

# SOUTHERN EXPOSURE



VOL. XIX NO. 2 \$5.00

A JOURNAL OF POLITICS & CULTURE

## Punishing the Poor

Workfare programs penalize women like Linda Beard who rely on welfare to feed their families

ALSO

**Wall Street Raids  
a Coal Town**

**Green Movies**

# SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

**Managing Editor:** Eric Bates

**Associate Editor:** Laurie Udesky

**Fiction Editor:** Susan Ketchin

**Design:** Jacob Roquet

**Cover:** Wood Grigsby

**Circulation:** Sharon Ugochukwu

**Editorial Assistant:** Lane Windham

**Special thanks to:** Harrell Chotas, Page McCullough, Sally Gregory, Barry Yeoman, Marcie Pachino, Jenny Labalme, Carol Roquet, Jan Jackson, Gail Woods, Derek Rodriguez, Betty Meeler, David Vanderweide, Ernest Josey, Meredith Emmett, Linda Vogel, Heidi Fisher, Charles and Jo Dickinson, Fund for Southern Communities.

**Institute for Southern Studies Board of Directors:** Cindy Arnold, Laura Benedict, Julian Bond, Cynthia Brown, Pat Bryant, David Cecelski, Vicki Crawford, Alice Gerrard, Christina Greene, David Harvin, Robert Hinton, Jim Lee, Leslie McLemore, Jim Overton, Joe Pfister, Ted Rosengarten, Len Stanley, Dimi Stephen, Sue Thrasher.

**Executive Director:** Isaiah Madison

**Research Director:** Bob Hall

**Research Associate:** Mary Lee Kerr

**Membership Coordinator:** Deborah Young

**Southern Finance Project:** Tom Schlesinger, Marty Leary.

**Summer Issue:** Copyright 1991, Institute for Southern Studies, 604 W. Chapel Hill Street, Durham, NC 27701.

**Southern Exposure** is published quarterly by the Institute for Southern Studies, a non-profit research and publication center. Annual membership is \$24 for individuals, libraries, and institutions.

**Southern Exposure** is indexed in *Alternative Press Index*, *The American Humanities Index*, and *Access: The Supplementary Index to Periodicals*. Address all editorial and subscription correspondence to **Southern Exposure**, P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702. Second-class postage is paid at Durham, NC 27702 and additional offices. ISSN: 0146-809X. Post Office No. 053470.

**POSTMASTER:** Send form 3579 with address changes to **Southern Exposure**, P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702.

**HOW TO SUBSCRIBE** To receive *Southern Exposure* four times a year, join the Institute for Southern Studies. You'll also receive a series of periodic action alerts, plus special discounts on all Institute resources and publications.

Send your membership check for \$24 to:

Institute for Southern Studies  
P.O. Box 531  
Durham, NC 27702



The University  
of Tennessee Press  
Knoxville, 37996-0325

## Coal Towns

LIFE, WORK, AND CULTURE  
IN COMPANY TOWNS  
OF SOUTHERN APPALACHIA, 1880-1960  
*Crandall A. Shifflett*

280 pages, illustrations,  
ISBN 0-87049-678-6, \$34.95

## Born in the Delta

REFLECTIONS ON THE MAKING  
OF A SOUTHERN WHITE SENSIBILITY  
*Margaret Jones Bolsterli*

152 pages, illustrations,  
ISBN 0-87049-690-5, \$16.95

## Dirt Roads to Dixie

ACCESSIBILITY AND MODERNIZATION  
IN THE SOUTH, 1885-1935  
*Howard Lawrence Preston*

220 pages, illustrations,  
ISBN 0-87049-676-X \$38.50, cloth,  
ISBN -677-8, \$18.95 paper



## YOU ALWAYS THINK OF HOME A Portrait of Clay County, Alabama

Pamela Grundy  
Photographs by Ken Elkins  
Foreword by Wayne Flynt

Combining the words of Clay County's residents with brief essays and a striking array of photographs, this book challenges the stubborn stereotypes that have depicted rural southerners either as pathetic victims of an oppressive economic system or as quaint carriers of romantic but outmoded customs.

"An evocative portrait of the fast disappearing rural South—in the tradition of James Agee's and Walker Evans's classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*."  
—Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton, author of *Alabama: A History*  
55 photographs, \$29.95 cloth

At better bookstores or from  
The University of **GEORGIA** Press  
Athens, GA 30602

**FEATURES**

- 8 The Lion Roars** *By Eric Bates*  
Is the nation's fastest growing supermarket chain feeding off its workers?
- 42 Bailout Rock** *By Barry Yeoman*  
Bankers want a trillion-dollar handout. One grassroots coalition is singing a different tune.
- 48 The Raider and the Coal Town** *By Mark Reutter*  
How a hostile takeover on Wall Street polluted a West Virginia community — and how the town fought back.
- 56 Green Movies: The Bomb Squad** *By Steve Dollar*  
Two Atlanta filmmakers working on a shoestring budget take on a nuclear bomb factory and earn an Academy Award nomination.
- 60 Green Movies: Speaking for Themselves** *By Anne and Graham Shelby*  
A new film from Appalshop helps Appalachian residents document their own stories and struggles.

**COVER SECTION**

- 14 The Numbers Game** *By Laurie Udesky*  
Shuttled into dead-end jobs, women forced to participate in the Florida workfare program wind up back on welfare.
- 19 Rural Roulette** *By Gordon Young*  
Arkansas workfare punishes more women than it employs.
- 23 Red-Tape Blues** *By Brett Campbell*  
Poor Texans ordered to work find themselves trapped in a bureaucratic maze that ignores the realities of poverty.
- 27 "Looks Like I Got Mad"** *Interview by Laurie Udesky*  
Annie Smart has 13 children — and 40 years experience struggling against the injustices of the welfare system.

**DEPARTMENTS**

- 2 Dateline: The South** *Compiled by Lane Windham*
- 4 Southern News Roundup**
- 31 Fiction: Washaway Etowah** *By Lynn Pruett*
- 36 Southern Voices: In Different Boats** *By Anne Braden*
- 39 Southern Books**
- 64 The Last Word**

# DATELINE: THE SOUTH



**ARLINGTON, Va.** (Feb. 25) — Lauren Cook has filed a federal lawsuit charging several national parks with sex discrimination for banning her from playing a soldier in Civil War reenactments. "It's illegal and it's a matter of principle," Cook said. Some 400 women fought in the Civil War, often disguised as men, but park officials remain unswayed by historical precedent. "We have a very strict standard here," one park superintendent said. "I won't apologize for it."

**TAVARES, Fla.** (March 3) — A county judge ordered a white man who chased a black couple with a shotgun to buy a newspaper ad apologizing for his actions. The unusual sentence was handed down after Howard Douglas Morgan assaulted a couple moving in across the street from him. His ad read, in part, "I regret having displayed such prejudice for those in my community."

**ATLANTA, Ga.** (March 8) — A former banker pled guilty today to making more than \$4 billion in unauthorized loans to Iraq. Paul von Wedel admitted to taking over \$350,000 for making loans to Saddam Hussein that exceeded his branch's lending limit. "Don't you think you sold out pretty cheaply?" the judge asked. "We were trying to increase the business of the branch," the banker replied. "It was something that just snowballed."

**MONTGOMERY, Ala.** (March 9) — The Ku Klux Klan staged a protest today at a civil rights monument built to honor 40 people who died fighting for racial justice. The KKK distributed flyers that spelled out their fear of the monument: "We protest against this scheme to

change Montgomery from the 'Cradle of the Confederacy' to the 'Cradle of the Civil Rights Movement.'"

**NEW ORLEANS, La.** (March 15) — State Insurance Commissioner Doug Green was convicted of accepting \$3 million in bribes from Champion Insurance Company. Green declared Champion financially secure just four months before it went bankrupt, sticking policyholders with \$205 million in unpaid claims. Testimony proved the company gave Green \$200,000 in cash every two weeks for a year. "They helped buy him his clothes from the socks up," said a prosecutor.

**CHARLOTTE, N.C.** (March 19) — Twenty-five protesters marched outside a Cracker Barrel store after the shop fired employee Jeffrey Sherill because he is gay. The national chain has fired at least 10 workers for their sexual preferences this year, claiming that it violates traditional American values to employ people who "fail to demonstrate normal heterosexual values."

**AUSTIN, Texas** (March 20) — Wealthy Republicans dining with President Bush were surprised when they were joined by Eazy-E, lead singer of the con-

troversial rap group Niggers With Attitude. Eazy-E attended the banquet after the Republican Senatorial Inner Circle accidentally sent him an invitation. Although the singer wore a t-shirt and baseball cap, he made a good impression by supporting Bush's Persian Gulf policy. "If he didn't look like a Republican, he sounded like one," said one guest.

**DALLAS, Texas** (March 22) — Homeless people who eke out a living collecting aluminum cans face a \$240 fine if they are caught rummaging through garbage. The City Council ordered police to ticket people removing trash without a waste handler's permit. "I pick up cans to make a living," objected James Poole, a homeless man who received a ticket. "I don't rob or steal."

**WILLIAMSBURG, Va.** (March 24) — Restaurant and hotel workers at Colonial Williamsburg shed their traditional costumes to march down Duke of Gloucester Street, striking for a fair contract. Tourists were startled when they were approached by local members of the Food and Beverage Workers Union bearing leaflets and petitions. "We don't want our appetite spoiled," grumbled one Atlanta tourist in town for a conference.

**COLUMBUS, Ga.** (March 27) — Two Roman Catholic brothers and a priest were convicted of splattering blood on the Fort Benning school that trained five El Salvadoran soldiers who murdered six Jesuit priests in 1989. "The protest was to point out the crimes of Salvadoran soldiers returning to their home country and using our training to kill," said convicted priest Roy Bourgeois, a former Navy officer and recipient of the Purple Heart.

**JACKSON, Miss.** (March 28) — State legislators overrode the governor's veto of a bill requiring a 24-hour waiting period for women seeking abortions. Under the new law, doctors must inform women of medical risks and alternatives to abortion. "This bill is a cruel joke," said Representative Bill Jones. "We're doing nothing more than throwing the pro-life people a political bone during an election year."

**MORGANTOWN, W.Va.** (April 9) — The leader of a Hare Krishna commune expressed pleasure at the prospect of spending 90 years in prison following his conviction for racketeering and mail fraud. "It's the perfect life for a monk," said Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, meeting with a stream of followers during visiting hours. "They take care of all your material needs and it gives me more time to chant the Hare Krishna, pray, and write."

**TALLAHASSEE, Fla.** (March 31)

— Florida towns will be able to require blue-collar workers to carry special I.D. badges if a bill in the state Senate passes. The bill is an attempt to revive a Palm Beach ordinance known as the “Doonesbury Law,” which was declared unconstitutional after cartoonist Gary Trudeau launched a campaign comparing the badges to pass laws in South Africa.



**CORAL GABLES, Fla.** (April 1)

— Angered by criticism from the weekly *New Times*, city officials confiscated copies of the newspaper hours after it hit the street. The paper has ridiculed this wealthy Miami suburb for image-conscious laws prohibiting parking pickup trucks overnight or swimming in private pools near churches on Sunday. The city confiscated sidewalk racks full of the paper, claiming the racks were the wrong shape and color.

**BATON ROUGE, La.** (April 2)

— Two environmentalists chained themselves inside a steel box attached to railroad tracks to protest chlorofluorocarbons being shipped from the nearby Allied Signal plant. The chemicals, used as coolants for refrigerators and air conditioners, also damage the ozone layer. Authorities cut the protesters out of the box, which included a sign asking: “How many cancer deaths will it take?”

**WAYNESBORO AND LOUISVILLE, Ga.** (April 2)

— A federal judge ruled that S. Lichtenberg and Company illegally laid off 120 workers who voted to join the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. The judge found that the company dismissed the workers to “disinfect” two drapery plants of pro-union sentiment. An ACTWU lawyer called the decision “electrifying.”

**NORTH COURTLAND, Tenn.**

(April 3) — Principal Patrick Graham has ignored numerous complaints from parents and the town mayor, forcing students at J.R. Hubbard Elementary School to listen to his Christian devotionals over the intercom. Graham insists the

morning prayers do not violate a U.S. Supreme Court ban on prayer in public schools. “It’s all voluntary,” he said. “The kids know they can tune out anything they don’t want to hear.”

**CARTERSVILLE, Ga.** (April 13)

— Fifty native Americans marched to the 800-year-old Etowah Mounds today, demanding a state law to protect such burial sites from construction workers and artifact hunters. The protest came after Georgia legislators laughed off a proposal to restrict excavations at Indian graves. As State Representative James Langford said during the debate: “The only Indian I know is Chief Noc-A-Homa,” the former mascot for the Atlanta Braves.

**FORT GORDON, Ga.** (April 19)

— Veterans wounded by “friendly fire” in the Persian Gulf said they were censored when Barbara Bush visited soldiers at the base. Sergeant Anthony Walkers said a major ordered him not to tell the First Lady his leg was blown off by an American tank. None of the six veterans who appeared on camera with Mrs. Bush were amputees. “People have been told that it was a good war,” said Specialist Ernest Smith, who lost his left leg below the knee. “They just don’t want to think about the wounded.”

**COLUMBIA, S.C.** (May 9)

— A local citizens group threatened to sue unless state legislators remove the Confederate battle flag that flies from the capitol dome. The legislature raised the Dixie flag in 1961, in the midst of the civil rights struggle. Although many lawmakers privately oppose the practice, a few vowed to defend it. “I will talk until I drop” to keep the flag there, said Republican senator Glenn McConnell.

**HAMPTON, Va.** (May 12)

— Half of the graduating seniors at Hampton University refused to rise when President George Bush was introduced as their commencement speaker, staging a silent protest of his indifference to black issues. Many of the 1,029 graduates raised clenched fists in a black power salute. “Bush was trying to sound like he had done so many things for blacks,” Kimberly Robinson said after Bush spoke. “He didn’t convince me.”

*Compiled by Lane Windham. Illustrations by Steven Cragg.*

*Readers are encouraged to submit articles to Dateline: The South. Please send original clippings or photocopies and give name and date of publication.*



**SCIENCE CONFRONTS IRONY**

**ORLANDO, Fla.** (Feb. 19) — A homeless man returned \$29,200 in cash he found while looking for cigarette butts in a field, even though he had only nine cents in his pocket. The neatly-packaged \$100 bills had been dropped by an elderly lady who didn’t trust banks. “I carried them bills around for about 20 minutes,” said Darrell Teel. “I started to run with it, but stealing don’t pay.” Teel received \$200 for his honesty.

## S&L BAILOUT SPAWNS TOXIC DEVELOPMENTS

Early one morning more than a decade ago, Dorothy Richter slipped into the natural limestone pool along Barton Creek in Austin, Texas for her daily swim. As she submerged her hand, it flickered out of view in a cloud of sediment.

"I was so shocked," Richter recalls. "I could not see the depth of my arm." The pool was choked with runoff from a shopping mall being built upstream.

The Balcones Canyonland limestone pool — the largest in the nation and an important Austin tourist attraction — was suddenly threatened by developers. Deregulation of the savings and loan industry fueled one of the most destructive development binges of all time.

Throughout the 1980s, S&L executives joined investors to push pro-development agendas past state and local lawmakers.

Richter and other residents formed the Save Barton Creek Association to protect the water. Last summer, the battle came to a head as 1,000 angry residents showed up at a city council meeting to denounce a proposed 4,000-acre development upstream from the canyon. By the time the meeting adjourned at 6 a.m. the next morning, council members rejected the proposal by a vote of 7-0.

Now the Save Barton Creek Association is at the forefront of what has evolved into a nationwide fight to save endangered species — except this time, the enemy is the federal agency created to supervise the bailout of the savings and loan industry.

Last spring, the association joined the National Wildlife Federation and National Audubon Society in legal efforts to block the Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC) from selling thousands of acres of pristine land that are home to the golden-cheeked warbler and six other endangered species.

The RTC and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation are trying to sell off the land to developers as quickly as possible — but the environmental groups say the agencies have violated federal law

by failing to clear the sales with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The groups also charge that the RTC and FDIC have been dumping environmentally sensitive lands before conservation groups and state and local governments have a chance to bid.

"You have two federal agencies denying that they're federal agencies and selling off properties as fast as they can to developers," says Robert Irwin, lead attorney for the National Wildlife Federation.

The outcome of the legal battle will have a broad impact on what the government does with the tens of thousands of properties it has inherited from failed savings and loans. In the Austin area alone, the RTC and FDIC control approximately 13,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land.

Austin residents want to acquire some of the property to help create a nature preserve for several endangered species. "My professional opinion is that the RTC and FDIC don't have a leg to stand on," says Bill Bunch, an Austin-based attorney representing the Sierra Club and local environmental groups. "We haven't found a single case that would support their position."

—Jenny Thelen

## STRIKERS OCCUPY TEXAS SWEATSHOPS

It's a jarring sight. The dusty El Paso, Texas streets are the kind of industrial blocks where you usually see more trucks than people. Lately, though, the normally calm factories have erupted as 120 strikers have occupied small apparel shops with names like "DCB" or "Sonia's" that sell clothes to big clothing chains like J.C. Penney's and Macy's.

Most of the strikers are middle-aged Mexican women who operate sewing machines in dangerous and filthy sweatshops. Spirited and self-confident, they mug for the cameras of journalists and management spies, shouting the Spanish

for "I won't give in, I won't wimp out!"

The women want one of El Paso's biggest contractors, Andre Diaz, to sign a contract with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. But they are also speaking out on a more global issue — the recent Free Trade Agreement, which threatens to completely destroy their livelihood.

The agreement is designed to lift trade barriers that have prevented garment contractors in El Paso and elsewhere from moving their operations to Mexico, where they can pay workers as little as 50 cents an hour.

For El Paso contractors, "free trade" means bigger profits. For garment workers, the agreement could mean the loss of as many as 15,000 jobs.

"We work sometimes from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. in places like concentration camps," says Eustolia Olivas, a striking worker. "Now Free Trade is pressuring us even more."

Olivas and most of her fellow strikers belong to La Mujer Obrera, a group that began organizing El Paso garment workers 10 years ago. The group developed health programs and food co-ops, training women to confront everyone from husbands to politicians with their needs. Last summer, when one subcontractor refused to pay wages, members of the group attracted national attention by chaining themselves to sewing machines. A hunger strike followed.

The strike bared the plight of workers in an industry that has lost nearly half a million garment jobs to cheap foreign labor since the 1970s. In cities like El Paso, subcontractors have attempted to compete by rigging up fly-by-night sweatshops that pay below the minimum wage — or sometimes no wages at all.

La Mujer Obrera recently convinced the Texas House of Representatives to pass a bill making non-payment of wages a crime. The group has also tried to save the local industry from the ravages of "free trade" by promoting the entire city of El Paso as a manufacturing base for trendy clothing that requires quick turnaround.

So far, though, the group's proposals have gone nowhere — and leaders antici-



**MEMBERS OF LA MUJER OBRERA STAGE A SIT-IN AND HUNGER STRIKE TO DEMAND A FAIR CONTRACT AND AN END TO JOB EXPORTATION.**

pate harder times ahead. Cecelia Rodriguez, director of La Mujer Obrera, considers the current strike a “crisis response” that adds the voices of workers to community and national debate on the issue of free trade.

“No one has any illusions that we’re going to stop free trade,” says Rodriguez. “At the least, we’re not going to let these jobs leave without El Paso paying a price — for all the years of work these women did.”

—Debbie Nathan

*For more information contact La Mujer Obrera, P.O. Box 3975, El Paso, Texas 79923. Or call: (915) 533-9710.*

## THE BLUES HIT WEST VIRGINIA

Just weeks after JoAnn Williams bought health insurance from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of West Virginia last October, the insurer went broke. Williams, stuck with \$4,000 in unpaid bills for treatment of her son’s snake bite, sued the company for fraud.

The collapse of “the Blues” has left Williams and 270,000 other residents who relied on the company for health insurance feeling angry — and scared. West Virginia Blue Cross was the first private insurance plan in the nation to fail,

and the size of its debt makes it by far the largest health insurance plan to fall into insolvency. Hospitals, doctors, pharmacies, and others have been left holding \$51 million in unpaid claims.

Insurance officials blame the bankruptcy on mismanagement, insisting that the West Virginia collapse is an isolated event. But a look at other states suggests that the demise of Blue Cross in West Virginia could mark the beginning of a wave of failures among insurance companies nationwide.

According to data from the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, 11 other Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans across the country are currently in debt or underfunded. What’s worse, the majority have no state guaranty fund to bail them out if they become insolvent.

The West Virginia plan fell ill in 1987, when Blue Cross executives decided to gamble with the extra premiums paid by high-risk subscribers. They made risky investments, hoping to turn a quick profit — but the gamble didn’t pay off. According to state records, the plan lost \$2.3 million in speculative trading that year.

By 1989, the plan was \$32 million in debt. When Blue Cross officials tried to absorb the red ink by raising premiums, healthy subscribers jumped ship. The company was left with a smaller pool of payers with higher health costs. In one year, the number of subscribers fell from 84,000 to 68,000.

As the company’s collapse became imminent last summer, state regulators scrambled to find a neighboring Blue Cross plan to assist the Charleston-based insurer. Blue Cross of Ohio agreed to take over the insolvent plan — but only after Governor Gaston Caperton agreed to push for legislation that would allow the company to deregulate insurance rates in West Virginia.

What followed was the most expensive lobbying campaign in state history. The Ohio Blues spent \$500,000 on an ad blitz, arguing that hospitals should be forced to accept smaller, “discounted” payments. The state Hospital Association struck back, spending \$200,000 to portray the Ohioans as greedy out-of-staters intent on driving vulnerable hospitals out of business.

In the end, legislators sided with the



**A GEORGIA PRISON GUARD SPARKED A CONTROVERSY WHEN HE SNAPPED THIS PHOTO OF A HANDCUFFED INMATE ON A WORK DETAIL.**

home-state hospitals, giving the state new authority to regulate rates. The Ohio plan has responded by attempting to cancel \$7 million of the takeover agreement, saying West Virginia leaders broke their promises. Ten hospitals are meanwhile suing Blue Cross, accusing the insurer of concealing information about its failing financial health.

As the legal haggling drags on, former policyholders like JoAnn Williams wait for assistance. More than six months after her son's snake bite, Williams is still receiving medical bills telling her to pay up or face a collection agency.

Williams hasn't given up hope of winning her case against the Blues, but she has her doubts. "It's such a long and drawn-out process," she says. "I'm still hoping they'll pay, but I really don't know."

—Phil Kabler

## **GUARDS SIDE WITH GEORGIA INMATES**

It could have been a scene out of the prison movie *Brubaker*. Last September, a guard at a state prison in Jackson, Geor-

gia, snapped a photograph of a prisoner being forced to work while handcuffed. Indignant at such mistreatment, the guard smuggled the photo anonymously to the head of the state prison system.

But instead of investigating the abuse, the state Department of Corrections launched a probe to identify and punish the guard who took the incriminating photo.

Fred Steeple, a department spokesperson, told one reporter that it was within state regulations to handcuff a "violent or unruly" inmate on a work detail. It was the unauthorized photo, the department insisted, that had violated the prisoner's rights.

The episode marked another chapter in an ongoing campaign by Georgia prison guards to have some say-so over their increasingly grueling work conditions. The state prison population has almost doubled since 1985, but the prisons themselves remain old and ill-equipped. As a result, many prisons have become powder kegs: overcrowded, understaffed, and plagued with racial tensions.

The dangerous working conditions have prompted many guards—traditionally staunch allies of prison administrators—to join the Georgia State Employees Union. "We had problems with inmates in

gang wars," says Cliff Herrin, a prison guard for nearly 26 years. "No one knew how to control it. We went to management and didn't get any answers. That's when we went to the union."

Although state employees are forbidden by law to negotiate contracts, union members can take their grievances to court—and some are doing just that. Last October, a month after the Jackson guard photographed the handcuffed prisoner, guards at the Lee Arrendale Correctional Center in Alto, Georgia created a stir by siding with prisoners who are suing the state over dangerous conditions.

In a letter to the Department of Corrections, a union attorney explained that the guards wanted to join the prisoner lawsuit because "the working conditions of my clients ... as well as living conditions

of the inmates ... are approaching the insufferable."

According to the union, prison management immediately struck back. "Management went haywire, saying we had taken the inmates' side," says Grant Williams, an organizer with the union. "They trumped up charges against the union members and threatened to close the facility."

Although the guards were kept from joining the lawsuit, the dramatic move fueled public outrage. In December, the state agreed to reduce the number of inmates, beef up staffing, and begin \$31 million in prison renovations.

"We won a big victory," declares Grant Williams, field director of the union. "We got a new warden and deputy warden, and they've reduced the danger to officers."

To Williams, it's not gang wars or other violence within prison walls that pose the biggest threat to guards. "Their biggest problem," he says, "is management that keeps them from doing a good job."

—Nancy Peckenham

*For more information contact the Georgia State Employees Union, P.O. Box 4414, Atlanta, GA 30302. Or call: (404) 523-7884.*

## FEDERAL COURTS FINE CIVIL RIGHTS LAWYERS

If Linda Brown and her family had tried to demand an end to segregated schools and face down the Topeka Board of Education in the 1990s instead of the 1950s, they might have had trouble finding a lawyer. The reason? Rule 11, a little-known federal court procedure that is making civil rights attorneys very cautious about taking on risky cases.

Amended in 1983 by the U.S. Supreme Court, Rule 11 gives federal judges the power to penalize lawyers for bringing any lawsuit they deem "frivolous." The penalties, called sanctions, are more than a slap on the wrist: fines can exceed \$100,000, and lawyers sanctioned several times risk losing their license.

Since 1983, some 3,000 attorneys — including prominent public interest lawyers in the South — have been fined for bringing "frivolous" lawsuits, according to George Cochran, a University of Mississippi law professor who directs the Rule 11 Project of the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights.

The problem, says Cochran, is that the Reagan and Bush administrations loaded up the federal bench with conservative judges who disagree with liberal lawyers. "It's not a very big step for a judge to move from 'not only do I disagree with you, but I think this case is frivolous,'" says Cochran.

"There's no question that Rule 11 is having a chilling effect on civil rights," agrees Michael Maness, a Houston-based lawyer. "Had we had Rule 11 forty years ago, it would have effectively stopped the civil rights litigation that changed the way we live in the South."

Rule 11 recently made headlines when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review sanctions totaling \$122,834 imposed on civil rights attorneys Lewis Pitts of Christic Institute South, Barry Nakell of the University of North Carolina, and William Kunstler of the Center for Constitutional Rights. The three were penalized for bringing a "frivolous" suit on behalf of Eddie Hatcher and Timothy Jacobs, two Native American activists who took over a newspaper office to demand racial justice in Robeson County, North Carolina.

With the stakes so high, many lawyers say they must shy away from chancy cases. "Under Rule 11, civil rights law-

yers are practicing law at their own peril," says George Cochran. "It has curtailed a lot of people's access to the federal judicial system."

If the penalties continue, advocates contend, many people whose civil rights have been violated simply won't be able to find a lawyer who will risk taking their cases. In Texas, for example, a high school student whose car was searched for drugs sued her school for unreasonable search and seizure. Her attorney was slapped with an \$82,000 fine for filing a frivolous lawsuit.

"The cost of Rule 11 has been high," says Frank Goldsmith, a North Carolina civil rights attorney who represented a lawyer sanctioned for filing a lawsuit on behalf of a tax protester. "Basically, it has robbed lawyers of the courage they need to bring the cases that make a difference."

—Liz Seymour

*For more information contact the Rule 11 Project of the Center for Constitutional Rights, 666 Broadway, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10012. Or call: (212) 614-6464.*

## COALITION STRUGGLES IN ROBESON COUNTY

There is good news and bad news in Robeson County, North Carolina, where the armed takeover of a local newspaper by two Native American activists three years ago dramatized racial injustices in this poor, rural county.

The good news: The social change that surrounded the hostage-taking continues to build. The bad news: The tri-racial coalition of blacks, whites, and Native Americans that changed things is badly frayed.

The county has faded from national attention since Lumbee Indians Eddie Hatcher and Timothy Jacobs walked into the offices of *The Robesonian* in February 1988 and took two dozen people hostage. Denouncing the all-white county government as unjust and corrupt, the two activists demanded equal rights for minority residents who make up more than half of the county.

The incident fueled a tri-racial movement to improve the segregated county school system, which pitted whites in better-funded city schools against minorities in poor rural classrooms. In 1988, Citizens After Responsible Education

(CARE) succeeded in passing a referendum to merge the school systems. Now, says Eric Prevatte, chair of CARE, "everybody's riding in the same boat."

The local Black Caucus is also pushing for unprecedented changes in county government. County commissioners are currently considering a proposal to create two black-majority districts that would more fairly represent minority voters. Only one black has been elected commissioner in the history of the county.

Yet all is not well in Robeson County. Daily life continues to be tainted by poverty — with an unemployment rate of 8.2 percent. There has been a spate of unsolved murders of Native Americans: According to North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence, no suspect has been named in the slayings of 14 Native Americans since 1975.

The poverty and violence have sown tensions among the races. A key factor, grassroots leaders say, is the lack of progressive Indian leadership after the death of Julian Pierce, a Lumbee lawyer murdered in March 1988 during his campaign for a local judicial election. The police say Pierce was killed in a domestic dispute; activists consider the murder unsolved.

Tensions deepened recently when Lumbee leaders suggested redrawing one of Robeson County's three state house districts so that it's predominantly Indian. As currently drawn, both blacks and Indians have represented the district. But if the proposal passes, Robeson blacks — the county's smallest racial group — will virtually be denied state house representation.

Joy Johnson, a black minister and the mayor of Fairmont, says blacks will sue if the proposal goes through, charging that some Indian leaders are "grabbing after everything they can get."

Prevatte, the school merger advocate, says there's been little tri-racial cooperation since school merger. "Every group of people still has their own agenda," he says. "I'm not saying that's right or wrong — that's just the way it is."

—Adam Seessel

*Compiled by Laurie Udesky.*

*Readers are encouraged to submit articles to Southern News Roundup. Please send original clippings or photocopies and give name and date of publication, or articles of no more than 300 words.*

# THE L I O N A R S

By Eric Bates

**KNOXVILLE, TENN.** — Wilma Berry loved to bake. She taught herself to make pastries and pies, and was proud of her skill in the kitchen. So when she was offered a job as a cake decorator at the local Food Lion supermarket, she was thrilled.

Berry worked hard and got high marks from her supervisors. One called her “very creative” and “trustworthy.” Each day before she left work, she collected outdated food from a throw-away pile and took it to Zion’s Childrens Home. “Later, when the orphanage closed, I brought food home and fed it to my goats,” she says.

One day last year, Berry took six four-day-old cookies and put them in a box to take home. As she was leaving, the store manager demanded to know what was in the box. “It’s throw-aways,” Berry said. “No it isn’t,” the manager replied. “These items were supposed to be marked down. You’re suspended.”

Two days later, Berry got a call instructing her to meet with a Food Lion “loss prevention” agent. But when she arrived at the store, she found herself subjected to something the

company calls “an interrogation.”

“They wouldn’t let my husband go into the room with me,” she recalls. “They locked the door. I told the man what happened, but he kept saying, ‘I don’t believe you. You’re lying. Everybody makes mistakes. All you have to do is admit it and you can go back to work.’ He threatened to have me arrested. After an hour and a half I began to cry. It was mental torture.”

After another hour of questioning, Berry signed a form saying she had taken baked goods “on three separate occasions.” To her surprise, Food Lion responded by canceling her health

insurance and firing her for “gross misconduct” — but not before billing her \$75 for the interrogation.

“I felt very humiliated,” Berry says. “I had heard about loss prevention, but I didn’t know how they worked. If somebody had told me that they had done people like that, I wouldn’t have believed it.”

More and more of Food Lion’s 50,000 employees are starting to believe it. Former workers in Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas describe almost identical interrogations at the hands of company agents. What’s more, they say, the “internal police” are part of a general climate of insensitivity and intimidation that has helped make Food Lion the fastest growing supermarket chain in the nation.

“It’s a rough place to work,” says a former grocery manager in Tennessee

Is the nation’s fastest growing supermarket chain feeding off its workers?

who asked not to be identified. "Many days I would come home and sit down and cry. It was that bad."

## SHARE THE WEALTH

Food Lion denies such charges.

"We want to get to the cause of a problem, but we want to do it in a legal and ethical way," says Martin Whit, supervisor of investigating coordination at company headquarters in Salisbury, North Carolina. "We'd rather let a lot of employee theft go on than accuse somebody who hasn't done anything wrong."

The company prides itself on its homegrown thriftiness. Tom Smith, who worked his way up from bagboy to president of the firm, appears on TV almost every night to demonstrate how Food Lion recycles cardboard boxes and turns off the lights to save money. "And when we save," Smith grins at the conclusion of each commercial, "you save."

The "extra low prices" the company advertises have exploded into extra large profits, making Food Lion the darling of Wall Street. Annual sales grew by an average of 25 percent during the 1980s to total \$5.6 billion last year, and the number of stores soared from 141 to 778. Food Lion is now the third largest private employer in North Carolina. It has stores in 11 Southern states, and it is expanding rapidly in Florida and Texas.

But the experiences of many employees suggest that the Lion may be feeding on the misery of its workers. According to a lawsuit filed by a group of former employees supported by the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), the company is illegally firing or pressuring workers to quit to prevent them from collecting profit-sharing benefits.

The profit-sharing plan serves as a sort of pension program. Employees earn a share of company profits each

year, but they must stay with Food Lion for at least five years to collect the money. Wilma Berry was 18 months short of qualifying for \$5,000 in profit sharing when she was fired.

Instead, Berry "forfeited" her earnings, and the money went back into a

we have to split among us," says Deck, who managed a Food Lion store in Gastonia, North Carolina.

Other ex-employees tell similar stories. "When you got close to collecting your profit sharing, they was looking for something to get you," says

*Photo by Bob Bridges/News and Observer*



**TOP FOOD LION EXECUTIVES LIKE TOM SMITH POCKET PROFIT-SHARING BENEFITS EVERY TIME AN EMPLOYEE LEAVES BEFORE PUTTING IN FIVE YEARS.**

profit-sharing pool worth \$317 million. The trouble is, few employees ever get to share that wealth. Company records filed with the Internal Revenue Service show that fewer than one in 10 Food Lion employees is entitled to full benefits under the plan.

What's more, many of the forfeited profits wind up in the pockets of top Food Lion executives. According to the latest proxy statement filed by the company, Food Lion co-founder and chairman emeritus Ralph Kettner received \$1,896,251.71 in profit sharing when he retired April 1. Because they share in forfeited benefits, many managers also make a direct profit every time an employee leaves the company before putting in five years.

Betty Deck says Food Lion hounded her into quitting seven months before she would have qualified for \$35,000 in profit sharing. "The joke my supervisor always told was, 'Every one of you that gets run off or quits, that's more money

Rusty Hornaday, an assistant manager in Asheville, North Carolina who lost \$59,000 in profit sharing when he was fired just 10 months short of being fully vested. "That's a big chunk of change that went into someone else's pocket."

## GRAPES OF WRATH

Food Lion blames the union for stirring up trouble. "You have to consider the sources of your information," says company spokesperson Mike Mozingo. "It's all part of a plan by the UFCW to discredit Food Lion. They are trying to paint a picture of a handful of cigar-smoking fat cats getting rich off people leaving the company. That's totally false. There is no such scheme."

The profit-sharing lawsuit is not the first time non-union Food Lion has found itself in court over unfair labor practices. This year, former employees Wayne Tew and Belinda Faye Lyle from Fayetteville, North Carolina sued

the company for forcing them to work overtime on a regular basis without pay. Food Lion denied the charge, but on February 7 a federal judge ruled in favor of the workers and awarded them \$53,352 in damages and back pay.

"This case hinges on a credibility determination," the judge wrote in his decision. "The court did not find the testimony of the store managers to be credible."

Food Lion also wound up in court last year after a company security guard stopped 61-year-old customer Charles Carrick at a store in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and accused him of eating three grapes. Carrick sued, saying the guard grabbed him, called him a thief, took him into a back room, and refused to release him for 45 minutes until he paid nine cents for the grapes. A jury awarded Carrick \$31,500 in damages for false imprisonment and slander — plus the nine cents he paid for the grapes.

Robert Willett paid a somewhat higher price when he was accused of nibbling grapes at Food Lion. An assistant store manager in North Myrtle Beach, Willett recalls working 14-hour shifts six days a week. "I can't remember how many times I fell asleep at the wheel of the car driving home at 1:30 in the morning," he says.

Willett says he was good at his job, but he wasn't so good at managing his money. He remembers bouncing at least three personal checks at the store — mistakes he says he promptly made good. "It was a little bit my fault," he admits. "I should have been more careful."

The third time Willett bounced a check, a loss prevention agent showed up at the store. "I ain't never been drilled like that in my life," Willett recalls. "The man said, 'Have you ever eaten a grape on the job? Had a banana at work? Gotten a coffee from the deli and never paid for it?' I said everybody at the store has nibbled something at one time or another. He said, 'A banana here, a grape there — maybe over a period of three years you've forgotten to pay for \$1,000 worth of stuff.'"

Willett says he refused to pay for food he never took. After four hours of questioning, he says, the agent told him he would also be charged \$320 for the interrogation. A week later, Willett was fired for "gross misconduct." He lost \$18,000 in profit-sharing benefits, and had to move his wife and four children into a smaller house.

"The loss prevention guys are really good," he says. "They know exactly how to bully and intimidate you. They won't ever let you see your accusers. Sure, I done that with the checks, and it was wrong. But it wasn't about the checks. I honestly believe it was about the profit sharing."

### "THE PERFECT CRIME"

A year after Willett lost his job, William Abrecht had a similar confrontation at a Food Lion warehouse in Elloree, South Carolina. One day last June, a loss prevention agent showed up and accused Abrecht of punching the time clock for his supervisor.

"They told me that if I wrote a statement saying that I knew what I did was wrong, I wouldn't lose my job," Abrecht says. "As soon as I wrote the statement, they fired me." After four years on the job, Abrecht lost \$20,000 in his profit-sharing account.

"The way loss prevention works is the perfect crime," says Abrecht. "They say you won't get fired if you put it down in writing, and then when you put

it down in writing you can't even collect unemployment because the company says you confessed."

Mike Mozingo, the company spokesperson, says many employees fired by Food Lion have committed offenses that were more serious than they claim. For example, he says, the cookies Wilma Berry took from the Knoxville store weren't four days old — they were gourmet cookies worth \$5 a pound.

"That was not the only reason she was fired," Mozingo adds. Asked to provide examples, he says: "There are other incidents with her that for her own privacy we're not allowed to discuss."

Still, isn't it a bit harsh to fire workers for taking food without giving them a chance to change their ways? "If people are caught stealing, what would you suggest be done?" says Mozingo. "Food Lion loses millions of dollars every year on employee theft. There are warnings posted in the stores, and people know before they go to work that stealing will get you fired."

Former employees say the tactics used by loss prevention agents are simply business as usual at Food Lion. Betty Deck, the Gastonia store manager, quit after she was questioned about pushing employees to work overtime without pay. She says she knows firsthand how managers treat workers, because she was one of the managers.

"Food Lion made me a bitch," she says. "I didn't want to be, but I had to be. They expected more out of you than any one person could deliver. I was working 100 hours a week. If I didn't have an understanding husband, I'd be divorced right now."

Deck and other managers say Food Lion relies on a system called "Effective Scheduling" that simply doesn't give employees enough time to complete assigned tasks. Routinely forced to work overtime without pay to get the job done, many employees burn out.

"I've seen the company reports on turnover," says Robert Willett, the assistant manager accused of munching grapes on the

*Photo by Jack Kirkland/News-Sentinel*



**WILMA BERRY SAYS SHE LOST \$5,000 IN PROFIT SHARING OVER SIX FOUR-DAY-OLD COOKIES.**

job. "It's nothing for a store to go through 50 or 60 people a year. In most cases, that's 100 percent turnover."

"Food Lion just thinks of you as a number," agrees Peter Carpenter, a grocery manager in Aberdeen, North Carolina who was fired for taking outdated food home to feed his father's pet squirrels. "I think they get their kicks from getting rid of people. They treated us like nobody."

Jeremy Barker was stocking groceries with Carpenter the night the loss prevention agents arrived. "They threatened us, said if we didn't tell the truth they were going to take us to jail. They showed us the handcuffs they carried with them. I had never been threatened like that before. Here I was, 19 years old. It was only later that I come to find out we were talking to someone who didn't have the right to threaten us like that."

## PRESUMED GUILTY

Mention "loss prevention" to former Food Lion employees like Barker, and the reaction is apt to be one of terror. "We used to call them the Gestapo, because they think they run everything," recalls Rusty Hornaday, who was interrogated about giving beer to under-aged employees. "You'd be working in the store at night, and you'd turn around and they'd be standing right behind you. That's a spooky feeling."

"They would raid your store and interrogate everyone," adds Betty Deck, the Gastonia manager. "It was horrible feeling — you were guilty until proven innocent. I've never been treated like that before. They wore me down until there was nothing left. I felt like I had been raped."

Martin Whitt, the loss prevention supervisor, says Food Lion agents only interrogate employees they know are guilty. "Once you get to the interrogation stage, you have your facts pretty much together. Every criminal has a rationalization; even murderers have an excuse. But that's irrelevant once you get to the interrogation. You already know what happened."

But former employees say this assumption of guilt made it impossible to defend themselves against false accusations. "If somebody's got a grudge against you, they just call one of the hotline numbers posted in the store and say, 'I saw this guy stealing' — and boom! You're out the door," says a former manager who was fired last year for eating on the job.

Tammy Minnick was fired from her job as customer service manager at a Food Lion store in Bristol, Virginia after loss prevention agents accused her of forcing employees to work overtime without pay.

"They were very arrogant," Minnick says. "They try to belittle you. They didn't listen to anything you said — they knew it all. It didn't matter what you said, you were guilty."

Minnick says she eventually signed a confession, but not because she did anything wrong. "By the time they were finished with me, I didn't know what I was admitting to," she says, her voice breaking at the memory. "I was scared to death." If she had been able to keep her job two more months, Minnick would have been eligible for \$20,000 in profit-sharing benefits.

## THE \$3 THIEF

Delores Wilson, an executive secretary, used to work down the hall from the loss prevention department at Food Lion headquarters in Salisbury. One day, on her way to lunch, she found three one-dollar gift certificates lying on the floor.

"I put them in my pocket to give to the girl who handles them, and forget about them until I got home that night," Wilson says. "I set them aside, and by the time I remembered them again I couldn't find them. I assumed they got thrown away."

They didn't. Several months later Wilson was called in to the loss prevention department. Agents showed her three gift coupons bearing the names of her mother and two brothers.

"They said, 'You stole these, didn't you?' I said, 'No, I didn't steal any-

thing.' They said I was lying and they were going to turn it over to the police. I said, 'Fine — at least then I'll be innocent until proven guilty.'"

That afternoon, Wilson says, her boss told her to clean out her desk and get out. "You'd think they'd realize it was just an innocent mistake. I told him, 'Look, I don't believe in stealing. It isn't right, and I wasn't brought up that way. And even if I was a thief, I wouldn't waste my time on three one-dollar gift certificates.'"

Wilson and other employees fired by Food Lion also say the company violated federal law by failing to tell them that they were entitled to receive extended health insurance. As a result, Wilson lost her coverage. Today she works as a medical clerk at the veteran's hospital in Rockwell, North Carolina.

"I like where I am now," she says. "You're not constantly in fear like you are at Food Lion. I'm the type of person who believes that what goes around, comes around. They'll pay for what they did in the end."

Wilma Berry says Food Lion agents still call her at home a year after she was fired, demanding that she pay the bill for her interrogation. Even worse, she says, friends and relatives still wonder why she signed a confession if she wasn't guilty.

"My husband was a prisoner during World War II, and he said he can understand what I went through," Berry says. "I feel so ashamed that I let them push me like that. Sometimes I wonder how these company people can lay down and sleep at night."

Some former employees have taken comfort in joining with other workers to take the company to court. They want Food Lion to reinstate fired employees and appoint independent trustees to supervise the profit-sharing plan.

"There's been a lot of people over the years that Food Lion has treated this way," says William Abrecht, the former warehouse worker who is now a plaintiff in the suit. "At least I'll have the satisfaction of having them answer for what they done. Maybe they won't be able to treat somebody else the same way." □

*Eric Bates is managing editor of Southern Exposure.*

**"WE USED TO  
CALL THEM THE  
GESTAPO,  
BECAUSE THEY  
THINK THEY RUN  
EVERYTHING."**

# PUNISHING THE POOR

---

**D**uring his first term as president, Ronald Reagan went on national television to set the tone for a stern attitude towards the poor. Many women on welfare had plenty of money, he insisted. In fact, he added, he had once witnessed a single mother picking up her welfare check in a Cadillac.

Suddenly it was all the rage to condemn "welfare cheats." Welfare mothers were nothing but lazy freeloaders who made babies to milk taxpayers for more money. For the first time, poor women joined the ranks of the undeserving poor.

Playing to the public outrage they had helped create, lawmakers decided to tell single mothers on welfare to get a job. In 1988, Congress passed the Family Support Act to force impoverished women to work for their welfare checks.

Better known as "workfare," the new law was presented as a reform designed to "end the cycle of dependency," according to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, one of its chief architects. Under a federal program called JOBS, states would be allowed to require poor mothers to work or receive job training in exchange for their welfare benefits. The program promised a melange of services — education, child care, transportation — to aid women on the road to self-sufficiency.

It looked good on paper, and millions of women were eager to participate. After all, most parents rely on welfare simply because they can't find jobs that pay enough to support

their families. JOBS seemed to offer a way out. In the South, tens of thousands of the nearly two million adults on welfare joined the program.

But as the articles in this special section of *Southern Exposure* reveal, workfare has not delivered on its promises. Instead, mandatory state-run programs have punished the very people they were designed to help, causing new suffering among poor families.

One reason: the programs lack the most basic tools to meet the needs of those forced to participate. Most states provide scant training or education; few offer adequate child care or transportation for parents required to work.

The lack of day care has put many women in a terrible bind: If they miss a training session or don't show up for work, the state can slash their welfare checks. As a result, some mothers have left their children alone — or with caretakers they don't trust — to keep from losing their benefits.

Yet state officials who administer workfare programs refuse to admit that their policies are endangering children. In one cheery newsletter distributed by the "PEACH" workfare program in Georgia, for example, parents — called "Peaches" — are urged to find neighbors or relatives to care for their children during the long summer months.

The newsletter clearly implies, however, that some parents may have to leave their children unattended. It counsels

parents to instruct children to obey safety rules — “like never opening the door for a stranger, never playing around busy streets and never playing with matches.”

**I**t's little wonder that workfare doesn't work. The program was doomed from the start because lawmakers failed to grasp a fundamental economic truth: There simply aren't enough jobs that pay enough to support a family.

Nowhere is the absurdity of workfare more apparent than in the South. Over the past two decades, plant closings and run-away factories have left the region with little to offer except low-paying positions in the service sector — exactly the kind of jobs workfare participants are expected to fill.

In South Carolina, for example, the list of “targeted occupations” published by the state welfare agency includes jobs for waitresses and sewing machine operators. The positions pay less than \$9,200 annually, a figure well below the poverty level for a family of three.

Such low-paying work creates a “revolving door” in which parents are pushed off welfare, only to return when a child gets sick or the rent goes up.

Southern states add to the misery of the poor by maintaining strict eligibility levels that punish women who manage to find work. In North Carolina, Governor Jim Martin wants to restrict welfare to families of three earning less than \$272 a month — a move that would cut off all welfare benefits to 19,000 working women and their children.

“A lot of very poor working families are going to be cut off from the small amount of payments they get, and will wind up having to quit their jobs to go back on welfare,” says Pam Silberman, a lawyer with North Carolina Legal Services. “If your goal is to help people become self-sufficient, this is the most counterproductive proposal you could come up with.”

Such punitive policies are nothing new. With the inception of welfare assistance in the 1930s, men were forced to sweep streets or perform menial tasks to “earn” their government aid.

What is new is the staggering number of people being hurt by such policies. Today, more people than ever rely on welfare to make ends meet — a record 12.2 million, up nearly a million from the previous peak in 1976.

And the ranks of the poor continue to grow. Last year an estimated 665,000 people went on welfare, and federal officials expect another 430,000 next year.

**W**hat is also new is the growing number of households headed by women. From 1970 to 1985, the number of single-parent families receiving

Aid to Families with Dependent Children nearly doubled.

This “feminization of poverty” can be traced, ironically, to early welfare policies themselves. In the late 1960s, the federal government presented poor mothers with an ultimatum: If you want money to keep a roof over your head and food on the table, then the father of your children must move out of the house.

Policies that broke up families fueled a nationwide movement for welfare rights. Unfortunately, they also branded welfare mothers as immoral, unmotivated good-for-nothings looking to the government for a free ride. “They're breeding faster than you can pay for them,” Louisiana State Representative and former Klan leader David Duke told supporters during his campaign for the U.S. Senate last year.

Even social service workers often look down on poor women without husbands. “The children all have different fathers,” one food pantry director in Florida lamented recently.

If welfare mothers are taking taxpayers for a ride, it isn't much of a trip. A family of three in Mississippi receives only \$120 a month in benefits — \$130 less than what it costs to rent a one-bedroom apartment in the state capital.

To make matters worse, the state offers no real job training to parents on welfare. “They're giving people bus passes and a copy of the want ads,” says Rims Barber, director of the Mississippi Human Services Agenda.

State welfare officials seem to think the solution to such flawed policies lies in good public relations. Take the case of Phyllis Region, a welfare recipient in Florida. A newsletter prepared by Project Independence, the state workfare program, shows Region smiling happily at her new job as an accounts clerk for the Dade County public schools.

“She has more control over her life and feels much better about herself, thanks to Project Independence,” the newsletter boasts.

But a talk with Region reveals a different story. “I felt used by Project Independence,” says Region. Officials with the program wanted her to settle for a job at Burger King, she says, but she pushed for something better.

Region and the other women on welfare we spoke with are eager to get jobs. They don't want to scrap employment programs — they want to work. But for reform efforts to work, states must realize that most

women on welfare have been cast aside by the labor market. Ordering poor women to get a job means nothing if those jobs don't pay enough to put food on the table.

If we want true welfare reform, we must give poor families a voice in developing their own jobs programs. We must give them the basic tools they need to succeed — meaningful training and education, adequate child care, a ride to work, and good jobs. Anything less from workfare won't work ... and isn't fair.

— Laurie Udesky

Photo by Alan Pogue



**A RECORD 12.2 MILLION PEOPLE RELY ON WELFARE TO MAKE ENDS MEET.**

# T H E N U M B E R S

Shuttled into dead-end jobs, women forced to participate in

# G A M E

the Florida workfare program wind up back on welfare.

By Laurie Udesky

**MIAMI, FLA.** — Kathy Murray didn't much like working alone at a gas station late at night. The job was in a dangerous part of town, but she and her three children needed the money to supplement their monthly assistance check from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). So she continued to ring up gas sales on the cash register. After work, the hum of the TV would help her unwind.

Then, one night in February 1988, Governor Bob Martinez looked into her living room from the TV screen. What he said made her hopeful for the first time in years.

"He was talking about this new program for AFDC recipients," recalls Murray. "New life, new change, new future — all you do is call up your local Health and Rehabilitative Services of-

fice. I thought I would find out what this is all about."

The program Murray saw advertised is Project Independence, one of the state workfare programs mandated by Congress in 1988 to provide education and job training to parents on welfare. "Since its inception," boasts a recent state report, "the program has been recognized as a national model of welfare reform." Last year, Florida spent almost \$26 million to administer the program for nearly 80,000 welfare recipients.

But a closer look reveals that Project Independence has done little to help poor Floridians become independent. The



state's own records show that most participants receive no education or training — they are simply shuttled into dead-end jobs that pay too little to support a family. What's more, the state routinely denies participants the child care and transportation benefits they are entitled to by law, making it impossible for many to juggle their responsibilities at home and at work.

As a result, many mothers have been ordered to join the program, only to have

their monthly assistance checks slashed when they are unable to attend mandatory meetings.

To Kathy Murray, Project Independence offered the promise of self-sufficiency. She dreamed of taking paralegal classes at a community college so she could support herself and her children. But when the 26-year-old mother went to Project Independence, she was told to take her dreams elsewhere. If she wanted to go to school, a caseworker told her, she would have to foot the bill herself.

"They said that since I have a high school diploma, since I don't speak with grammatical errors, since I know how to spell and put two sentences together, that I don't deserve to go to school," Murray recalls. "I said, 'You mean to say that because I'm intelligent, it weighs against me, that I have to take a \$4 an hour job?'"

Unable to persuade the program to provide the education she needed to help her get a decent paying job, Murray appealed the decision to the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). The agency rejected her appeal, saying that her skills in "cashier/sales" work qualified her to enter the labor force. Murray finally won her right to attend school after she testified before

dence participants receive no education or job training — even though many lack the skills to qualify for jobs that pay enough to support their families.

Many women, once eager to participate in the program, have become disillusioned — but they have no choice. According to state figures, more than 80 percent must take part or risk losing their welfare benefits.

So why does the program do so little to help participants improve their chances of finding a good job? According to the auditor general's report, some caseworkers said they felt pressured by their supervisors to increase job placements, which "led them to steer clients into employment who would otherwise be better served with education or training prior to employment."

Jim Clark, program director of Project Independence, admits that staff often overlook the education needs of participants. "When they're rushed to get the job done, they don't refer recipients to education and training programs," he says. "I've seen areas where a social worker will circumvent the federal law, because in the social worker's mind, this person will never make it."

Such prejudices have a way of becoming

got to be kidding. No one can support their family on those wages."

Even when a participant does find a job, it usually doesn't last long. Project Independence claims that 62 percent of participants have found jobs through the program — but some employment experts say the numbers are misleading.

"Project Independence is playing a numbers game," charges Jude Burke, director of the Florida Employment and Training Association. "If a participant gets a job at Burger King and leaves it the next day, they count that as a job placement."

Burke's claim is backed up by the auditor general, who found that 59 percent of Project Independence participants are back on welfare two months after they leave the program.

Clark does not dispute that many Project Independence participants who get a job return to the welfare rolls, but he blames the sagging economy and high unemployment. Even a low-paying job, he insists, "diminishes spells of dependency." The more a recipient gets out of the house to work, he says, the more she "develops interpersonal skills and engages with people." This, says Clark, is what the program's for. "We shouldn't



state lawmakers at a public hearing last fall — but she had to go all the way to the state Supreme Court to force Project Independence to pay her tuition.

### RUSH JOB

A recent report by the state auditor general indicates that Murray is not alone: 80 percent of all Project Indepen-

ing self-fulfilling. According to an HRS report, the average wage of those shuttled into jobs is \$4.49 an hour — wages that even Clark concedes are too low to allow people to become self-sufficient.

One mother from Ft. Lauderdale recalls her disappointment at her Project Independence orientation when a social worker announced cheerfully that the program would enable participants to get a job as a bank teller. "I just thought, you've

have expectations that everyone involved in education and training is going to go out and become a brain surgeon."

But many participants in the program resent such low expectations. "We're looking for some financial help, not an evaluation of our IQ," says one mother who asked not to be identified. "We're not talking about personality development here — we're talking about survival."

## NO WHEELS, NO WAY

Six-lane boulevards crisscross Broward County for miles, linking metropolitan Ft. Lauderdale with suburbs like Plantation to the west and Pompano to the north. Here, the message is clear: If you want to get anywhere, you'd better have wheels.

Federal law requires states to give workfare participants a bus pass or gas money to take their children to day care and get to work or school. In Florida, however, Project Independence has failed to tell many participants about transportation benefits. According to the state auditor general, the program can document that it provided transportation to only half the parents who need it.

That stinginess almost cost Maureen Anderson her son. When welfare officials ordered her to join Project Independence last year or lose her benefits, Anderson decided to study alternative medicine in Ft. Lauderdale. Her four-year-old, Sean, suffers from epilepsy and asthma.

"I'm in school because of the medical problems that my child has had," she says. "I want to learn how to work with him. I want to make a decent living where I can have benefits, where I can help others with problems."

When the state refused to cover her tuition costs, Anderson took out loans and began attending classes day and night so she could finish before the money ran out.

week.

"I hated leaving him there all day," declares Anderson, "but I just couldn't afford the gas for that extra trip."

What happened next is every parent's nightmare. A social worker at HRS, aware of Anderson's predicament, filed a neglect charge against her for leaving her child in day care 12 hours a day.

Anderson's voice quivers slightly as she recalls the day that she learned of the charges. "The first thought that went through my mind was intense fear. I've invested a lot of time and a lot of love into my little boy. The fear of losing him was so great that I literally collapsed on the floor."

Sharon Bourassa-Diaz, director of litigation for Legal Services of Broward County, calls the HRS accusation outrageous. "They put her in this position by not providing transportation, and then they try to punish her for something they caused," she says. Since Anderson was fortunate enough to have an attorney, the department eventually admitted its error and agreed to reimburse her for child care, books, and transportation costs.

## ALONE AFTER SCHOOL

Federal law also requires states to provide child care to poor parents struggling to find work and get off welfare — but once again, Florida has failed to live up to the mandate. Many parents taking part in

## "THE EYEBALL EFFECT"

**Tallahassee, Fla.** — When state lawmakers met to draft a new budget last spring, they were poised to freeze welfare benefits at 1990 levels. Instead, they received a rude awakening.

A group of poor women, many of them strangers to the statehouse, had gathered in the front row during the budget session. They were members of a group called Single Mothers In a Learning Environment (SMILE) — but they were not smiling.

The women, most of whom rely on welfare to support their children, had made the long van ride to Tallahassee from central Florida to make sure that they had a say in any budget decisions. "We just sit where they can see us every time they look out," says Deborah Simms, the group's executive director. "And we're shaking our heads yes or no depending on what they're trying to do. That's what we call the eyeball effect."

Taking new members to Tallahassee is one way SMILE endeavors to

each one has a code number, and you have to pick at least two schools that you prefer," she says. "You don't know what you're picking."

When Mary Harris entered Project Independence, she felt robbed of the right to choose a day care center for her three-



Then Project Independence refused to give her gas money, making it impossible for her to pick Sean up at his day care center in the middle of the day and drop him off again in the evening. Unable to afford the 30-mile round trip, Anderson had no other choice but to keep Sean at the center until she finished her classes two nights a

Project Independence say their children have been placed in facilities that fail to provide proper care.

Often, parents have no real say in choosing a day care center. As one mother describes it, the selection process resembles a bureaucratic version of pin the tail on the donkey. "You have a form,

year-old son Kenny. Even though the center selected by the program admitted that it was licensed only for younger children, Project Independence refused to give her another option. Harris, who works on-call as a substitute teacher in Pompano Beach to supplement her welfare check, had to get an attorney to have

empower women who have been forced to grapple with the unruly welfare bureaucracy. "I tell them that the people in Tallahassee are the ones sitting in the big chairs," Simms say. "But we are the people with saws to cut off the legs of those chairs if they don't make the right decision."

This year, the strategy paid off. After holding rallies, meeting with individual legislators, and giving them an eyeful during budget sessions, SMILE convinced lawmakers to raise welfare benefits 3.5 percent to keep up with inflation.

SMILE was also armed with a study it helped conduct for the Food Research and Action Center documenting that the majority of children in families on welfare suffer from hunger. Sixty-one percent of families experience "food emergencies," forcing them to seek help from food pantries or soup kitchens. In Florida, 31 percent of all families with children under 12 years old "are hungry or at-risk for hunger."

### "LIKE A FAMILY"

Just off Highway 441, in the rural community of Apopka, an innocuous

store front office sandwiched between a job services organization and H&R Block serves as a base for SMILE. Founded by welfare recipients in 1983, the group scrapes by on foundation grants and neighborhood fundraisers like fish fries, car washes, and yard sales.

In the office, a Hispanic woman carefully echoes an English language tape. "What is the color of the chair? The chair is green." SMILE helps members study for the high-school equivalency exam, providing free transportation and on-site child care while mothers attend class. Unlike similar programs sponsored by the state, SMILE keeps its classes small and tailors them to the individual needs of each woman.

"It's like a family," says Simms, who recently taught a spelling class. The teachers are well-equipped to understand the problems students have; some, like Simms, were once welfare recipients themselves. "Basically you're looking at faces that are ready to grasp what you're saying. They feel comfortable that you're not going to look down on them if they make a mistake. You say, 'It's okay,

let's try again.' It's a good feeling."

SMILE works with women who are eager to get the education and training they need to find a good job. Many are refugees from Project Independence, the state employment and training program, where they have run up against barriers that make it difficult to move forward.

"If they start working, the check is gone and the Medicaid is gone," explains Simms. "If they don't know that they're entitled to child care and Medicaid, a lot of times it's not mentioned to them."

SMILE tries to hold the state program accountable and help recipients understand their rights. The challenge, Simms says, is giving members the courage to assert their rights. "That's what taking them to Tallahassee does. It lets them see that the legislators are just people, and they have to vote them into office."

Simms encourages poor women in other states to organize groups like SMILE. After all, she says, it doesn't take much to form a welfare rights group. "If you have five people with common concerns, that's a start right there."

— L.U.

Kenny placed in a center qualified to care for him.

Kathy Murray, who was denied her right to attend community college, has also been forced to keep her children in a facility that she feels is neglectful. Her four-year-old daughter has severe asthma

the middle of the night because no one gave her medicine at the day care."

Christi Chatlos also suffered when Project Independence assigned her children to day care without giving her a say in the decision. At first glance, Chatlos would seem to be an ideal participant for

When she was offered a job as a teacher's aide at Earlington Heights Elementary in Miami—the same school her six-year-old son Jerome attends—she qualified for day care through Project Independence. That's when the trouble began.

Even though Earlington Heights



Illustration by Jan Francoeur

— a condition the day care center selected by Project Independence is unprepared to handle.

"There have been two incidents where I've gotten to the school and she's been in total arrest, wheezing her brains out because she hasn't had her medicine. One night I had to rush her to the hospital in

welfare: She dislikes being dependent on welfare, and she enjoys working. She used to work with developmentally disabled adults and children, but she lost her job during her pregnancy and had to seek assistance from AFDC.

Even with the monthly welfare check, Chatlos had to work to make ends meet.

had its own after-school program that could care for Jerome until Chatlos got off work each day, Project Independence assigned him to another day care center—and refused to give Chatlos gas money to take him there.

"They said that they don't have a contract with the school, and he had to go to a

program one mile away," Chatlos says. "I don't have the money to pay for gas to get him there."

As a result, Jerome must stand outside the doors of the day care center of his own school each afternoon, waiting for his mother to finish work. When the clock in her classroom hits two o'clock, Chatlos feels her muscles tense up. For the next hour, she knows that her son will be on his own. "It's a rough neighborhood. I see so many packets where drugs came from right on school property."

One day, while Chatlos was helping her third-graders with their reading assignments, Jerome ran into her classroom crying uncontrollably. He had a large, red bump on his head. "He was standing near a door outside when someone opened it and it hit him in the head. I was worried he had a concussion, so I made him sit down and rest. It seems like he gets hurt a lot when he's unsupervised," Chatlos says, her voice trailing off.

Chatlos also worries that someone might kidnap Jerome while she's finishing her work day. She has tried to ease her fears by teaching him what to say if a stranger approaches. "We role-play. I pretend I'm a stranger and say, 'Come with me, your mommy is sick.' And he says 'no.' But he's only six years old. He shouldn't be anywhere unattended or unsupervised."

With help from a lawyer, Chatlos finally forced Project Independence to place Jerome in a day care center that would pick him up after school. Even though she fought for her son's safety, she somehow feels that she's to blame for what happened to her children. She looks down, lowering her voice and shifting uneasily in her chair. "I feel like it's my fault for trying to work, pay the bills, and take care of them."

### A VICIOUS CYCLE

Project Independence now plans to eliminate almost all day care. An internal document advises HRS caseworkers that because of state budget cuts, the only children eligible for day care are "AFDC employed, transitional, or children at-risk for neglect or abuse." The memo further stresses that "Project Independence clients who are in pre-employment activities

such as job search and AFDC applicants who participate in Project Independence are not entitled" to day care.

Program Director Jim Clark maintains that nobody who is currently working or enrolled in school or training will be denied day care. But Clark apparently hasn't talked to Barbara Smith, who was turned down for child care even though she is studying to be a medical assistant. "I feel ticked off," says Smith, who has no one to watch her children at home in Plantation while she attends classes during the day. "It means I'm really stuck."

Smith is not the only one concerned. Jude Burke of the Florida Employment and Training Association says she has been getting calls from service providers complaining that Project Independence participants are being forced to drop out of school because their child care funding has been cut.

Jim Clark dismisses such reports as untrue. He says that new participants will simply have to get relatives to watch their children—"like the rest of us." He insists that people are on welfare not because they can't find child care, but because of "a lack of belief in themselves."

But without the child care they are entitled to by law, many parents on welfare may never be able to build their self-confidence. "It's a vicious cycle," says Barbara Smith. "If you have a minimum-wage job, you may be getting your self-esteem back, but you can't afford child care. The cheapest I've found is \$65 a week."

### PUNISHING THE INNOCENT

To make matters worse, women in the program who miss a class or training session run the risk of losing their welfare benefits. By its own calculation, HRS "sanctions" 800 women each year, slashing the monthly checks they rely on to feed and shelter their children. An HRS report cautions, however, that "exhaustive efforts to contact the participant and determine whether 'good cause' exists must be completed prior to initiating sanctions."

In the case of Kathleen Gordon, the agency's efforts proved somewhat less than exhaustive. Gordon was forced to quit her job as a maid and go on welfare

when she was blinded by glass from a shattered window. Three weeks after her eye surgery, she was ordered to attend a Project Independence orientation. "I couldn't even read the note," says Gordon. "When I read, my words look like they're running together." Dizzy and nauseous with pain, Gordon showed up at the session with a bandaged eye—and a note from her doctor explaining her medical problems.

Since then, Gordon has continued to visit her doctor every week and nurse her injured eye back to health. She heard nothing from Project Independence for seven months—until she received a sanction notice in December informing her that the state was cutting her welfare for failing to conduct a job search.

"I got \$167," says Gordon, whose Ft. Lauderdale living room sports more than a dozen basketball trophies won by her two teenage sons. "I should have gotten \$225."

An HRS report released in March also indicates that black women like Gordon have been punished far more often than white women in the program. Although blacks comprise half of all participants in Project Independence, they represent 80 percent of all those "sanctioned" by the program.

Such figures underscore the punitive attitude that seems to pervade Project Independence. In stressing "self esteem" and punishing those who cannot participate, the program fails to grasp the reasons many families end up on welfare in the first place: disabling injuries, high unemployment, and a shortage of child care. Instead of enabling women on welfare to get back on their feet, Project Independence has denied them training, endangered their children, and wrongly punished many doing their best to follow the rules.

"It's hurting me more than it's helping," says Kathy Murray, who fought Project Independence all the way to the state Supreme Court. "You struggle so hard to do the best that you can do, and then you see it fall apart because of things beyond your control. My children deserve more than what they've been exposed to." □

*Laurie Udesky is associate editor of Southern Exposure.*

# RURAL

Workfare got its start along the back roads of Arkansas, but

# ROULETTE

today the program punishes more women than it employs.

By Gordon Young

**IVAN, ARK.** — Even when the central Arkansas weather is dry and the Georgia Pacific lumber mill in nearby Fordyce is running at full tilt, Anita Ford can only count on \$400 a month in earnings from her husband. With the additional \$475 she receives in Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and food stamps, there's barely enough money to feed her four children and keep gas in the pickup her husband drives to the mill.

When the thunderheads started rolling in this April, the rumble of trucks hauling freshly cut pines on the dirt roads near Ford's home slackened. It was a sign she would have to get by on less as the spring rain held up timber cutting and shortened shifts at the mill.

"If the weather's bad the bossman

thinks nothing of saying 'you can't work this week,'" Ford says from the front room of her trailer. "You just expect it."

But Ford wasn't expecting a letter from her caseworker announcing a cut in AFDC payments, with the loss of food stamps and Medicaid benefits soon to follow. Like more than 1,000 other women in the past year, Ford had been "sanctioned" by the Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) for "failing to cooperate" with the state's workfare program known as Project Success.

Ford's benefits were cut after she failed to make the 12-mile round-trip drive to Fordyce for adult education courses — a requirement to receive welfare benefits under the program. Ford had

no objection to the twice-a-week classes aimed at helping her pass the GED exam; she simply couldn't afford to go. Although Project Success reimburses participants at the end of every month for transportation costs, Ford didn't have the \$6 it took each week for gas. And like virtually all rural areas in the state, there was no public transportation available.

"The money we have is money to survive — it goes to electricity, water and food," Ford says as she sits forward in her chair. "I would have gone if they could have given me \$3 each time in advance. Even though Fordyce is just a hop, skip and a jump, I can't do it."

Ford's 10-year-old daughter had recently shown some signs of scoliosis during a screening at her elementary school.

Finding gas money for a more thorough exam nearly 70 miles away in Little Rock before her Medicaid privileges were revoked became Ford's main concern. After her benefits run out, she has a rather tenuous plan for assisting her children if they fall sick.

"I'm going to pray to God I can get to Little Rock because they don't turn kids away at Arkansas Children's Hospital," she says. "But you've got to get gas to get there. This whole thing has taken a mental and a physical toll — it just weighs on me. This program is not helping us at all."

## WELFARE RECYCLING

Ford is not alone in her opinion of Project Success. Although Governor Bill Clinton proposed and lobbied for the Family Support Act of 1988 — the federal legislation requiring workfare programs like Project Success nationwide — the chronic shortage of child care and transportation plaguing the state's predominantly rural counties has made it more of a burden than a benefit for many of the nearly 15,000 participants.

"There's been no success in this project," says Jo Ann Cayce, an advocate for the poor who has organized relief efforts for the past 39 years in rural Dallas County. "It was misnamed."

Cayce and other critics complain that AFDC recipients are being forced to participate in a program that is flawed from start to finish. Assessments intended to gauge the skills of participants before they are placed in training programs either miss the mark or don't take place at all. Arkansas' AFDC payments are the sixth lowest in the nation, making it difficult for women to remain in the program when unexpected expenses — no matter how slight — force them to miss training sessions and face the threat of sanction. Women who make it through the education program face unemployment figures that often reach double digits in many rural areas.

Those who find work

often earn minimum wage — or less — with few health care benefits. If one of their children gets sick, they end up back on welfare to pay the doctor bills.

"Project Success is just ridiculous in Arkansas because the assistance payments are so low women can't afford to stay in the program," says Brownie Ledbetter, executive director of Arkansas Career Resources, a non-profit organization that works with welfare recipients. "Then there's no follow-up on the women who manage to get jobs, and nine times out of ten she's eventually back on welfare. We're recycling just like always."

In order to qualify for AFDC payments in Arkansas, an individual's income can be no higher than 29 percent of the 1985 U.S. poverty level. The low income necessary for participation is matched by the meager levels of support qualified families then receive. A family of three, for example, can count on only \$351 in AFDC and food stamp payments each month.

"We've tried to get the governor to at least raise the qualifying standards to 1990 poverty levels, but he just won't do it," Ledbetter says. "He's very active in the National Governor's Association, but we can't get him to raise benefits right here in our own state."

As chair of the Governor's Association, Clinton helped draft the Family Support Act, basing much of the legislation on fledgling workfare programs already

in place throughout Arkansas. Project Success made Arkansas one of the first states to meet federal guidelines when it began on July 1, 1989.

Although Clinton has been reluctant to raise welfare payments, he was more than willing to expand the number of women forced to participate in Project Success. While previous workfare programs were mandatory for AFDC applicants with children at least six years old, Project Success included all women with children over one.

"The Family Support Act is very flexible — we could have had the minimum child age be three years old," Ledbetter says. "But instead, we jumped right in as deep as we could go. What you get is very little progress because it's spread so thin."

Kenny Whitlock, who oversees Project Success as deputy director of economic and medical services for DHHS, believes the state can't afford to limit participation.

"It's true if we targeted fewer cases we could spend more money on the client," he says. "But then we couldn't help as many people. We know this approach is the only approach we can take. This is a real opportunity for people."

## "A LOT OF PRIDE"

Janet Hayden's first opportunity came in the mail. Unable to read or write, the 38-year-old mother of one had a friend read her the form letter from Project Success.

It stated she was required to attend an employment training session in Fordyce or risk losing the \$329 she received each month in welfare benefits. Hayden went to the four-day session out of fear, but she laughs when asked about what she learned.

"They talked about how you go about getting a job, about dressing up and having confidence," she says, standing on the front porch of a small house she shares with five other people in a predominantly black section of Fordyce. "To tell you the truth, I didn't learn much."

Asked about the assessment process required by DHHS to familiarize participants with Project Success

Photos by Wood Grigsby



**WORKFARE DIDN'T HELP LINDA BEARD FIND WORK. "ALL THIS TIME I WENT TO SCHOOL AND NOW I CAN'T GET A JOB. IT'S FRUSTRATING."**

and evaluate their educational standing, Hayden confirmed it never took place. She hasn't heard from Project Success since she attended the training session last year.

Even when participants manage to get an assessment, critics argue it seldom produces a realistic profile of the educational or financial barriers women face. Project Success caseworkers, for example, may ignore a participant's shaky relationship with a landlord because they can't do anything about it. But when the rent is unexpectedly hiked or an eviction notice arrives, the woman may be unable to attend training sessions.

"Our fear in the very beginning was that the assessment process wasn't truly comprehensive," says Amy Rossi, director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. "Women's lives need to be stabilized so once they start training something doesn't come up to make their lives fall apart. A change of circumstance — a \$10 raise in rent — can make or break these families real quick."

With only one caseworker for every eight Project Success participants, the special barriers posed by rural poverty are often overlooked in the assessment process. Many women live without phones on roads that are often washed out in the spring and too muddy to travel in the winter. Rossi dealt with one welfare mother who could only afford to wash clothes once a month, while another had only a pair of her husband's old work boots to wear.

"You have people who really don't have adequate clothing to go anywhere people will see them," Rossi says. "There's a lot of pride in these people. They would work if they had some of the other little things that would enable them to work."

### WALKING ALONE

In rural Arkansas, where a visit to the nearest grocery store can easily translate into a 15-mile round trip, adequate trans-



**"NUMBERS DRIVE THIS PROGRAM," SAYS BROWNIE LEDBETTER, WHO WORKS WITH WELFARE RECIPIENTS. "THE PERSON WHO GETS SCREWED IS THE CLIENT."**

portation can be as difficult to find as a well-paying job.

"It's just not reliable because very few counties have any sort of system for picking people up reasonably close to their homes," Rossi says. "That's not the woman's fault. It's the fault of the system that can't respond."

In a state where only three cities — Little Rock, Pine Bluff, and Fayetteville — have mass transit systems, it was obvious in the early stages of the program that an extensive transportation network would need to be established. A study by the University of Arkansas released in October 1989 — four months after Project Success was implemented — reported that only two percent of participants could rely on public transportation to get back and forth to their job or training. A full 64 percent didn't own a car, and 36 percent didn't have a valid driver's license.

Things haven't changed much since then. Reports released late last year by county planning groups set up by DHHS to study Project Success uniformly listed transportation as the major flaw in the program. The sole public transportation in rural Sevier County are three vans that only transport senior citizens. In Lincoln County, the report states, "there isn't any way for people without private means to travel about the counties to conduct business or keep appointments."

Faced with the threat of sanction, women often call on relatives or friends

for transportation, but such arrangements are often unreliable at best. Sharon Clancy, a 20-year-old who is expecting her fourth child, borrows her mother's car to make the 12-mile round trip from her home in Thornton to Fordyce for GED courses. She was also giving a neighbor a ride, but the other woman quit attending because she couldn't pay Clancy \$3 a week up front for gas. The neighbor is now being sanctioned.

Janet Smith, who is expecting her second child late this summer, couldn't find a ride from her trailer in Fordyce to

GED classes. She now walks to her classes that meet twice a week from six to nine p.m.

"I walk two miles, but it seems like five," Smith says. "I love school, but I don't like walking alone at night. Some of the neighborhoods are pretty bad."

Governor Clinton has created a task force to look at the transportation problem, but state officials expect no quick fix. "Our problem is that we don't have any organized public transportation," says Kenny Whitlock, who oversees Project Success. "There's no network where a person can go and just call a number to get a ride. That's what we really need."

### NO HELP WANTED

While finding transportation is often impossible, the search for adequate child care can be equally daunting. The planning report for Green County details problems typical of many rural areas in the state. "Most of the day care facilities in Green County are at their capacity," the report states. "No day care is available for evening or late-night shifts which would facilitate factory employment. There is limited after-school day care. We do not have but four day care centers or family homes that will take a state voucher."

Carol Rasco of the governor's office concedes that child care is a "barrier to successful implementation of the pro-

gram," but says that child care money mandated by federal legislation should reach the state this fall and help ease the problem.

For the women who make it through job training or adult education classes, their perseverance often goes unrewarded. Linda Beard made the 40-mile round trip from her home in Grady to Pine Bluff for nearly a year to learn child care skills. Project Success originally provided transportation, but Beard eventually had to hitch a ride with a friend.

"If the weather was bad my road would get flooded and the van just wouldn't show up," Beard says, tapping her feet on the plywood boards covering the floor of her trailer. "Sometimes they'd call and tell me to ask around for a ride and sometimes they wouldn't. Then it just stopped completely. I was wondering if I was ever going to finish because I'd go for awhile and then have to stop."

Because of interruptions in transportation, it took Beard 12 months instead of nine to complete her training. She's been job hunting in Lincoln County — with its unemployment rate of nearly 11 percent — since January.

"A lot of day care centers asked me when I would be finished and I had to tell them I didn't know," Beard says. "I went back later and they told me they needed me when they asked the first time. If I would have finished sooner I might have a job now."

With only \$704 in AFDC and food stamps coming in each month, Beard depends on a garden during summer months to feed her four children. The two hogs she bought at a local flea market and keeps penned up in a field near her trailer will eventually be slaughtered for food.

"There's nothing I can do if I don't find a job but just wait and pray," Beard says. "All this time I went to school and now I can't get a job. It's frustrating."

Without an extensive program to place participants in jobs once they're trained, the frustration felt by Morgan is not unique. In addition to Lincoln County, Arkansas has 22 other counties with double-digit unemployment rates. Fourteen southeastern counties have an average unemployment rate of more than 11 percent, with Lee leading the state at 18.8 percent. Not surprisingly, the same 14 counties account for the most Project Success participants in Arkansas,

with more than 4,500 open cases.

"A policy to find jobs for these people just isn't there," says Rossi, director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. "It was missing in the beginning and it's still missing."

Karan Burnette, manager of the Project Success central office in Little Rock, adds, "There are some areas where there just isn't anything there. You can train someone for a job, but there's not always a job available."

Reports issued by the Arkansas Division of Finance indicate that approximately 175 to 300 women find jobs through the program every month, but an average of more than 600 new cases are also opened.

And every month, the number of women sanctioned or "suspended" by the program outstrips the number who actually find jobs. Women are suspended when they can't overcome "significant barriers" such as pregnancy or have completed necessary training but can't find a job. Unlike women who are sanctioned, women on suspension still receive benefits.

"They developed the suspend category because they knew they couldn't handle rural areas," says Rossi, who served on a governor's advisory committee for Project Success. "If you're suspended you just sit and wait."

During December of last year, for example, only 175 women in the program found jobs statewide — while sanctions claimed 190 women and suspension 973 more. Forty-four counties had more sanctions than jobs, and 22 counties produced no jobs at all.

### \$3.35 AN HOUR

Shoddy record keeping and haphazard tracking make it difficult to ascertain exactly what kind of jobs Project Success participants are finding. DHHS stopped compiling county records with detailed job descriptions or wage levels more than a year ago. A comprehensive, statewide study of jobs will not be available until a new computer is installed next year.

"About the only gauge of how people are doing is when they make enough money to get off public assistance," says Whitlock, the project supervisor. "We used to file monthly reports with job de-

scriptions and wages, but it took too much staff time."

Critics of the program argue that judging Project Success solely by the number of jobs produced and money saved on AFDC payments ignores the hardship caused by placing women in low-paying, dead-end jobs.

"The tragedy is that numbers drive this program," Ledbetter says. "Every overworked DHHS worker at the local level has to churn out X number of 'successes.' But the person who gets screwed is the client. They have such low expectations for these women — I swear to God they're putting people in domestic work."

For Terri Morgan, landing a job brought her no closer to financial independence. Like Janet Hayden, she attended one week of training in Fordyce designed to teach her the do's and don'ts of getting a job. She says the classes provided little practical information, but she soon found work — making \$3.35 an hour as a fry cook at a local cafe.

Despite inconsistent hours and weekly wages below \$80, the state cut off the \$204 in monthly AFDC payments Morgan was receiving to support her two sons.

Both boys were the product of incest when Morgan's father raped her as a teenager. She is trying to get her father to help support the children, but she isn't counting on it. She says she is scheduled to lose her Medicaid payments once a six-month "transitional period" ends — even though the Family Support Act provides for benefits up to one year unless health care is provided by the employer.

When asked what will happen if she or her sons get sick, Morgan replies, "Jesus, I don't know."

For Jo Anne Cayce, who often gives food and clothing to families that have lost their benefits, Morgan's story sounds all too familiar. "If the government is going to get them a little old job and then take everything away from them, what's the point?" she asks. "People should be rewarded for finding a job, not punished." □

*Gordon Young is a reporter for Spectrum Weekly in Little Rock. All Project Success participants in this story except Linda Beard asked that pseudonyms be used to protect them from possible reprisals.*

# RED TAPE BLUES

Poor Texans ordered to find work find

themselves trapped in a  
bureaucratic maze that ignores the  
realities of poverty.

By Brett Campbell

**AUSTIN, TEXAS**— Sheila Foscette has been on and off welfare for the past five years, and she's seen it all.

She's made repeated trips to the welfare office to look for work, only to be ignored by disrespectful caseworkers. She's watched employment counselors conduct a "job search" by flipping through the Yellow Pages. She's been forced to give up her health insurance and child care benefits to take a job that pays less than welfare. She even had to quit college because the state refused to continue benefits after she took 60 hours of classes.

"Once I was about to run out of food, I had no money, my case was screwed up," Foscette recalls. "My caseworker wouldn't even look at me. I said, 'Please help me. My kids need to eat. I need

money to go buy some sanitary napkins because it's that time of month.'" The caseworker didn't bat an eye. "That's not my job," he said, turning back to his keyboard.

The problem, Foscette concludes, is the bureaucracy. "It's called the Department of Human Services," she says, "but it has no humanity. They get out of touch."

Sheila Foscette isn't alone. Thousands of Texans on welfare have been ordered to find work or lose their benefits — and they have run headlong into a dizzying array of rules and regulations that make it virtually impossible for them to fill out a form, let alone find a job.

Texas, it seems, could be a case study in how not to run a welfare program. For years, the state made applicants for public

aid fill out long, confusing forms that baffle even legal aid lawyers. Every applicant must list a permanent address — even though the wave of homelessness in the 1980s put thousands of Texans out on the streets.

The bureaucratic maze prevents many poor families from getting help. According to a report by the Southern Governor's Association, Texas rejects a bigger share of welfare applicants than any other state in the nation. The state turns away half of everyone in need — three-quarters of them for "failure to comply with procedural requirements."

In many cases, applicants are denied help because they can't get a former landlord or ex-boss to fill out required forms detailing their housing and employment record. The result: an "Application De-

nied" stamp on their thick, carefully filled-out application form.

By enacting policies that so defy common sense, the state has created a tangled welfare system that does little to help the millions of Texans who live in poverty. The welfare bureaucracy has lost touch with the people it is supposed to serve. The story of what went wrong — and what the state could do to make amends — holds important lessons for the other Southern states.

## HARD-ASS STATE

Texas has always been stingy when it comes to helping the poor. The state consistently ranks among the most miserly in the nation in providing for the welfare of its citizens. It provides Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to only 840,000 of the 2.5 million people in need. The maximum benefit: \$57 a month per person.

"Texas is paying people an AFDC grant that's 32 percent of what's deemed to be the need," says Cascell Noble, advocacy coordinator at the Texas Legal Services Center. "And that standard of need is outmoded."

Put simply, welfare checks have not kept up with inflation. Since 1969, AFDC benefits in Texas have lagged behind the cost of living by 23 percent, making it tougher than ever for families to get by.

This tight-fisted approach to public assistance can be traced in part to the Lone Star State's frontier tradition of self-reliance. "It's typical of Texan culture that we blame the person who has the problem," says Debby Tucker of the Texas Council on Family Violence. "We say, 'They wouldn't be poor if they would just pull themselves up.' We insulate ourselves from problems we don't know how to solve by blaming the victim."

The conservative state legislature has fueled the anti-welfare bias, imposing niggardly policies and niggling requirements. "The tone is set at the legislature," says a former official

with the Department of Human Services (DHS) who asked not to be identified. "We do not have liberal interpretations of federal programs. Look at AFDC — there's only been one time in the 1980s in which the state elected to raise benefits. This has been a hard-ass state."

The penny-pinching attitude has filtered down to the DHS, the state agency that administers welfare programs. "Historically, many people in the agency viewed its role primarily as protecting the taxpayers," says Kelly Evans, an Austin legal aid attorney who represents AFDC recipients. "They deliberately put up barriers to participation to keep caseloads down, because the budget wouldn't allow them to meet the needs of all those who really needed help."

State workers who want to help clients discover they simply don't have the time or resources to do the job. "Caseworkers in the field have enormous caseloads relative to other states, and there's extreme pressure for accuracy," says Dianne Stewart, a former DHS policy official. "The people who go into those jobs have good intentions and want to help people, but because they're faced with an overwhelming workload and pressures, they can't even devote time to thinking much about what the recipient's circumstances and needs are."

The staggering workloads force caseworkers to become little more than data-entry personnel. "It's like you're in there on an assembly line," says Sheila

Foscette. The average DHS caseworker handles 240 cases — far more than the legislature budgeted for — and the problem is getting worse. Last year, the number of welfare applications soared by 38 percent, and the average caseload jumped by 21.6 percent.

## PENNY UNWISE

The placid atmosphere in the Austin welfare office belies the stress felt by both recipients and caseworkers. About two dozen people sit in the waiting room — mostly women, mostly Hispanic, mostly young. Some fill out application forms; others stare into space, waiting for their names to be called. A few potted plants add a touch of green to the antiseptic blue walls and fluorescent lighting. Though it's a hot, early summer Texas day, the water fountains are broken.

Once those in the waiting room get in to see a caseworker, they will have to negotiate a maze of federal and state rules. "Front-line workers in DHS are basically penalized or rewarded based on how accurate the information is — not on how well they serve the client," says Christopher King, a University of Texas professor who has studied the welfare agency.

King notes that the federal government penalizes the state each time a caseworker approves an ineligible applicant for welfare. The result: "The reward system is geared toward not screwing up. It's much worse to be caught making a mistake than running a program that performs poorly. That gives you the wrong kind of character on the front lines."

Such pressures help explain why nearly a third of all DHS caseworkers leave the agency every year. "You become a senior DHS worker if you last three years," notes Debby Tucker of the Texas Council on Family Violence.

The pressures also help explain the hostility some caseworkers exhibit toward their clients. A DHS caseworker in

Photos by Alan Pogue



LONG LINES AND HARRIED CASEWORKERS AWAIT POOR FAMILIES THROWN OUT OF WORK IN SOUTH TEXAS.

## MILES TO GO

Texans who live in poverty and their advocates are pressing for far-reaching changes to make the Department of Human Services more responsive to those it serves. Among the proposals:

▼ **Break the agency up into smaller pieces.** Advocates say that having several boards overseeing fewer programs would improve efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness. Newly-elected Governor Ann Richards has already appointed three members experienced in human services to the DHS board, including its first disabled member.

▼ **Eliminate punitive regulations.** DHS must overhaul the "punish-the-poor" mentality that poisons the atmosphere of public assistance. "We have to put in place a system that rewards caseworkers on how well they get people off welfare," says Chris King, a University of Texas professor who has studied the state welfare system.

▼ **Provide more resources.** Human services advocates are pushing Texas to adopt an income tax to finance investments in human resources. "It will cost \$1.5 billion next biennium just to maintain our abysmally inadequate stan-

dards," says Jude Filler of the Texas Alliance on Human Needs. More money is needed to train caseworkers, lighten caseloads, and provide meaningful job-training to those on welfare.

▼ **Recruit and reward good caseworkers.** Advocates say DHS needs to hire more minorities and former welfare recipients as caseworkers. "We need to pay them better and train them better," declares Leslie Lanham of the Children's Defense Fund. Workers on the front lines should also have more say in shaping policies.

▼ **Place caseworkers in the community.** Lanham and other advocates recommend decentralizing welfare offices. "Rather than having all the caseworkers in one building where they only see other DHS workers, put them in clinics, hospitals, and schools, where they see what happens to clients," says Lanham. "Get them into areas where they can see a pregnant woman getting health care as a result of their work in getting them Medicaid. Get them out in the world where they can see clients as whole people." Just recently, DHS took steps in this direction by opening offices in hospitals.

▼ **Make home visits.** Visiting clients at home would help caseworkers make better decisions. "White middle-class

people don't know what it's like to live in a project," insists Sylvia Meyer, a DHS supervisor. "Home visits would educate workers, give them a little more cultural sense and empathy — a little more tolerance. Then we could give a little power back to the clients by getting them more involved in their own cases."

▼ **Train clients for decent jobs.** Job training programs should give welfare recipients a shot at a career instead of shunting them into low-wage, dead-end work. "I'd like to see more emphasis on policies that promote independence and dignity," says Ilene Gray, a human services consultant who stresses the need for detailed, individual assessments with each client.

▼ **Educate the public.** To build political support for effective, responsive policies, advocates want to teach taxpayers about the realities of welfare. "A lot of people don't understand what happens to people who are forced to the fringes of society," says Debby Tucker of the Texas Council on Family Violence. "A lot of people are still stuck in the idea that it's your own fault if you got in trouble. They don't have a clue about what it's like to grow up on streets and have to steal your own food." — B.C.

San Antonio, for example, recently caused a stir with a letter to the local newspaper describing AFDC recipients as fat, unappreciative deadbeats who have children just to stay on welfare. "They have never worked a day in their life," the caseworker wrote, "and don't intend to if they can get away with it."

Such hostility is fueled by the cultural gulf separating caseworkers from clients. "I'm a white, middle-class, single person," says Sylvia Meyer, a social services supervisor at a Dallas DHS office. "I don't know what it's like to have raised three or four kids by the time you're 33, like some of my clients have. I don't know what it's like to live from paycheck to paycheck."

With caseworkers operating under tremendous pressure, welfare recipients never know what to expect when they contact DHS. "I've had caseworkers who were real sweet. During the interview, they asked me about why I'd got on welfare, they really cared about me," recalls Sheila Fosette. "And I've had caseworkers who just get you in there, ask you

questions about your case, and that's it — they show no emotions whatsoever."

Confronted with indifference or outright hostility from the agency that is supposed to help them, many poor Texans never receive the services they're entitled to. They consider the agency "an obstacle to their survival," says Kelly Evans, the legal aid lawyer. "Remember, this is a clientele that's dependent on buses. They have kids, and they may lose income when they take time off to get the documents they need. A lot of people just don't come back. They drop out."

### MUSHROOMING RULES

With the Texas welfare system so bogged down in bureaucracy, it's little wonder that workfare "reforms" mandated by Congress in 1988 only added to the mess. A decade ago, caseworkers in Texas administered four separate welfare programs. Today they must master the complexities of 30.

"There's this bewildering avalanche

of information pouring into the field, and not all of it gets disseminated quickly to the bottom," says a former DHS official. "They're too busy trying to cope with all these federal and state changes to concentrate on helping people. A lot of workers feel like they're a part of the mushroom theory: keep 'em in the dark and throw a little shit on 'em every now and then."

The sheer size of the welfare agency — it employs more than 15,000 people — contributes to the bureaucratic isolation. "When a system is really big like DHS, its goal becomes one of self-protection," says Debby Tucker of the Texas Council on Family Violence. "That kind of hierarchical system increases paranoia and decreases creativity."

Many inside the bureaucracy privately agree. "A lot of people who gravitate to state office tend to be rule-oriented," says one DHS official. "They're not the kind of people who start questioning whether the programs are actually helping anyone. They aren't all that eager to re-examine rules and say, 'How can we make this system open and accessible to those it

serves?' All bureaucracies have people like this, but welfare, because it is incredibly rule-driven, tends to have more than its fair share."

For DHS bureaucrats who spend their work days confined to the agency's state headquarters in Austin, the isolation is also physical. The gleaming DHS office building was completed in 1984 — at a cost of \$26 million.

## CRONIES AND PHONIES

Despite the obstacles to change, the Texas welfare system looked like it might be on the road to reform a few years ago. In 1989, DHS got a board chair who said he was ready to question the rules. Rob Mosbacher Jr., a Houston socialite and scion of the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, vowed to shake up the inefficient agency.

He shook things up — but not entirely for the better. Although Mosbacher spouted the right rhetoric and initiated a few reforms, his appointments to top policymaking positions soon drew fire from all sides.

People on the inside complained that Mosbacher hired his friends to run things. "His political appointees knew little about running DHS, and they hired people like themselves who didn't know how to do their jobs," says Jude Filler, director of the Texas Alliance on Human Needs. "By the end of '89, the people at the bottom were appalled by the incompetence at the top, and morale just plummeted."

Mosbacher tried to fill one top administrative post with a political pal who had devoted his career to lumber. Advocates also accused Mosbacher of deliberately underestimating the surge in caseloads to avoid asking the legislature for more money during his campaign for lieutenant governor. Mosbacher lost the race — and DHS lost sorely-needed funding.

The most fundamental change that shook the state welfare system in 1989 came not from the top, but from the ranks of the frustrated poor. A welfare recipient named Carolyn Lewis sued the

state, charging DHS with systematically preventing her from receiving benefits.

The state settled the lawsuit in 1989, agreeing to demolish some of the procedural barriers confronting clients. According to Roger Gette, the lead attorney in the suit, DHS has condensed its bewildering 17-page application package to a simpler, four-page form. The settlement requires caseworkers to help clients fill out forms and obtain documentation — and to take the applicant's word for it if they can't produce the necessary paperwork.

What's more, rejection letters to clients must now include a list of alternative procedures and programs the client can take to obtain aid. The presumption has changed, at least officially, from suspicion to trust.

The settlement is far from a cure-all. Gette complains that "some areas that were problems before the lawsuit are still problems now. We've seen grudging compliance at best." But he concedes that the number of complaints to legal aid lawyers has dropped by 66 percent.

The same year that the state settled the Lewis suit, the "reforms" mandated by the Family Support Act also began to take effect. Unfortunately, the plan hatched in Washington didn't make much of a dent in the Austin bureaucracy. The state agreed to end its long-term policy of forcing families to break up in order to qualify for AFDC — but true to its reputation as a miser, the legislature only provided six months of benefits, creating a bureau-

cratic nightmare for caseworkers and recipients alike.

Still, a few modest reforms have managed to creep into the system. DHS notices are now written in both English and Spanish. Caseworker training has been revamped to include a session on "people skills." Computers are enabling some applicants to do "one-stop shopping" for all the forms they need, freeing up caseworkers to spend more time with clients. And the agency has set up local advisory policy review committees composed of recipients, front-line caseworkers, advocates, and policy planners to provide much-needed feedback to the central office.

Many of the changes were only implemented statewide last October, but welfare advocates say things seem to be improving — albeit slowly. "There are still some problems, but I think over the last two years there has been a concerted effort by the agency to try to change the image of the department," says Kelly Evans, the Austin legal aid attorney.

But with the number of welfare cases expected to triple over the next few years, most Texans trapped in the system don't hold out much hope for change. The only real difference, says welfare recipient Sheila Fosette is that caseworkers now push single parents into "McDonald's jobs" that pay even less than welfare.

"Why should you have training as a nurse and go be a garbage woman?" says Fosette, who completed two years of college. "Why should you give up your dream?"

The welfare bureaucracy will remain out of touch, she insists, until the bureaucrats come out from behind their desks.

"The only way they're going to get in touch with the people is if they take off their nice suits and dresses, put on some blue jeans, take the bus to the welfare office, go through an appointment, fill out an application, and pretend they don't have any money in their pockets," Fosette says. "Then they will understand." □

*Brett Campbell is managing editor of The Texas Observer.*



**TEXAS PAYS A MAXIMUM OF \$57 A MONTH TO EACH PERSON ON WELFARE. ITS WELFARE HEADQUARTERS IN AUSTIN COST \$26 MILLION.**

# LOOKS LIKE I

Welfare rights activist Annie Smart talks about going on

# GOT MAD

welfare under Truman — and fighting for reform under Bush.

Interview by Laurie Udesky

*Annie Smart has struggled against the injustices of the welfare system for more than four decades. Her family first received assistance during the Truman administration, and she helped organize a national movement for welfare rights after the failure of the War on Poverty during the Johnson administration.*

*As vice president of the National Welfare Rights Union, Smart continues to mobilize the poor to fight for better benefits and jobs. She also serves as co-chair of the National Anti-Hunger Coalition and works as a paralegal in an advocacy program she helped organize for welfare recipients.*

*When she's not buttonholing Louisiana lawmakers, challenging welfare bureaucrats, or marching in the streets, Smart enjoys dancing the jitterbug for her 13 children, putting up a big pot of gumbo or red beans, and sitting on her front porch in Baton Rouge reminiscing.*



My grandmother owned her own home. In those days the older people were able to get property for about \$50. She made a house large enough for all of her family. She could not read or write, but she could count. She used to grow her own sugar cane and sell it to LSU. She'd pick strawberries and raise chickens, and that kept her in business.

When I was about 10, I was her business person, because I could read and count. If I didn't do it right, that woman would beat you half to death—or you'd think you was dead! I'm glad, because if it hadn't been for her, I probably wouldn't have been the same mother that I became when I had the responsibility.

When my grandmother died she willed me part of the property, so I'm living today on the same spot I grew up

on. It's a big house, with a nice side yard where children come and play and tear up my flowers. They have a good time — but then I have to put it back together.

I'm the mother of 13 children. I have two sets of triplets, a set of twins, five singles, a host of grandchildren, and 10 or 12 great-grandchildren. We have a good family, we get along fine.

On holidays I do the cooking. I don't do as much cooking as I used to 'cause I'm getting older — I'll be 67 this next birthday. I guess I'm getting tired. But I can't let go of the organizations I work with — they just won't let me. For the last 10 years I've been trying to come and sit in this chair that my daughter bought me, one of these comfort chairs where you lay back, put your feet up and sleep in. But my daughter said she bought it too early — I'm still traveling.



What caused me to get into helping out other people was the knowledge that I had about how to receive public benefits. It was not easy when we started out in 1968. It was 'long about that time that things got real tight. It was just like it is now — you couldn't find employment.

My husband had been working at Louisiana State University, but he left to work on a construction job. You know how men are. I tried to tell him that even though he wasn't making as much money at LSU, he was gaining benefits. But men do not like for women to tell them anything. He left LSU to work on this construction job, and they upped and moved after two or three years. Naturally, they wasn't taking a man with a family. That brought problems for us.

When I first needed welfare, I knew nothing about it. I really didn't know where to go. At that time the president was the one before Eisenhower. I wrote to this president to ask him how would a family get aid in this state. He wrote me a letter back and told me where to go. So I took his letter and went on down to the state department, and they told me that if my legal spouse was in the household, that I couldn't get any help. My husband had to leave out of the house.

It made me feel terrible. I was working for a lady about three days a week, but I couldn't afford to do the whole week because I had small kids. I had to wash and keep the kids clean and send them off to school. A lot of them was small.

My children didn't feel bad about it, because I never let them down in keeping up the house, feeding them, doing

*Photos by Guy Reynolds*



things for them, and keeping their health. It doesn't hurt children when you're on welfare if you continue to be a parent. What hurts the child is if you get despondent and take it out on the child. We talked about things and discussed things. If the light people came and turned the lights off, we had a party by kerosene lamp.

Seven ladies and myself was at the welfare department and found out that we all had the same issue: We really didn't want to be on welfare, but we had no choice. If your man wasn't working, you had to think about the children first.

We used to have partnership on the street. If I went to work today, my neighbor would watch my kids and hers, and then if she went to work tomorrow, I'd watch her kids. We had a good thing going without having to pay somebody to watch our kids.

But then in the '50s and '60s, the state decided that we needed day care. That meant that mothers had to stay home with their kids or put them in the nursery. If you put them in the nursery, you had to pay those fees — we didn't know welfare was supposed to pay those fees.

We seven mothers got together and we started discussing how bad we was doing. We were very angry. We got together. New Orleans already had a welfare rights group. So they came in for a meeting and we set up one of our own. We decided that welfare would be our issue. We'd go around and try to get more groups among the parishes. We started to get contacts who were able to do something.

I learned to do appeals hearings, but I wasn't making any money for it. We had to go in training like we were going to school. We had to learn how to read the manual. It was so complicated. The little attorneys we had were fresh out of school — they didn't know anything about the manual. So we had to go to the welfare department and ask for things that they didn't want to tell us.

When I went around the state and did appeals, I would talk about welfare rights. Our early conversations was about them destroying the household. Once you lose the man of the house, the family won't survive unless the mother is able to keep it together. If the woman is not strong enough, it destroys the family.

We started fighting them on that, and they fought us back. In the '70s some states adopted the unemployed parent program which allowed fathers to stay in the house, but our state would not do it. Today they finally are — but for many families, it's too late. There's no fathers in those houses any more.

Before we had the National Welfare Rights Union, we had the National Coordinating Council. We had someone represented from every state. It was a good feeling to have all those women together — you didn't feel so isolated and alone, like you had degraded yourself.

---

---

**“Oh my God, I  
can't do this —  
I'm in Missis-  
sippi! They  
might hang me  
20 times!”**

You had white and black women fighting the same issues. Today you still have white representatives and senators who don't believe that welfare consists of anything but blacks. It's real strange. There's just as many white women across the country that are suffering the same thing we are suffering. Some of them are having a worse time than we are, because they don't want to rock the boat.

My first demonstration was supposed to be in Mississippi. It was my first meeting as chair of the welfare rights group, and we had our conference in Mississippi. Everything was terrible then. They didn't allow you in certain places. We got this hotel, the Sun and Sands, across from the Capitol. When I got there the director says to me, “Smart, before we leave, we have to go down to the welfare department and demonstrate for these people how to deal with welfare.” I said “OK.”

Then I thought about where I was and I said, “Oh my God, I can't do this — I'm in Mississippi! They might hang me 20 times!” I was backing up like a crawfish. I did everything I was supposed to do, but I was determined not to put my foot on the soil of Mississippi to demonstrate. People scared you to death about Mississippi.

The demonstration was supposed to be at nine in the morning. I found Charlie Granger, director of the Anti-Poverty Program of Baton Rouge, and said, “Charlie, you better pack your suitcase.” We was out of there before seven.

I came on home. Then George, the director of the NCC, called me up. He said, “Now, Louisiana,” — they used to call you by your state name — “you left and did not tell us a thing.” I said, “I didn't intend to, George. I was getting out of town before the water rise.”

Then I went to a meeting in New York. It was my first plane ride, I like to had a fit. The social workers were having a conference in the hotel across the street from us, and we decided to demonstrate against them.

I dressed up as a social worker. You know how all those women come with all their furs, all their fine shoes, painted faces, fingernails all painted — cool, calm, and collected. So a bunch of us put on our Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, came in, and they thought we were social workers.

I pretended I was. I told them I was from Louisiana. The lady next to me was from Kansas. She said, “You know, that welfare rights organization is right across the street. I hope they don't give us any trouble.” I said, “I hope not, too.” Then Johnny and all them leaped up on the podium, and I stood up and throwed my hand up — that mean everybody in our group stand, and we had them surrounded. We took over the podium.

I didn't know it, but I was supposed to be the speaker. I had never rapped to that many people in my life. I think that I was sweating bullets. Somehow, my mouth flew open and I

rapped for a while. Looks like I got mad.

I talked about social workers as though they had stole something. I told them about all of our issues — how they destroyed families by putting husbands out of the house, how devastating that was to the children who did not understand the mother and father breaking up. I said, "That don't happen to you and your family. Do you think it's fair to us and our family?"

I said, "My husband is out of the house. If I wasn't a strong mother and understood that I had to keep the family together, our family would be destroyed."

One social worker who said she'd been working at it for 60 years got up and said, "This is the best education that I've ever had. They're right: We have not treated them like humans. And I'm ashamed of myself." That lady cried me a river.

The next day they actually invited us to the meeting and fed us and gave us \$3,000 for bringing out our executive board.

Since we started our welfare rights organization, our goal was to fight for jobs. But we still have not reached the goal of getting up and out of poverty. We came to the conclusion that America cannot exist without poverty. The only way that they can keep on going is for us to be poor. There are thousands of people administering welfare — all 50 states is in the business of welfare. They're not ever going to give us clear-cut jobs with annual incomes for nothing in the world, because they need to keep themselves in jobs.

I was on the advisory board of CETA, the first employment and training program. It turned out to be good. It got a lot of women off welfare into employment. People were buying cars and houses. Some women worked for five years through CETA. We thought CETA was going to be here forever, and then they cut it off.

So that was the issue from the '60s on — we was never able to get above the poverty guidelines.

Every year we used to lobby and try to get people jobs so they could feel like they were part of society. We were on the Hill. There was 15 of us, blacks and whites. This senator said to one of the white women, "I can understand them being on welfare, but I can't understand you being on welfare."

She said, "Smart, don't say a word. I'm going to say enough for you and me." And she did. She told him, "It's no different if you have children, whether you're black or white. You put us there." He was so stunned, he couldn't even get out of his chair.

In the past, we never had a race issue. Back then, everybody was in the same boat — we never thought about black or white. We did

---

---

## What distinguishes the struggle in the South is that a lot of women seem to be afraid.

whatever had to be done, disseminated information. Some of those women, when I see them now, you'd think that we had been to school and living together for years, because that's the kind of relationship we had.

We have more race issues now than we did then. I think what happened was that the senators and representatives in the South seen the tie between whites and blacks, so they told whites that they didn't need us. It was hard for us in the South to get many whites to join with us. We have white clients at Legal Services who don't join our client council, because they figure they don't need it. Once in a while you gain one or two, but you have mostly blacks. When you're in a racist state, you have problems.

Our work in the South is harder than the work we have in any other area, for both white and black. What distinguishes the struggle in the South is that a lot of women seem to be afraid. A lot of them live in small towns where the welfare office will intimidate them, threaten them. So they are not as energetic about going out there changing anything — unless you show them how it could be done.

The workfare program in this state, JOBS, is not going to work. The poor already work every day, and they cannot put food on the table for their children. What kind of job you going to give me? You work, but it doesn't elevate you above poverty.

Look at the War on Poverty — it was a war on us. I didn't get a job and I was full grown. You got retired teachers, retired people out of the army who got those jobs. But we didn't get any. We were still on welfare. We would get these little programs, and we would participate in the program, but they kept us poor. You never got a job. The training they gave you was only six to eight weeks.

And even if you give people a year of training, where's the job market? Do you know that the job program in our state created 206 jobs? You had to have a college degree to get a slot.

A lot of people is really embarrassed by welfare. But I tell them all the time: If this is the only thing the system has prepared for you, you take it and survive. If I didn't have any children, I could make it. I could go out and get me a hamburger, and I've fed my whole family. But when you've got children, you have to think about everything that child needs to survive. If it's welfare, you have to take it.

Just always be looking for something better. □

*Laurie Udesky is associate editor of Southern Exposure.*



Washaway  
 Lettowah

By Lynn  
 Pruett



Most cities you can't see the sky but you can in Montgomery. Now that I'm here, I'm thinking, why did I ask to see Montgomery in the dropdead heat of July? At least I can breathe. The sky is so blue and close, the clouds traveling in little groups, the dome of the capitol building

blinding white, topped by three flags, the American, the Alabama, and the Confederate. I was reading the plaque for Dexter Avenue Baptist Church when those three flags caught my eye. Standing here, it's hard to believe that yesterday I was stuck under a skyscraper on 95 just past the George Washington Bridge, morning rush hour, a wreck ahead, feeling about to pass out, steak and eggs riding my throat in waves, and all around me the radios going "Don't worry, be happy" and "Fight the Power." Loud. And I was getting more and more claustrophobic and thinking more and more how my doctor told me to relax for the next six months so I won't have another heart attack, but how are you going to relax after that kind of deadline?

I'm a trucker but I don't drive at night anymore because those white road markers shine like so many cigarettes, which I had to give up. But I couldn't sit still for six months wondering, is this it? So I found myself stuck behind the wheel under a skyscraper, angry that my life was slipping away in the exhaust of New York City.

Then I did what everybody does in those kinds of situations. I asked God to please not let me die in New York City, and so he let me make Jersey, and then I said please, not north of the Mason-Dixon, and then not in Virginia where those snotty fox hunting planters live and then not in North Carolina because of Jesse Helms who is a cancer pack in the tobacco industry's pocket and the reason I'm dying, cigarettes, and not in South Carolina because they can't run an honest football program and not in Georgia because I hate Lewis Grizzard getting rich off stuff my Grandma told me. Let me see Alabama again. Make me an angel that flies from Montgomery.

I've never been to my home capitol before. The building is being renovated behind a big chain link fence. And it's pretty, pure white, like all the government buildings. I don't know how they keep the buildings so white but the glorious look of them almost makes me have faith in the state government. But not quite. I'm from Winston County and I'm glad there's a fence around the state house. We declared ourselves the Free State of

Winston and didn't secede. For that, our delegate spent the war years as a so-called political prisoner in a Confederate dungeon.

Up the next rise is the Civil Rights Memorial, brand-new. It's simple, two fountains made of black granite. One is a wall that water runs down and the other is like a flying saucer cut in half, but nice-looking, water coming out of an off-center spring. There's a white concrete walk around it and a white concrete ledge to sit on. I sit a long time and watch people come and go and take pictures of the moving water. The beauty of the monument is that it doesn't stand still. It can't stand still; it makes you want to move, to keep moving with that water, to make justice roll down like a stream, like rain, like thunder, like sweat on my chest, God it's so hot in July.

I walk around the edge of the dais, my hand trailing in that running water, warm, like blood. I begin to feel the names carved in stone, not reading them, not reading them, and I walk around and around and then my hand stops on one name, traces his letters, and I burst out blubbering crying, me a weeping white man in a swarm of solemn blacks. I know before I look.



William Moore. Shot dead in Etowah County, 1963. I was there. I saw him lying in the roadway, his sandwichboard crumpled under him. My headlights on the shape in the road, my uncle saying, "Stop. Stop right now, boy. Pull over and get out."

I was fourteen years old that April, driving my mother's 1951 Chevrolet DeLuxe. It was black and ornery on turns. This evening Uncle Ax was taking me to buy whiskey for the first time. I'd spent a week with him and he'd decided which job he could arrange for me but was holding off the announcement until we had the proper beverage for the celebration. Uncle Ax gave directions to Etowah County rather than to Bim Lee's in Marshall, where he lived. I was excited. I'd never tasted moonshine but I'd smelled it and knew it was powerful enough to kill. I had an uncle who'd died of bad hooch, so they say. Uncle Ax liked his drink, too. I was to make sure he got home since he had a hearing in the morning. He was an elected judge, kind of a tough thing to be. He wasn't good at farming so he needed something, and being popular and fair without offending anybody was a tough chore and the reason he drank, or so he told me on our little journey.

We found the man's house, up a tiny road we had to negotiate without the headlights, then flash them three times as we sat in a running creek and waited on an arcing light, three times around. We got out in the creek, cold water sweeping over our ankles, and stalked through the yard like panthers. Uncle Ax made me stay outside and watch our car to see if we'd been followed. I couldn't see much of the house, except it was small and there was only a very dim light near one window, probably a candle. There were no dogs which was real odd. Everybody had hunting dogs. Even if you didn't want one, at least one would find you and take up residence. So I sat there wishing for a dog to come up and ask for a pat on the head but none came. A cat rubbed on my leg and I almost bit my tongue through, but the cat purred so loud

that I rubbed its neck, then it began to lick my fingers.

Uncle Ax huffed behind me. I carried the crate to the truck and was disappointed to feel regular cold beer bottles. This was no moonshiner, just a bootlegger. It made no sense to drive all the way over here for some beer. We put the crate where the spare tire's supposed to be, and put the tool box on top of that, and drove on, again with no headlights, but the moon was bright enough. It just took a long slow time, and Uncle Ax said nothing at all until we were heading down a steep hill.

"Pull over, boy," he said. He always called me boy. He had so many nephews and grandsons and cousins and what not and he was supposed to know everybody who voted for him, so all males under forty were "boy."

I saw two big trees and a stump on my side, a gully on his.

"Never mind. Just stop in the middle of the road. Nobody else'll be out this way this evening."

So I did, all the while thinking this is Mama's car he's left in the middle of the road heading down a steep hill, not his, and it's got beer in it. Then I started to realize why I had been asked to chauffeur, not to bring me into the world of men but to take care of Uncle Ax's tail.

"Get the shovel and the buckets from the back seat."

I did, thinking maybe now we were going to the still. We'd carry raw hooch in the buckets, but first we'd have to dig until we found the mouth of the moonshine well.

We walked through mushy ground covered with last year's brown leaves. Ahead was a dogtrot, sunk in the middle, all the steps gone. It looked haunted and mysterious. We walked around to the front. It had been fancied up a little by shutters, which I saw were not shutters at all but the side panel of steps, put up beside the steps in a zigzag design. Kind of neat and unusual.

"Here we go," said Uncle Ax. "Right here. Now be careful not to break any roots." He pinched off a plump creamy rosebud and ran it under his nose like it was one of his Cuban cigars.

"You want me to dig up these rosebushes?"

"That's what I said." He shone his flashlight on the shrubs and then selected which ones I should take.

I remembered the glorious roses that grew in front of his grand house. A double rose hedge ran a quarter of a mile from the road and ended in an enormous arch over the white sand walk.

So I dug. We got about five and put them in the buckets. I did break off a root or two, a loud pop! which Uncle Ax had to hear, but he didn't bother me about it. By now the moonlight had slicked everything with a silvery coat and I had scratches all over my arms. I was hoping when we got to the car that Uncle Ax would give me a beer or at least a sip off the little bottle he took from under his jacket. But no. I was there to drive. So I did, knowing now why we had come all this way for maybe six bottles of beer. Stealing flowers from a homesite was a serious crime. We all believed the plants belonged to the heirs since their Mama or Grandmama or Granddaddy had cared for them. It wasn't like taking flowers off a grave because those were going to die soon anyway. But uprooting plants from a homesite was like stealing from the dead.



couldn't really relax even when we got to the straight highway because the car pulled to the left and the road took a lot of turns. I'd always had strong arms, though, and I was starting to get seduced by the rhythm of the road and Uncle Ax's cheery singing.

By the time we got to Attalla, he was into his sixth round of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The lights had just come on at a store called the Hilltop so I put mine on and I'm always glad I did. A car roared toward us in our lane, his lights in my eyes, and I flashed him and fought the car to the right. We bounced down in a ditch, then bounced back up onto the road. I flashed him again, since I had just got through a lecture from Uncle Ax about returning favors.

My lights hit on a shape in our lane, a big shape, a shape too thick and round to be a box. A deer, maybe.

Uncle Ax said calm and slow and sad, very sad, "Stop right now, son. Pull off the road. Then we'll get out."

I pulled hard against the car, the pull stronger as we slowed, me not wanting to let it die before we got all the way off the road, sweat coming down off my head. I got us off the road to a gravel spot beyond a picnic area.

It was a man wearing a crumpled sandwichboard. It said "Eat at Joe's Both black and white." I couldn't see the man's face, just his dark hair.

"Help me, Joab. We got to get him off the road before he's run over."

He was a big man. Uncle Ax took his shoulders and me I got his legs right under his knees and I knew from the way his leg joints gave that he wasn't alive, but he was warm and I could smell his sweat and his leathery shoes. His shoes were unlaced, knots at the top to hold the tongue in, stretched at its widest. The shoes were swollen up, like he was wearing watermelons.

We put him on the ground. Uncle Ax straightened up his head and told me not to look but I did. He'd been shot in the face at close range; there was little to recognize, except his jaw, which was hanging open in a twisted scream. I swallowed and straightened the billboard. This side read Equal Rights for All Mississippi or Bust. His grocery cart was still beside the road. We pushed it over next to him. There was a black notebook and some food and bandages. I didn't know who he was. Uncle Ax did but he didn't say anything to me then. "They must have been scared or they would have dragged him off the highway."

I remembered the long car, its headlights, its pale color as it rushed by, the silver fins, white roof. All so clear. And how I pulled us off the road because, because it was in our lane, taking off from this spot, trying to blind us as it barreled into its own lane — trying perhaps to let us run this man down.

A car drove up and stopped, its single headlight turning us into statues. What if it was the killers? My heart was going fast as I stood there, still, my hand on a dead man's shoe, the lanolin filling my nose. A whiff of Uncle Ax's whiskey, wet April air, the exhaust of the dead-eye car. We waited.

A man got out, clip pad in hand. "What's going on here?"

Uncle Ax said we'd found this man in the road. I expected

him to introduce himself as a judge from Marshall County and have us on our way, but no. Uncle Ax gave the name of a recently deceased friend who'd lived in Birmingham. Uncle Ax said we were driving home from Collinsville. I knew then that Uncle Ax had to appear on the up and up. If the man ordered a search of our car, a search for a rifle, and instead found our booze or the roses which were wilting on the floorboards, probably wagging their branches out the window — but I didn't look. If he found any of that, Uncle Ax would have trouble at home.

Then a sheriff roared up and I thought we'd really done it. Uncle Ax would be voted out of office for sure, and me, well, I was only fourteen and only Uncle Ax would know that I was driving without a license. But the weird thing was, the sheriff and the man with the clipboard, who turned out to be a radio announcer, seemed to know the dead man, and they weren't surprised to find him shot.

I knew there was trouble between whites and blacks but hardly any black people lived in Winston County so I didn't really know what all the fuss was. But as the sheriff and the radio man talked, I began to get that funny warning taste in my mouth. This dead man, this dead white man, was born in Mississippi and he'd gotten so ashamed of his home state, they said, he wrote the governor. The radio man claimed he had a good head for quotes and just spouted the dead man's letter, "I dislike the reputation this state has acquired as being the most backward and most bigoted in the land. Those who truly love Mississippi must work to change this image."

"Thank God he wasn't born in Alabama," the sheriff said.

"No, but he died here," said Uncle Ax, trying to be friendly. But being a little drunk, he didn't have control of all his wits.

"What's your name again?" the sheriff said and Uncle Ax lied again.

The radio man said, "Funny thing, I just had Mr. Moore talking on the radio telling us all about his march. It was on the TV out of Chattanooga and I figured lots of people would be curious to know him. Just one hour ago me and him were sharing coffee at the station and talking about his sore feet."

Uncle Ax and I stood still. I wanted to leave and I figured Uncle Ax did too before they took down Mama's license plate, but neither one of us wanted to make the suggestion.

The two men talked on and occasionally reached down to feel if there might still be a heartbeat. "No, he's dead," they'd say and keep talking.

"I do admire his courage," said the radio man.

"If you call it that," the sheriff spat out a chaw so close to my foot I could smell it. "You wouldn't catch me spending my two week vacation walking across the South with a sandwichboard on my back. No sir, especially not if I was a postman. If I was a postman, last thing I'd want to do is walk my vacation away."

"What would you do on your vacation, sheriff?" asked the radio man, then added, "off the record."

"Damned if I'd tell you." He looked up to the store. "Where is the ambulance? If it don't show in a minute, I'm going to have to carry him over there myself."

The ambulance soon arrived and everyone soon forgot about us. The ambulance must have alerted the whole county because

cars kept driving up, taking a look at the grocery cart, at the dark spot in the road, at the sandwich board that had been removed from his body by the medics. Soon the whole place changed. Tire marks erased, the gravel kicked up here and there, the story changed a million times, suddenly a dozen witnesses.

Uncle Ax decided it was time for us to leave. He leaned his head into the circle surrounding the sheriff and yelled, "Hey, see y'all later. Got to get home to Margaret and let her know what's going on before she gets it all ass backwards and thinks a nigger got killed."

The men laughed and said to go on home and we walked real casual to our car and I saw where Uncle Ax had blacked out one of the numbers on the tag, how and when I don't know, but he is a judge after all and knows how to loop the law. He told me to drive. A bit shaky, I didn't want to maneuver around all the cars but I did and I was sweating again. I had only a little ways to go when that pale car with the silver fins pulled up on the other side of the road. Two men got out, one a skinny guy with gray in his hair and the other a preacher, I could tell by his big round hat. Their clothes had been pressed to creases. Uncle Ax growled "Get on with it," and we roared off. He'd got a bottle from the trunk and nipped all the way home. Soon he was snoring.

As I was driving away, fighting that car, concentrating on the road, on the raggedy bridges we crossed, on the long stretches of plowed fields that come fall would be white with cotton, on the beautiful Tennessee River, and finally near Scant City going up and down the hills making sure not to speed blind through the foggy bottoms, I was losing the evening, the sheriff's chatter, the exploded face, the swirl of lanolin, sweat, and leather, the dead weight from knees gone lax. That night in North Alabama I learned the comfort of tunneling through blur.

Uncle Ax got me hooked up with a trucker in May. By the time I was sixteen I was driving a rig. Then I got sent to Viet Nam. I've done so much running since 1963, that night in Etowah County faded almost out of my head. But I can't run now. My finger is locked onto William Moore's name; it's wearing a dent in my finger, a dent already there, the water warm in July, warm going cold as his ankles had in my hands.



At Uncle Ax's house, I got him woke. He said we had to plant the roses, then and there. I dug and he shone the flashlight that kept winking on and off. And it got so I didn't need the light and told him so. He leaned up against the house and went to sleep on his feet. There were five holes already where

he'd ripped out some dead bushes, so it was pretty easy work. One or two roots had been broken. They'd lose some branches and some buds but I didn't cut them that night. Figured I'd let the plant choose what to save and what to let die. The soil was moist and I got stuck plenty since I couldn't see that good. And I thought that if me and Uncle Ax hadn't shown up then maybe the postman would be getting buried right now, just disappeared. The moist dirt falling on his face, into his shrieking dead mouth. The soil so moist I could taste it.

I cleaned the shovel under the pump and put it back in the toolshed, all the while feeling like I had killed and buried a man and needed to hide what I'd done. I went back to the compost heap and filled the wheelbarrow, then raked the dead leaves around the roots of the roses, as if the bushes had been there all winter. These would bloom white, I knew, little white clusters. I unloaded the beer. Took the crate into the barn and hid it among bales of hay all stacked up and neat. I pried the cap off a brown bottle and drank the burning yeasty beer. I remembered with awe that me and my cousins had played hide and seek among the bales. I remembered the day we found Whitey-Cat's kittens. She'd taken one or two newborns and dropped them between the bales. She had kittens every spring and fall, and always some disappeared. The beer stung but I made myself drink the whole bottle.

Five years later Uncle Ax lost it. The folks had been noticing he'd gotten weird at the courthouse, carrying garden snips under his robe and clipping off any pretty flower he took a liking to. He'd have his driver stop so he could hop out and get a blossom from somebody's garden, put it in his lapel or tie it to his shoe. In his judge's chambers, they'd find him, a camellia behind his ear if it was winter, a magnolia in the summer. This got to be too much for some people and they voted in a young guy. Uncle Ax didn't seem to mind except at night, when he was haunted by the dead he had robbed. I figured out it wasn't just me who knew about the stolen roses. It was all his grandsons and nephews and young cousins. He'd given us all something on him, but it was reverse blackmail. How could you turn in old Uncle Ax? We all thought it was a secret between him and each of us, one little secret. But my secret was the darkest.

One night he hacked the roses down all the way out to the road. They found him, one bush to go, lying face down in the dew, his heart ticked out. It was an awful slaughter in the early summer. Tufts of color strewn along the road like so many dead bodies. The briars had given a good fight. Uncle Ax was bloody from it.

I went to his house and got the last bush, dug out the root, soaked it in my cooler and drove to the Hilltop store in Etowah County. My rig handled the road easily; I was there in no time at all, and that made me sad. I planted the root near the picnic area, a memorial to William Moore and Uncle Ax and my innocence. I haven't been back because I don't know if that rose can survive the traffic, or if someone else has stopped for lunch and fancied a pretty rosebush under the kitchen window, sweetening up the washing of the dishes. I like to think it's still there.



A bus full of black Baptists unloads across the street. They walk against the light, then spill up the steps and fan out around the fountain. Kids splash in the water on the other side; they don't splash me. I've still got William Moore's name under my hand. They want me to move out of the way so they can get a

picture of them and the waterfall over Martin Luther King's words. They don't ask but I understand. I try to take a step but my

legs won't budge. My hand is held to William Moore as if by electricity. I am buzzed to it. I want to let go. I'm shaking now, sweating. I want to get out of the way so these black ladies in their fine church clothes can get their picture taken on a Friday afternoon, a freedom so recent it feels like a commercial for Disneyland.

I almost cry out when those fat armed ladies in their bright flower dresses stand together in front of that weeping wall. All bunched up in purple hats and red lipstick and none of them crying; the men in white shirts standing around, reading the names of the murdered people on the dais, the offering plate. Kids splashing in the water; those little throwaway cameras going click, pop, click. Tears coming out of my eyes and me pretending it's sweat off my forehead, it's so hot, summer hot in Montgomery, Alabama. And these people sweating, too, and no one saying anything but I am thinking, these people, not any older than me, had to drink at a different fountain; no wonder they lower their eyes; no wonder they believe in God; no wonder you can see the sky in Montgomery, because you can look straight ahead and you can't look down. The sky is so blue in Montgomery.

And then I fall over on the memorial, water in my throat now, washing down my face, down my shirt and in my crotch, wet and thick and warm ... washaway Etowah, washaway Winston, washaway Alabama.

They're looking at me, a rim of black faces above the black bowl. They're telling the children, "Don't splash him."

I hear the whisper, "Klan," going around like the game Telephone.

I try to say, No. I am not the Klan. I try to say. I saw this man dead in the road. I saw his dead face. He died for you, I want to say.

They are looking down under that blue Montgomery sky.

I hear a kid, "White man gonna contaminate the monument," and then "Shhh."

There's a rumbling, a rumbling in the stone, a rumbling in the people, like the growl of a dog. I hang on to the granite but it's wet, it's slippery, there's no hand hold. I'm losing it. I'm losing my hold, my grip, I am in the water. I am drowning in the water. My head will not raise. My eyes see swim.

"Baptize this man!"

The shout makes me jump, raise up a bit, cause a tiny splash. I don't get splash on anybody.

"A sinner. He needs to be cleansed. The Lord has called him to the water and he is ready to drink at the mighty well."

Who is this voice? My eyes see black and glitter. My eyes hurt.

"Baptize this man in the name of Jesus."

No amens. I roll my head. The crowd is still there, looking. None wants to Amen for me. Their eyes glint pity.

A heavy hand on my head pushing me down in the water. I fight but my neck is so weak. Water in my nose.

"The Father."

My cheeks brush the granite below the surface.

"The Son."

I give up. My body goes limp. I'm in it again, water all over, legs lifted off the ground.

"The Holy Ghost."

The heavy hand is pushed away. Rough arms thrust under my

shoulders. I'm brought up into the air and I can breathe. I suck up a lungful of hot summer Montgomery air, bus exhaust so thick I can chew it. I chew it and then I chew the asphalt and the construction dust from a few blocks over and the man's sweat behind me and a dozen different perfumes from the ladies. I am hungry for air.

The Baptists get back on the bus and I wonder, did they take a picture of a white man prostrating himself on the Civil Rights Memorial? But the thought is fleeting. I'm so happy to breathe.

"Can you stand up by yourself?" says the deep voice that owns the arms.

"Yes, sir." I'm fine. The grip is loosened and I turn to shake the man's hand.

He's an Alabama state trooper, my mortal enemy on the road. I squeeze his large brown hand, his shoulders stamped Crimson Tide. "You're all wet," he says.

"Yes sir, I reckon I am. I'm baptized, too."

"I was afraid you had a heart attack."

"No sir."

"This place gets some people very angry. Wouldn't surprise me if someday there was a killing here."

"I hope not."

The man laughs and sits his broad butt right down on the memorial.

What can I say? I am outraged. "Their lives meant something," I shout. "Don't be so disrespectful."

His uniform is soaking up that water, dark blue going black. I want to slug him, slug his smug face as he sits there, his big fanny on William Moore's name. Then my heart starts going like an M-16 and I feel weak again. I lean on the monument, cup my hands, drink. I go clammy cold, and drink some more. I hear the trooper spit but I do not look to see where. I must drink.

He is beside me again, holding me up. "You okay?"

"I need my pill. Digitalis."

"Where?"

I tap my breast pocket, my hand making a flapping noise against the blister-pak inside.

He puts the pill in my mouth and helps me over to a grassy spot in a small triangle of shade. "You ought to go home."

"I am home."

"No, I mean to your house."

"This is my home." Washaway Etowah, washaway Winston.

"I have real work to do," he says. And that's all.

I don't thank him for my life and I don't care that I don't. As my heart returns to its normal pace, a nice comforting thurrump, thurrump, I begin to have normal thoughts, it's time to find lunch. I pace down the hill to the state house. A monument is action turned to stone. A roadblock maybe. A dead-end sign. My strides are long now, giant, I am barreling past sawhorses, flashing yellows, bulldozers, men in orange hats.

My heart is big and strong, a bellows, wings. I'm soaring. I'm going to rip that Confederate flag out of the blue Montgomery sky. □

*Lynn Pruett is a writer who lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. This is her first published short story.*

# In Different Boats

*The myth of reverse discrimination  
— and what we can do about it.*

By Anne Braden

*Anne Braden is a white activist who has been involved in Southern movements for social justice for more than four decades. She is currently co-chair of the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC), which she helped found in 1975. She presented the following talk as part of a panel discussion on "The World in Which We Organize" at a recent SOC conference on building community and labor coalitions held in Birmingham, Alabama.*

First, I'll briefly belabor the obvious: If there is one thing that has kept all movements for social justice weak in the South, and elsewhere in this country, it is the division of race — and the basis of that division, which is racism. That is true among workers organizing on the job, and also among people organizing in their communities.

To belabor the obvious further, it is

also clear that if working people in this country had not been divided by race, we would have a very different situation today. Working people would probably be running the country, and we would have different policies — not perfect ones, but policies that would address the needs of people instead of ones that favor the few who are rich.

Today, despite the recent upsurge of racism, I believe we are in a better position to break down the barriers of race in our organizing than ever before in the history of our nation. We are in this position because of the tremendous struggles waged by African Americans through the modern civil rights movement. Even though many of the specific gains of that movement have been eroded, some things have changed forever.

One thing that changed was the attitude of whites toward people of color. In some whites, the movement of African Americans for freedom generated great fear.

People who can't overcome that fear join violent racist groups, and they are growing all over the South and the country; part of our constant job, especially those of us who are white, is to combat them actively and visibly wherever they appear.

But in many whites, the civil rights movement generated a healthy respect for African-American leadership, militancy, and skill. That respect may be just an opening wedge; in itself it does not create a coalition. But it *is* an opening, and we who hope to organize a truly strong and united coalition movement must take advantage of that opening and find ways to build on it.

We are not yet doing this, in either our communities or our unions, on the scale that it must be done. We all know of unions that would have won an election if they had convinced enough white workers to join with their African-American brothers and sisters. We all know of communities where a tenant organization or some other movement would have won its battle, but didn't, because those in control successfully kept black and white people divided.

## UNIONS AND RACE

Let me make clear what I mean by racism. There are many definitions, but the one I've found most useful defines it as the assumption that *everything* in this society and the world should be run *by* whites, for the benefit of whites. If you think about that, you'll see how many things in this society it explains.

In terms of labor and community organizing, for example, too many whites (even those of us who consider

ourselves progressive) just assume that we should have the best jobs, the best housing, the best education. We take all this for granted, and never think of ourselves as racist.

It's important, as we look at this issue, to remember that all through our history there have been important efforts to overcome the barriers of race. And these efforts have come especially from working people. It happened among some people during Reconstruction after the Civil War. It happened in the Populist movement. And it happened in the 1930s — right here in Birmingham, where black and white unemployed people marched together in the streets, and in places throughout the South where black and white workers risked their lives to organize unions together.

But ultimately every one of those beginnings failed. Terror and repression played a part. But there was something deeper. A man named W.J. Cash wrote a book in the 1940s, a very dismal book called *The Mind of the South* (and he meant the white South). One of his conclusions was that interracial working-class movements had always failed because when the chips were down and things got rough, whites fled back to what they thought was the security of their white skin, rather than maintain unity with their black brothers and sisters.

Our great challenge today



Net Worth (Household; 1988)	<b>\$4,170</b>	\$43,280
Unemployment (Jan. 91)	<b>12.1%</b>	5.5%
Tenage unemployment (Jan. 91)	<b>35.4%</b>	15.8%
Male life expectancy (1988)	<b>64.9 years</b>	72.3 years
Female life expectancy (1988)	<b>73.4 years</b>	78.9 years
Average weekly earnings (union)	<b>\$440</b>	\$521
Average weekly earnings (nonunion)	<b>\$302</b>	\$402
Per Capita income (1989)	<b>\$8,747</b>	\$14,896

**AS THE UNITED STATES ENTERS THE 1990s, RACIAL INEQUALITY IS GREATER THAN AT ANY OTHER TIME IN THE PAST 20 YEARS. BY EVERY MEASURE, BLACKS CONTINUE TO FARE WORSE THAN THE WHITE MAJORITY.**

is to break that historic pattern in the 1990s. Many of us who are not directly a part of the labor movement, but consider ourselves its ally, look to unions to provide leadership on this issue. We know that when unions have taken on racism in the South, they've won and become strong. I learned this very early; my very first experience in social justice movements was working with a large local of the Farm Equipment Workers in Louisville during the late 1940s. It was a time of massive attack against unions everywhere, but that local encouraged African-American leadership and refused to compromise with any racist discrimination in its plant; it had the highest wages in the South.

Down through the years, we've seen the beginnings of many other breakthroughs like this. J.P. Stevens workers became strong in the '70s when they moved to overcome racism in the textile industry. Today, state employees in Mississippi, organized by the Communications Workers of America, are making the legislature listen to them and grant some of their demands because they refuse to be divided along racial lines and they deal with discrimination against African-American workers.

Conversely, history teaches us that when unions dodge this issue or give into racism, they fail. The classic example is Operation Dixie, when the

CIO set out to organize the South after World War II. Think where we'd be today if they had really done it. But they fell flat on their face — partly because of terror (the terror that time of the Cold War), but mainly because they did not take on the issue of racism. Instead, they accommodated to what they thought were the unchangeable "mores" of the South, and they lost.

## TWO MYTHS

How do we make things different this time?

I think the key is to challenge and jettison two related myths. The first is the myth of "reverse discrimination" — the idea that white people are now discriminated against in this country. That Big Lie is the most dangerous idea abroad in our land today, because it carries the seeds of a truly fascist movement. It's what got David Duke his votes in Louisiana; in North Carolina, it kept Harvey Gantt out of the U.S. Senate; and if we don't combat it, it will defeat any union drive you launch if white workers are in the workplace.

So far the progressive movement in our nation has not mounted an effective counter-offensive to this myth, and it is capturing the minds of many, many white people, including many working people.

How do we combat it? I do not claim to have any magic answers. But I think we must all put our heads and our experiences together and come up with some.

First, of course, we can point to the facts. There is just no way that whites in the United States are discriminated against. Every study of the factors that measure the quality of life proves how far behind whites people of color are. You don't have to be good at remembering figures to recall what these studies show, because they all follow a pattern. People of color always have only half as much of the good things of life as whites — things like jobs, housing, health care, education; and they have twice as much (or more) of the bad things — things like unemployment, infant mortality, prison cells.

For example: According to *The State of Black America, 1991*, published by the National Urban League, 30 percent of African Americans live in poverty,

whereas only 10 percent of whites do. Forty-three percent of African-American children are poor, compared with 14 percent of white. Median income for African-American families is 56 percent of whites — down from a high of 61 percent in 1970. In 1972, African-American unemployment was twice that of whites; in 1990 it was almost three times as high.

In wealth ownership, the mean net worth of African-American families is 23 percent of that of whites. The gap between black and white infant mortality has been growing in recent years; life expectancy for African Americans fell to age 69.2 in 1988, while whites could expect to live 75.6 years.

African Americans seeking loans to buy homes are rejected at twice the rate of whites; 3.5 percent of black renters are able to buy their own homes, compared with 16.9 percent of whites. Black college enrollment declined in the 1980s, while one-fourth of black males were either in prison or on probation or parole.

## BEATING THE SYSTEM

These are a sampling of the facts. Part of our job is to make sure white people know them. But the problem is that if you are scared, you don't necessarily want to be confused by the facts. And there are lots of scared white people in this country today — especially young whites. They are afraid for the future, and they have good reason to be. Economists have often noted that today's white youth are the first generation of whites in the history of this country who cannot realistically look forward to a better future than their parents had. That makes them look for scapegoats — and scapegoating drives people to fascist movements.

It seems to me that people who buy the reverse discrimination myth assume that if things are going to be rough, at least they should get the best. In effect, they are counting on their white skin to enable them to beat the system. This is immoral of course. But today it is also impractical, because most of them will *not* beat the system. It's a little like buying a lottery ticket instead of food for the kids, thinking you'll hit the jackpot.

We've got to find a way to tell people

effectively that it *is* possible to beat the system, but only if we stick together — by working in a way that is fair to everyone. We have a great chance to talk to people about this right now, because the myth of reverse discrimination is at the heart of the debate over the 1991 Civil Rights Bill. We need to stop being on the defensive about that bill — talking about how it's not about quotas. Let's talk about what it *is*, and that's fairness. That's what affirmative action really means: fairness.

Unions can give leadership on this question, because unions at their best have built their strength on fairness. If a union contract is fair to everyone, people stay united and strong. If *all* the people left out of the American Dream unite around a program of fairness to all, we'll win, and we'll *all* beat the system.

But to do that, we have to confront the other big myth — the idea that we can ignore race in our organizing.

There used to be a saying, "Black and white, unite and fight." That's a good slogan, but it's not that simple. Black and white cannot unite until whites deal with racism.

There's a catchy phrase speakers like to use; I've heard it many times in recent years: "We may have come over on different ships, but we're all in the same boat now." People always applaud, sometimes both African Americans and whites applaud. But this saying is not a very good slogan either. In the first place, it insults some of our brothers and sisters who didn't "come over on ships" at all, Native Americans. But beyond that, white and black people are just *not* in the same boat in this country, as the statistics I've mentioned prove.

In all of our movements, let's face the facts: People of color in this country are being devastated, and a whole generation of young African Americans is being lost. Let's all of us take on the job of changing that situation. Then we can build both labor and community movements that are based on fairness. And movements based on fairness will be strong — and we will all win, for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren. □

# The Black Exodus

## THE PROMISED LAND

By Nicholas Lemann.

Alfred A. Knopf.

421 pps. \$24.95.

Nicholas Lemann's narrative history of "the great black migration and how it changed America" begins with a description of a rusted-out piece of farm machinery in a deserted hog lot outside Clarksdale, Mississippi. This is an important historical artifact, he says, "the last tangible remnant of a great event in Clarksdale."

On October 2, 1944, nearly 3,000 people gathered to watch the first-ever demonstration of mechanized cotton picking by this contraption and seven others like it. At the rate of 1,000 pounds an hour — the equivalent harvest of 50 field hands — each machine heralded a breakthrough as dramatic and important as Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in the late 1700s.

Here, says Lemann, segregation lost its imperative ten years before it was stripped of its legal protection. In this cotton field outside Clarksdale, he declares, sharecropping became obsolete, and the gun sounded for the last major black exodus from the South.

Fortunately, Lemann doesn't linger over this event to drive home its historic and symbolic significance. The cotton picker certainly was one factor in the complex equation of black-white rela-

tions in the South of the 1940s, but it was not a singular herald of desegregation or of black migration to the cities of the North.

Instead, the author, a New York-based magazine writer who was born and raised in New Orleans, focuses on a few individuals who left Clarksdale for Chicago in the migratory surge. In an engrossing episodic narrative that spans almost 50 years — beginning and ending in the Mississippi Delta — Lemann describes the long and continuing search of black Americans for the ever-elusive Promised Land.

Ruby Hopkins and Uless Carter are the two individuals whose separate journeys we follow from Clarksdale to Chicago and back, giving the book a symmetrical completeness. Along the way, a fascinating cast of characters moves in and out of the story: William Alexander Percy, Bessie Smith, Muddy Waters, Richard Daley, Elijah Muhammed, William Dawson, Saul Alinsky, Bobby Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King, Aaron Henry and numerous others, famous and anonymous.

In the context of larger national currents, these personal stories illuminate incidental and accidental events that multiply into rationalized expressions of public policy. Chicago appeared to give no thought to racial issues in 1910, when blacks numbered about 40,000 in the city, but by 1930, when they totaled more

than 200,000, segregation was beginning to emerge. By 1960, when more than 800,000 Chicagoans were black, de facto segregation was pervasive and rigid — distressingly reminiscent, in many ways, of the legalized brand that still prevailed in the South.

In Clarksdale and Chicago — and in Washington, where Lemann finds a geographic and temporal hinge for his story — the white perspective on race differs in degree but not in kind. Regardless of the time or place, that perspective seems flawed by lack of attention, lack of empathy, even lack of enlightened self-interest.

At the end of *The Promised Land*, Ruby Hopkins and Uless Carter are both back in Clarksdale, living in apartments in the town's War on Poverty public housing projects. They have, Lemann says, survived to see the end of sharecropping and legalized segregation and the rise and fall of Chicago as a glorious symbol of hope, but the land of Canaan still lies beyond their reach.

Lemann's lesson, in a nutshell, is that ghettos make prisoners of the keepers as well as the kept. It is a lesson that this nation has never learned — and ignores now at its own peril.

— John Egerton  
Nashville, Tenn.

## LANTERNS AGAINST THE NIGHT

### JUKE JOINT

Photographs by Birney Imes.

Introduction by Richard Ford.

University of Mississippi Press.

124 pps. \$49.95.

Juke joints are dim, hot, sometimes raucous, often drowsy roadhouses that brighten the flat fields and back roads of the Mississippi Delta like lanterns

against the night. Places like the Pink Pony Cafe, Star's Love Lounge, the Out of Sight Club, the Freedom Village Juke, and the Skin Man are refuges from the brutality with which reality attacks those many black folks for whom life is a marginal existence. They're places where people do what they feel: drink, smoke, snort, gamble, dance, fight, sleep it off; for many, for those deformed by the blighted remnants of a plantation economy, they're places simply to pass the long, dull, lonely hours that come with each day of joblessness and dependence.

It's disappointing that a photographer as talented as Birney Imes, who got hold of as rich a subject as juke joints, chose to explore their aesthetics over their emotional force: What's impressive about his photographs is their technical brilliance, their flawless composition. His images, though exotically lit, are so intensely, almost surrealistically colorific that it's as if steroids were poured into the developer, manage somehow to evoke little of the sweet, pulsing reality, or of the pathos that filter like the blues through these wondrous places.

"Growing up white in the segregated South in the 1950s," Imes writes in a brief afterword, "I was only vaguely aware of another culture, another world that existed in the midst of my own. As a child, I saw things out of the corner of my eye, but the question of race was one I never had to face straight on." To this day Imes seems unable or unwilling to defy his upbringing. His view of black culture, like that of many Southern white liberals, is respectful, but not very personal.

People in *Juke Joint's* 58 photographs are almost an afterthought; they exist in some of the images, but often as blurred, pool-shooting, beer-drinking apparitions who happened to drift into the scenes during the unusually long exposures. There is nothing wrong with Imes's images — and *that* may be what's wrong with them: They're too tidy, too beautifully composed. These joints are in some ways the invention of the photographer; for all his wizardry with light and lens, the images are drained of the flesh and blood, the boisterous humanity, the squalor. (Well, there is a sense of squalor, but it is

belied somehow by the *beauty* of the squalor.)

Having said this, I must confess that I still find these pictures irresistible. Even if the joints appear more as dormant Hollywood sets than as living, breathing centers of black cultural life, and even if Imes miscasts their patrons and proprietors as extras, I am drawn to these photographs in powerful and numerous ways. Perhaps it's the mood and feeling conveyed in the symbols Imes focuses on: ramshackle exteriors, bare light bulbs, cracked and peeling walls and ceilings spray-painted garishly and joyously, hand-lettered signs (O. LORD PLEASE HELP. ME TO KEEP MY. DAMN. NOSE. OUT. OF OTHER. PEPPLES BUSINESS), the easy irony of beer and tobacco company propaganda. If you've never been in such a joint, the symbols compel you to imagine the sensation; if you have, the notion that nothing about most of these pictures invites a look inside the subjects' minds allows you to be alone with your memory.

I suppose that in the way diners were rediscovered not long ago as a distinct and virtually extinct part of Americana, so too will preservationists discover through Imes's pictures (and Mississippi-born novelist Richard Ford's provocative but oblique essay) the cultural significance of a world otherwise hidden. Along with its sheer artistry, that may be this book's most

valuable legacy. And with hope it will serve as a springboard for another, more socially engaged photographer to record the emotional power and meaning of these places: to capture the fact that their very existence is a tribute to a persistence of the spirit.

— William M. Adler  
Austin, Texas

## RED BADGE OF COURAGE

### HAMMER AND HOE

By Robin D.G. Kelley.

University of North Carolina Press.  
369 pps. \$12.95 (paper).

A well-written narrative on "Alabama Communists during the Great Depression," *Hammer and Hoe* is a wonderful history of a surprisingly large radical movement in the Heart of Dixie during the 1930s. Much of the later civil rights movement can probably trace its origins to Communist-led organizations like the Share Croppers Union and the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union that provided vehicles for black self-advancement and education long before any court or legislature attacked segregation. Likewise, much of the repressive machinery that confronted civil rights workers can be found in the same history, in patterns of police abuse, nightriding, disappearances, and lonely nocturnal murders.

*Hammer and Hoe* provides a histori-

Photo by Birney Imes



BELL'S PLACE, YAZOO CITY, 1984

cal framework for Theodore Rosen-garten's *All God's Dangers*, a thinly fictionalized account of an activist in the Share Croppers Union in Tallapoosa County, Alabama. The SCU was a product of the declining fortunes of cotton tenancy, as the Great Depression undercut the minimal gains tenants obtained during World War I and the 1920s. As cash vanished from the rural South in the 1930s, farm conditions deteriorated and blacks began to organize. The Community Party, then small and concentrated among a handful of trade unionists in the Birmingham area, sent organizers into the Black Belt, and the Union soon boasted an enrollment of 8,000 members — a number that remains remarkable.

During the Roosevelt administration, the New Deal crippled the SCU by making it easier for farmers to evict tenants instead of paying them their share of federal agricultural benefits. The Union responded by organizing farm labor into something more closely resembling a trade union and conducted successful strikes of cotton choppers and pickers in several plantation counties. Membership reached 10,000 in 1936, but attempts to merge with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in Arkansas were thwarted by sectarian squabbling among Socialists and Communists.

The SCU finally merged into the Alabama Farmers Union during the "Popular Front" period of the late 1930s. Although the new interracial organization represented something of a social advance, it ended the indigenous organization of black farmers. They eventually drifted into the 4-H and Home Demonstration Clubs, carrying with them the seeds of democracy planted by the SCU.

The SCU story, told so well in *Hammer and Hoe*, is one of grassroots democracy and independent political and economic organization among extremely oppressed people. Union members were met with police and planter violence (people were arrested for simply possessing copies of the *Daily Worker*, and murdered for organizing strikes), and used "Bible Meetings" and "Sewing Clubs" as covers for organizing. Their organizing style quietly defied the confrontational tactics advo-

cated by their Communist Party advisers — people who failed to grasp the level of repression in the Black Belt. This independence of strategy and action was undoubtedly the key to the organization's successes.

Yet rural organizing was only part of the Communist history in Depression Alabama. Perhaps even more important was the growth of the labor movement in the industrial Birmingham district. The Party began by organizing unemployed workers during the onset of the Depression, and it met with particular success among black women as it fought evictions, created neighborhood organizations, and increased relief resources. When a strike wave hit Birmingham in 1934, the Party's community base provided credibility among industrial workers.

Party members proved critical to the success of the "red ore" iron miners in the Mine-Mill Union, and also contributed to the success of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee in the iron and steel furnace mills. Here again organizing was conducted under the shadow of intense police repression, this time aided by the private police forces in company towns and villages. Kelley presents this labor history with a concern for vital detail, and his portraits of individual Communist activists bring history to life.

The roots of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s can plainly be seen in the labor movement of the 1930s. During the Depression, the Communist Party consistently challenged segregation in labor and other public organizations, while the NAACP and other "mainstream" civil rights groups were confined mostly to the black middle classes. The Communist International Labor Defense conducted a spirited defense of the Scottsboro Boys, a group of young unemployed workers falsely accused of rape, and sent organizers and lawyers into dangerous situations across the South, building a consciousness among black people that plainly came to fruition in the subsequent decades.

*Hammer and Hoe* also covers efforts by Communists and Southern liberals to organize a new Southern polity apart from the conservative Democratic Party. After the Commu-

nists abandoned their destructive sectarianism, they actively sought alliances with other groups awakened by the New Deal and the idea that social problems were amenable to governmental activism. The formation of "Popular Front" organizations like the League of Young Southerners and the seminal Southern Conference for Human Welfare fostered a new direction within the Party. Openness replaced the secrecy of its early Southern organizing, and a desire for alliances with liberals replaced sectarian squabbling with Socialists.

The Communists also advocated cultural activity, encouraging poetry and songwriting and even sponsoring a dramatic group in Birmingham. Such left-wing appeals to intellectuals seems to have been fairly successful in Alabama, but it was insufficient to preserve Alabama Communism from the larger forces at play in the world.

The mobilization for World War II, the Hitler-Stalin pact, and intensifying anti-Communism in the labor movement combined to doom the Communist Party's hope of a Southern mass movement. What *Hammer and Hoe* makes plain is the critical role the Party played in the political struggles of the post-war South, building foundations and exploiting the militant traditions of the laboring and agricultural classes.

Perhaps it would be rash to claim that there would have been no civil rights movement without the pioneering work of the Communists; the social forces that culminated in the revolution of the '50s and '60s were not dependent upon any one organization or set of circumstances. But it is reasonable to assert that the civil rights movement might have taken longer to unfold without the preparatory work of the Communists in creating a tradition of popular, democratic organizations.

This Communist heritage — a direct link to earlier economic struggles of poor people in the South — was tragically omitted from the civil rights movement. *Hammer and Hoe* reveals the possibilities posed by Communism in the South without resorting to partisan rancor or academic sterility. This book is a major contribution to 20th century Southern history.

—Neill Herring  
Jessup, Ga.

# BAILOUT

## ROCK

Bankers want a trillion-dollar handout, but one grassroots coalition is singing a different tune.

By Barry Yeoman

**RALEIGH, N.C.** — To be honest, the Elvis impersonator looked more like James Dean than like the King himself. Soulful eyes hidden behind dark glasses, hair slicked back, he stood in the drizzle in the near-empty pedestrian mall, thrusting his hips for the cameras, lip-synching lyrics that the real Elvis would never have recognized.

The King *would* have recognized the tunes. But for this Tax Day media event, sponsored by the Financial Democracy

Campaign, Elvis was transformed into “S&Lvis” and “Jailhouse Rock” became “Bailout Rock.” Instead of crooning about women and rock’n’roll, his words referred to the savings and loan industry:

*Bankers threw a party in the Treasury,  
Music was provided by the FDIC.  
The books were cooking and the cash  
began to flow,  
You shoulda seen those pinstripe fat  
cats go.*

The media loved it. Two television crews showed up, along with print and wire-service reporters. The next day, S&Lvis found his lyrics and color photo on the front page of the local newspaper.

The irony of all this attention wasn’t lost on organizers of the Financial Democracy Campaign. For more than two years they have made their mark on Capitol Hill and throughout the nation, arguing that middle- and lower-income Americans will bear the cost of a nationwide savings and



ORGANIZERS WITH THE FINANCIAL DEMOCRACY CAMPAIGN DANCE

loan debacle they neither caused nor benefited from. Sprung from a North Carolina research group called the Southern Finance Project, the campaign has grown into a coalition of more than 350 business, labor, church, and farm organizations, united in outrage over the biggest financial scandal in American history.

"They're up against a lot of power," says U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone, who used some of the Financial Democracy

In fact, the Financial Democracy Campaign has led the only nationwide protest over a bailout that economists say could eventually cost taxpayers between \$500 billion and \$1.4 trillion.

### OILY OTTERS

The night before the Elvis gig, 11 local Greens crowded into the corner of a bakery in nearby Chapel Hill, listening as

*Photo by Sadie Bridger/The Independent*



AS S&LVIS SINGS "BAILOUT ROCK" AND "YOU AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT A JUNK BOND."

Campaign's issues to win an upset victory in Minnesota last fall. "I think they are very effective at beginning to frame the issues differently and to build a constituency to fight for them."

Still, while their 22-year-old Elvis impersonator in a denim jacket and cowboy boots won the Financial Democracy Campaign a front-page photo in the local paper, the report devoted only two inches of newsprint to explaining the real story behind the coalition.

three representatives from the campaign explained their work.

"The mission of the Financial Democracy Campaign has been to create grassroots efforts all over the country in order to get a voice of the average citizen in the debate," explained outreach coordinator Leticia Saucedo. Over the next hour, as they learned about the 1989 savings-and-loan bailout law, the Greens were introduced to an entire lexicon of complex financial terms.

Finally, one woman spoke up. "I'm not really smart, but I'm not stupid — and I don't understand," she said of the S&L issue. "So I just push it aside. And if I do that, a lot of people do that."

Her comment pointed out one of the Financial Democracy Campaign's biggest challenges. Show someone a photo of an oil-drenched otter, and you've gained a new recruit to the environmental movement. But how do you dramatize the collapse of a nationwide financial system — and at the same time galvanize the average citizen to anger and action?

In fact, the S&L bailout will affect each of us in a big way. The average taxpayer could pay as much as \$14,000 over the next four decades to finance the hundreds of savings institutions that collapsed in the '80s. That cost could come in the form of either higher taxes or drastically cut services, as Congress struggles to pay off billions of dollars worth of long-term bonds.

Once upon a time, S&Ls (or thrifts) differed little from the one in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. They were "housing banks" created to collect money from small depositors and lend money to first-time home buyers. In exchange for investing most of their deposits in home mortgages, S&Ls were allowed to attract depositors by paying slightly higher interest rates than conventional banks.

Savings-and-loans were old-fashioned institutions. One joke claimed that S&Ls followed a "3-6-3" formula: pay depositors three percent, lend money at six percent, and get to the golf course by 3 p.m.

The system worked well until the late 1970s. Then, with interest rates spiraling, depositors began withdrawing tens of billions of dollars from their local S&Ls to put the money in higher-yield money-market funds and government securities. By the end of the Carter administration, two-thirds of the nation's S&Ls were losing money. Many had become insolvent.

Congress' solution to the problem was to deregulate the industry. Suddenly in the 1980s, S&Ls could offer depositors any interest rate at all, and they no longer had to focus their investments in home mortgages. They could invest in junk bonds, risky commercial real-estate ventures — or even the bizarre.

"S&L owners could borrow their depositors' money for *any* kind of hare-brained personal scheme, which is why

the government, thanks to bankrupt thrifts, now owns such weird items as a buffalo sperm bank, a racehorse with syphilis, a kitty-litter mine, and 'development' land so remote that it could only be used as a game preserve," wrote Robert Sherill in *The Nation*.

The industry went crazy with growth — and with greed. At the CenTrust Savings Bank in Miami, wrote Sherill, junk-bond-induced growth paid for 24-carat gold-leaf ceiling and gold-plated toilet pipes. The book *Inside Job* talks about Texas "thrift board meetings attended by hookers whose services were paid for by the thrift, chartered jet-set parties to Las Vegas, gala excursions to Europe, luxurious yachts, oceanfront mansions and Rolls Royces — princely lifestyles built on mountains of bad loans and bad investments."

In one year, 40 thrifts grew 1,000 percent largely by offering sky-high investment rates to depositors. To stay competitive, the more conservative thrifts were forced to follow. So unsound were some of the investments made by the deregulated S&Ls that when the oil economy began to slip and real-estate values started to fall in the mid-1980s, the entire savings-and-loan industry came crashing down.

## RESEARCH WITH RESULTS

Tom Schlesinger saw it coming. As the director of the Southern Finance Project, Schlesinger watched the financial industry up close. He had become an expert in regional economic development and had done the type of in-depth financial research that few political activists ever undertake.

It was quite an evolution for a man who began his adult life as a self-taught carpenter. For 10 years, Schlesinger traveled around the Southern mountains designing and building libraries. He built one at the Appalachian South Folklife Center in West Virginia, the Rural Advancement Fund in North Carolina, and the Highlander Center at Tennessee.

When his knees gave out, Schlesinger learned another aspect of library work: the research that happens inside. Working with Highlander, the Appalachian research and education center, he investigated how Pentagon money affected communities throughout the South. Schlesinger demonstrated that, contrary to popular belief, military industries often

## BIF BAM BOOM!

Although the Financial Democracy Campaign got its start watchdogging the collapse of the savings and loan industry, its mission has expanded in recent months to include the troubled banking system.

In the past three years, more than 600 banks have failed nationwide, draining the resources of the federal Bank Insurance Fund (BIF) that protects deposits in commercial banks. With another 440 banks in danger of collapsing atop \$160 billion in assets, the General Accounting Office projects that the BIF will be broke by the end of the year without a transfusion of dollars.

Congress and the Bush administration have already set in motion a bailout of the BIF. The president wants lawmakers to authorize \$70 billion in new borrowing to bolster the fund — a plan that could cost \$165 billion in interest over 30 years.

The administration says banks — not taxpayers — will repay these government loans through higher premiums for deposit insurance. But Bush wants to put a cap on insurance premiums that could leave taxpayers on the hook for another financial industry fiasco.

To make sure banks pay to bail out their own insurance fund, the Financial Democracy Campaign has proposed a

"fair funding plan" that would:

▼ **Levy a special, one-time assessment on bank assets to recapitalize the BIF.** This will give bankers a greater stake in preventing future failures and ensure that the fund will build up equity instead of going deeper in debt by borrowing more money.

▼ **Charge banks for insuring foreign deposits.** Foreign depositors and the big banks that use their funds currently receive a free ride from the deposit insurance system.

▼ **Clamp down on excessive dividend payments and executive salaries.** Overpaid shareholders and officers currently receive what amounts to a taxpayer subsidy that should be plowed back into stabilizing the BIF.

▼ **Strengthen regulation** to cut down on the number of bank failures, intervene earlier when banks begin to collapse, and stop giving away valuable assets from insolvent institutions to well-heeled investors at bargain-basement prices.

"We need to make the BIF bailout a downpayment on real reform," says outreach coordinator Leticia Saucedo. "It's time to make financial firms responsive to the country's real needs — by devising a comprehensive regulatory system that covers all segments of the financial industry."

put small towns on the federal dole, polluting their natural resources and doing little to address entrenched poverty.

"He really saw the connection between military issues, environmental issues and economic development issues in the South," says Highlander director John Gaventa. Living on potato chips and pizzas, Schlesinger developed a handbook to help citizens research their local military contractors and wrote a book called *Our Own Worst Enemy*.

Not content when he finished, Schlesinger then turned his attention to the financial industry: banks, S&Ls, insurance companies. The work lacked glamour — again, no oil-stained otters to capture the public's sympathy. But Schlesinger felt ordinary citizens needed to grasp the complex economic forces that shape their livelihoods and communities, rather than blindly handing the decision-making power to bankers and politicians.

From his home town of Charlotte, North Carolina, Schlesinger founded the

Southern Finance Project. Unlike most activist groups, the project spent most of its time researching — with results. When Schlesinger provided technical assistance and analysis to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the newspaper produced a Pulitzer Prize-winning series on discrimination in mortgage lending in Georgia. The series resulted in \$72 million in loan programs for low-income and minority neighborhoods, new fair-housing laws, and a host of other reforms.

Before the 1988 elections, Schlesinger realized the nation faced a tremendous crisis involving savings-and-loans. Economists outside the government had already predicted that S&L insolvencies could cost between \$50 billion and \$100 billion. Yet neither presidential candidate was talking about the issues. Even the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who would later help launch the Financial Democracy Campaign, stayed silent.

"Anyone who looked at the S&L industry saw an impending crisis and a bailout," says Schlesinger. "It wasn't in the

public eye because neither political party dealt with it in a straightforward way, much less as a major calamity about to hit the country." Deciding there needed to be an action-oriented group to complement his research, Schlesinger met with some fellow "eggheads" in Washington to discuss strategy.

Out of the Washington meeting grew the Financial Democracy Campaign, a nationwide coalition "that would try to get ordinary citizens' voices in edgewise in the savings-and-loan debate."

## CORPORATE WELFARE

As his first initiative in 1989, President Bush introduced a massive proposal to deal with the nation's savings-and-loan crisis.

Bush's plan called for taxpayers, banks, and S&Ls to pay more than \$125 billion over 10 years to bail out the collapsed thrifts. Most of the money would come from taxpayers themselves. The president's proposal also imposed tighter regulations on thrifts and gave \$50 million to the Justice Department to crack down on corruption.

The plan "was almost universally applauded," remembers Schlesinger. But, using the Southern Finance Project's in-depth research as evidence, the Financial Democracy Campaign called the Bush plan "snake oil." The campaign argued that \$125 billion would never cover the cost of a bailout, and that the burden would fall on ordinary taxpayers who did nothing to cause the collapse of the S&Ls.

What's more, the depositors benefiting from the bailout would be some of the most wealthy. According to a Southern Finance Project study, the 54 largest failed S&Ls in 1988-89 had an average account size of \$408,000. At seven of those thrifts, the average size exceeded \$1 million. By contrast, most Americans had less than \$10,000 in savings.

The campaign called for an alternative way of funding the bailout, levying a surtax on wealthy individuals who earned substantial income from interest. It also proposed a one-time fee on financial firms that contributed to S&L insolvencies. The coalition called for tough regulations on the industry — much tougher than Bush's proposal. And it insisted Congress should fund the bailout without selling long-term bonds, which would force future generations of working Americans into debt. The only people who would profit from those long-term bonds would be the wealthy

bondholders, the campaign argued.

When the Bush plan came before Congress, the Financial Democracy Campaign contacted its member groups, who lobbied Congress, rang doorbells, talked on the radio, staged protests. But the financial industry lined up squarely behind

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

▼ **Write your Congressional representatives** and tell them that you won't stand for average taxpayers being forced to bail out banks and S&Ls.

▼ **Contact three friends**, tell them what you've learned about the bailout, and ask them to write their representatives.

▼ **Write a letter** to the editor of your local paper and call radio talk shows to voice your concern.

▼ **Organize a town meeting** on the S&L and banking bailouts and invite members of Congress to attend.

▼ **Prepare and release a scorecard** with the help of the national FDC office on how your state's congressional delegation voted on recent financial issues.

▼ **Get on the FDC mailing list** by writing the Financial Democracy Campaign, 604 W. Chapel Hill St., Durham, NC 27701. Or call: (919) 687-4004.

the Bush proposal, opposing attempts even to discuss shifting the burden of the bailout.

Jim Grohl, senior vice president for the U.S. League of Savings Institutions, says ordinary citizens are the ones whose savings are being protected by the bailout; they should pay the cost. "The phrase 'S&L bailout' is a misnomer," he says. "Depositors are the ones who are being bailed out. The money spent to clean up insolvent institutions is going to depositors who had money in those institutions."

The campaign responds that small-time S&L customers didn't make the business decisions leading to the multi-billion-dollar financial scandal. They compare the current bailout plan to forcing the victims of toxic-waste dumping to pay for the clean-up.

Despite that argument, the Financial Democracy Campaign lost on the big issue of who pays for the S&L debacle, as Congress adopted much of the Bush plan. When Representatives Joseph Kennedy of Massachusetts and Bruce Morrison of

Connecticut tried to raise the "who pays" issue in the House Banking Committee, they were ruled out of order, says Schlesinger.

The campaign did score one victory during the 1989 bailout debate. With affordable housing falling out of reach for so many families, the coalition lobbied Congress to include some far-reaching housing measures in the S&L legislation. Partly as a result of those efforts, the bill makes available thousands of foreclosed properties, now owned by the government, to low- and moderate-income buyers. It also tightens up anti-discrimination provisions.

But former Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower, now the national spokesperson for the Financial Democracy Campaign, calls those housing measures "mild palliatives to the most regressive, expensive piece of corporate welfare legislation ever."

## FANNING THE FLAMES

Financial Democracy Campaign organizers see part of their mission as starting "little brushfires" throughout the country. Between 350 and 400 groups from Maine to Hawaii, ranging from the United Mine Workers to the National Rural Housing Coalition, have joined the coalition.

Most have simply lent their names in support, but about 50 have become active in the struggle for fairer S&L legislation. The Financial Democracy Campaign itself maintains offices in Washington and Durham, North Carolina, with two full-time staff members in each office. Member organizations — particularly the Southern Finance Project and the grassroots group ACORN — loan about 12 staff members to the campaign. Foundation grants and contributions fund the group's work.

Each of those member groups has a different strategy:

▼ In North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, and Texas, Financial Democracy Campaign members stood outside NNCB branch offices charging that the bank is one of a handful that have picked up collapsed S&Ls and banks at "fire-sale" prices. The demonstrators handed out lollipops with the message: "We're tired of being played a sucker. No more sweet deals for NNCB."

▼ In west Texas, a group of business owners took out advertisements in small-

town papers calling for a boycott of NCNB. They claim the bank cut off their credit when it took over failed thrifts in the Lone Star State. Now they've taken their fight to the state legislature, where Representative Pete Patterson wants to tax banks like NCNB that make few in-state loans.

▼ In Seattle, the "Bucket Brigade" (as in "don't bail out the S&Ls with my bucket") has packed forums with hundreds of taxpayers. At one meeting, the brigade invited the entire Washington congressional delegation to face an angry mob.

While it fans the brushfires, the Financial Democracy Campaign is also pressing ahead with the next round of the savings-and-loan struggle: convincing Congress that it's not too late to shift the burden of the bailout away from working Americans. This spring, the House came within 25 votes of passing a measure to spread the bailout over a much shorter

timetable. The campaign, which helped develop the measure, believes such a law would set the stage for taxing financial institutions and the wealthy.

"The Financial Democracy Campaign really did a lot of research on how much different proposals could cost over 20, 30, 40 years, how much it would save the taxpayers if we didn't borrow," says Ken Rivlin, an aide to Representative Jim Slattery of Kansas, who co-sponsored the measure. "In less than two days, we were able to win the Democratic vote by 2-1. If we had another day, we could have won." Slattery plans to reintroduce the proposal this fall.

The campaign also plans to turn its attention to what could become an even larger bailout: the federal effort to rescue failing commercial banks. At the same time, it will fight a proposed overhaul of the nation's banking laws, which would make it easier for commercial banks to expand their branches

with less government oversight.

Financial Democracy Campaign organizer Marty Leary hopes there will come a time when his group is no longer necessary — when the campaign has developed its member groups into effective crusaders for fairer banking laws. He compares his dream to the reality of the environmental movement, which has developed over 20 years into a network of local organizations throughout the country.

"It would be nice if the campaign made itself obsolete," Leary says. "If we make financial watchdogging as routine as environmental watchdogging, I would be happy." □

*Barry Yeoman is associate editor of The Independent, a newsweekly in Durham, North Carolina, from which this article is adapted. The Southern Finance Project is sponsored by the Institute for Southern Studies, publisher of Southern Exposure.*

---

## Percolate-Up **Economics**

Populist leader Jim Hightower questions who controls our money.

*Interview by Barry Yeoman*

For populist leader Jim Hightower, a fundamental question underlies the S&L debate: Who holds economic power in this country?

As Texas Commissioner of Agriculture for eight years, Hightower wrested some of that power from agribusiness and the chemical industry and put it into the hands of small farmers. Setting up new financing mechanisms, he helped farmers diversify, process, and market their own crops. He also encouraged ecologically sound farming practices.

Narrowly defeated for re-election last fall, he now travels the country as national spokesperson for the Financial Democracy Campaign. He spoke to reporter Barry Yeoman this spring.

**Southern Exposure:** *I'd like to ask you about the S&L crisis. A lot of folks have seen reports on TV or have read about it in*

*the newspaper, and assumed that some folks at S&Ls in Texas and California just screwed up. . . .*

**Hightower:** And certainly that happened. We had an embarrassment of thieves in Texas, for sure. But the real crisis is not a function of crooks.

There are two scandals really. One came under Voodoo One of Ronald Reagan, saying we really needed to deregulate savings-and-loans so that they can go into national and international enterprises. This would allow an infusion of wealth from Wall Street syndicates and international speculators into savings-and-loans, which could then go beyond pedantic little local housing loans and begin to build high-rises in Houston and condos in Aspen.

If ignorance is bliss, these guys were ecstatic to start with. This thing didn't have a prayer of working. They weren't

very smart in their investments, corruption aside. What did they know about condos in Aspen? And so when that began to unravel, the whole thing came crashing down. A lot of innocent people got squeezed.

But the taxpayer got squeezed overall, because then comes the second scandal, which is the bailout itself. And it's coming under Voodoo Two, which is George Bush's notion that whatever happens, we have to take care of the super-wealthy. They come rolling in, and saying, "Oh my God, our house of cards has come down. Now we need to bail this out."

**SE:** *The S&L crisis is more than an isolated crisis. It's a parable of our times. I take it that your struggle for a fairer approach to the S&L debacle is part of a broader vision.*

**Hightower:** It raises the whole issue of money and puts it back into politics again, which is where it belongs.

The discussion about who controls money used to be central to our politics. It was a huge debate during the 1830s and '40s, which is the time that the Republic of Texas was being formed. The Texas constitution outlawed banks. You could not create a bank in our state. We have a very strong populist streak in our history that believes money should be decentralized, not controlled by any central power.

And this resurfaced in our history, most recently in the 1920s and 1930s when Huey Long, Franklin Roosevelt, and other major political players talked a lot about who controlled our money.

It is, after all, our money that they're using. We put our deposit in the bank, and that is the sole source of them being able to make humongous profits. These people don't do anything. They move paper, or now it's not even paper. It's electronic manipulations. And they, as a result, have become the wealthiest people in our society.

That's bad enough, except that we have gotten to the point that it is assumed only bankers can be trusted with money. Even progressive politicians assume, "Oh my, if we were really in charge of money, we could mess it up." If we had practiced 24 hours per day, forever, we could not mess it up as bad as these bankers have messed it up.

People are mad because of this S&L debacle. Now here come the bankers saying, "Well, now, we're gonna need \$38 billion also and maybe more." Then here come the pension funds and the insurance companies.

So people are beginning to say, "Wait a minute. All this comes from the money that I take down to my local S&L or credit union. I'd like to have more say in how that money is spent, how it's being spent in my community. Right now, it's not being spent in my community."

NCNB — known as "No Cash for No Body" — is the largest bank now in the



**"IT'S OUR MONEY THAT THEY'RE USING," SAYS JIM HIGHTOWER, NATIONAL SPOKESPERSON FOR THE FINANCIAL DEMOCRACY CAMPAIGN.**

state of Texas. We are in an economic recession in Texas and we cannot recover unless we have capital to generate new enterprise at a grassroots level. But if you're a small business, you can't get in to see a loan officer at NCNB. We don't control our own deposits. And that means we don't control our own economic destiny.

**SE:** *Helping people control their economic destiny was something you implemented as agriculture commissioner. Progressive politicians see the way you stepped out, the boldness with which you pursued a people's agenda. You got too vocal and powerful, and the powers-that-be crushed you. Does that mean that there are limits to what populism can achieve?*

**Hightower:** No, not at all. My defeat is the direct result of big money coming into my opponent's campaign — \$2.5 million — that was spent on television ads to tell lies to voters. One suggested that I am a flag burner, which I damn sure am not.

Even though I lost, things we put in motion in Texas, like a whole movement

to sustainable agriculture, cannot be undone by the new administration. We showed people that we trusted them. We put tools of growth in their hands, and they took those tools and put them to work. Those people can't be sent back now.

**SE:** *What's next for the populist movement?*

**Hightower:** The populist movement is going on stronger and stronger. It's expressing itself in this savings-and-loans issue. It's expressing itself in housing and educational issues all across the country. If you go down to the Chat 'N Chew Cafe and talk to people, you will tap a very progressive streak.

People want to build, and they want to have the tools of self-help in their own hands. You know, "trickle-down" is a pernicious philosophy. Even if it worked, which demonstrably it does not, it says to people, "you don't matter," that we're gonna invest in a few wealthy people at the top and if you be good and sit there with your bowl at the bottom, some of it will trickle down to you. We need a philosophy of "percolate up" economics. □

## HOW A HOSTILE TAKEOVER ON WALL STREET POLLUTED A WEST

Photo by Ric MacDowell



ROSEMARY RUBEN AND OTHER CITIZENS FOUGHT TO CLEAN UP THE DECAYING SHARON STEEL COKE PLANT IN FAIRMONT.

**WAYNE STUTLER** has tracked down killers and extortionists over his 32 years on the police force in Fairmont, West Virginia, but he says he's never been so stymied in "finding justice" as in the case just down the hill from his home.

He walks across his lawn to the edge of Hoult Road. In the valley below, he

points to the ruins of row after row of coke ovens, flanked by railroad trestles, an ammonia plant, cooling towers, and a coal tippie stripped of its machinery and rotting in disuse.

Amid this jumble of derelict equipment, which runs for half a mile to the banks of the Monongahela River, are

VIRGINIA COMMUNITY — AND HOW THE TOWN FOUGHT BACK.



# THE RAIDER & THE COAL TOWN

*By Mark Reutter*

120,000 cubic yards of hazardous waste, the outgrowth of years of dumping coal tars, cyanides, ammonia, arsenic, beryllium, phenol, and acids at the vast Sharon Steel coke plant.

The chemicals have leached into the soil, befouling underground springs. After a rainstorm, uncontrolled surface run-

off dumps the wastes into backyards and chokes local creeks, which rise and carry the contaminants into the Monongahela.

Behind this mess lies a web of alleged coverups, regulatory lethargy, and the veiled world of the plant's former owner — corporate raider Victor Posner.

"We call it rape and run," says Stutler,

Fairmont's retired police chief. Like other residents, he believes that Posner took advantage of the Monongahela Valley, where natural beauty seems to be rivaled only by industry's relentless drive to plunder its natural resources.

"When Posner was running the ovens, we couldn't attract industry to the city be-

cause the plant was so far in excess of air pollution standards," remarks Rosemary Ruben, who formed Citizens Holding Onto a Klean Environment (CHOKE) to fight the pollution. "Now we can't attract industry because no company wants to be near a hazardous waste dump. The guy took the money and never reinvested it."

Posner is a legend on Wall Street: a master in the art of paper finance and leveraged buyouts. A seventh-grade dropout who turned 72 last September, he runs his financial empire out of Miami Beach, where he can indulge his passion for dealmaking, limousines, jumbo-sized estates (he owns seven houses and condominiums) and teenage girlfriends.

He puts his children and relatives on the payroll of the companies he buys. Big salaries and even bigger bonuses follow in the wake of a Posner takeover. Although three of his entities have collapsed into bankruptcy, sagging under heavy debt, the financier remains one of America's richest men. He has salted away \$300 million, perhaps more, in stocks, real estate, and a family trust. No matter what happens to his companies, he is fond of saying to his associates,

"it's not going to change my lifestyle."

Posner has been in the news in recent years, pleading guilty to tax evasion and charged with stock reporting violations by the Securities and Exchange Commission. His alleged transgressions against stockholders, however, pale in comparison to his dirty deeds in Fairmont. Far from the media spotlight, in northern West Virginia, Posner dismantled a vital factory, threw hundreds of workers out of good jobs, and polluted the soil, air, and water.

The economic and environmental destruction is a reminder that the debris from a decade of financial excess has not been confined to Mike Milken's X-shaped trading desk or Ivan Boesky's suitcases full of cash, but has spilled over to heartland communities like Fairmont. Posner was one of the first financial pioneers to discover he could get rich by piling up "junk bond" debts on Wall Street — and then ransack Main Street to stay one step ahead of his creditors.

**VICTOR POSNER** entered the life of Fairmont in 1969, when he staged a hostile takeover of the Sharon Steel Corporation. A real estate developer in Florida

and Maryland, Posner was a new breed in the world of high finance — a self-styled "conglomerateur." He was not interested in mining coal or making steel; he was a numbers man who scoured for "undervalued situations" in corporate America — companies he considered "underpriced, with good cash position and no debt."

He began his corporate raiding with DWG, a Detroit maker of cigars and pipe tobacco. When a management feud broke out, Posner entered the fray and emerged as chairman and CEO. He then shed the cigar business and used DWG to buy interests in National Propane, Southeastern Public Service Company, and Wilson Brothers. Although the companies sold very different products — liquified gas, underground cable conduits, and men's shirts — they soon had one thing in common: Victor Posner, who made himself the boss.

At the same time, Posner was eager to transform his small laminated plastics company named NVF into a conglomerate. Although the company wasn't doing too well in its own business, NVF was the vehicle that Posner used to acquire Sharon Steel.

Posner lured Sharon stockholders by

*Photo by Tim Chapman/Miami Herald*



**VICTOR POSNER PLAYS SANTA TO THE HOMELESS IN MIAMI — PART OF A DEAL HE CUT TO AVOID PRISON ON CHARGES OF FEDERAL TAX EVASION.**

offering to swap their shares in the company for NVF bonds with a face value of \$70—40 percent above what Sharon stock was selling for on the New York Stock Exchange. For Posner, the key to the deal was that he didn't have to pay off the \$99 million bill for the takeover until 1994, when the bonds came due. The takeover was not only an early instance of a little company gobbling up a big one (Sharon was seven times NVF's size), but of equity (Sharon stocks) being swapped for debt (NVF bonds) in a hostile takeover.

The Sharon deal made a tremendous impact on Wall Street, serving as a forerunner to the junk-bond and leveraged-buyout boom of the 1980s. In Fairmont, where the Sharon coke plant was the biggest employer in town, the conquest was greeted with astonishment. Posner had no track record in West Virginia—but given the state's history, people should have been wary.

Fairmont owes its gritty industrial character and extremes of wealth and poverty to coal. From the narrow, winding valley of Buffalo Creek east to the Maryland border, and from the Pennsylvania line south to Buckhannon and Elkins, the hills are honeycombed with seams of "high-volatile, Pittsburgh coal," excellent for iron smelting and other industrial uses. Mining began here in the 1850s, and the importance of the enterprise was reflected in the fact that the founders of Consolidation Coal, the Watsons, built their opulent estates, High Gate and La Grange, on the outskirts of town.

On the heels of coal came oil. The rich beds of oil and natural gas in neighboring Mannington attracted other moguls, including Standard Oil tycoon and former U.S. Senator Johnson Newlon Camden. Camden built a railroad line between Fairmont and Clarksburg, using the Watsons as his agents to buy 70,000 acres of prime coal and gas land at prices as low as \$5 an acre. He organized the mines at Monogah with future Governor Aretus Fleming and cleared virgin timber from central West Virginia.

Clarence Wayland Watson dazzled Wall Street in 1909 by merging the coal fields of Somerset, Pennsylvania and the Fairmont mines into Consolidation Coal, the biggest coal trust in the nation. The company was invigorated with \$20 million in fresh capital, much of it supplied by John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil.

In 1920 the Rockefeller-Camden-Watson interests unified their West Vir-

ginia coking facilities into Domestic Coke Corp. and established a large by-product plant in East Fairmont. Sharon Steel purchased the plant, plus a coal reserve of 15 million tons, in 1948.

For the next 20 years, the plant and the Joanne mine at Rachel supplied coking coal for the blast furnaces in Sharon, Pennsylvania. The sprawling factory also sold sulphate, benzol, and other coal chemicals used to manufacture women's nylons, explosives, aspirin, plastics, and highway asphalt.

**LIKE THE MOGULS** of old, Posner placed coal at the center of his strategy as chairman and CEO of Sharon. To raise cash, he sold the Joanne mine to Eastern Associated Coal and entered into a contract with Eastern for the long-term supply of coal. Thus assured of a low-cost source of raw material, he shut down Sharon's coke ovens in Templeton, Pennsylvania and began selling its mined coal to outsiders.

Fortune smiled when the energy crisis induced by the oil embargo gripped the nation in 1973. Spot coal prices soared from \$8.50 to as much as \$80 a ton in a

erations, which amounted to less than 10 percent of sales.

Posner used these profits to underwrite his increasingly ornate lifestyle. A corporate jet, 100-foot yachts, speedboats, a penthouse suite at the Plaza Hotel in New York—all were furnished for his comfort by his captive companies. Sharon, a landlocked Pennsylvania company, saw fit to purchase three company yachts. The least of them cost \$190,000, while the most expensive was \$1.5 million. Each was conveniently docked at the chairman's house on Sunset Island, Miami Beach.

A 1978 audit ordered by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) found that Posner billed his companies for the rent on his 10-room Plaza suite, Cigarette speedboats costing \$94,000, chauffeured Mercedes on around-the-clock call in New York and Miami, \$100,000 for personal air travel, a cabana at the Fontainebleau Hotel, and liquor and restaurant bills in excess of \$100,000.

His children also lived well at company expense. On Manhattan's East Side, Gail Posner had her own limousine and driver, the use of Sharon's corporate jet, charter helicopters, and \$39,032 in free

Photo by Ric MacDowell



**ONCE THE LARGEST EMPLOYER IN FAIRMONT, THE VAST SHARON STEEL PLANT NOW STANDS IN RUINS, CHOKED WITH DEADLY CHEMICALS.**

little over a year. By buying coal cheap and selling it dear, Posner reaped windfall profits. In 1976, nearly half of Sharon's operating profits came from its coal op-

telephone calls. The cost of Steven Posner's Plaza suite was picked up by his dad's firms, along with a beach house in the Hamptons, a vacation spot in the

Catskills, a Stutz, and free groceries.

To settle the SEC complaint, Posner and his children agreed to repay nearly \$2 million to his companies — but not without a lot of personal angst. At one point Steven protested to an SEC lawyer that it was unfair to ask him to pay for his \$6,400-a-month rooms at the Plaza because he and his family had been subjected to “jungle-style tenement living” there.

The lawyer was startled. “The jungle tenement living that you are referring to — was that at the Plaza Hotel?”

“Yes,” Steven answered. “This is the way the family and I viewed it.”

**FAR FROM** Steven’s sufferings at the Plaza, Wayne Stutler knew something was wrong when the coke oven doors kept “blowing out” at the Fairmont plant.

“It was terrible,” he remembers. “The explosions waked you up at night. Sometimes you’d think the place was blowing up.”

For Rosemary Ruben, who lived a few doors down Hoult Road, it was the constant downpour of soot. “Everybody was getting sick. People were getting skin rashes. And I had trouble breathing. I went through all the allergy tests and the doctors couldn’t find anything. Then I started asking, ‘Do

you think this could be related to Sharon Steel?’”

Residents woke up to find grit on their windows, on their cars, on grass, plants, everything. The rotten-egg smell of hydrogen sulfide increased. Loathsome pools of bluish-black liquid puddled in the breeze washout piles and drained into the yards of houses huddled, coal-country style, within 200 feet of the works.

“When you grow up here, you accept pollution, but this was something worse than in the past,” Ruben remembers.

“Then we started hearing about cover-ups,” Stutler adds. “That made me very angry.”

In Charleston, state environmental officials also heard about strange goings-on in Fairmont. On a routine patrol of the Monongahela, an inspector for the water resources department reported “bubbling action within the river approximately 20 feet from the shore line.”

He noticed a pipe running along the shore line. He followed it and it led to the Sharon coke ovens. Another pipe was discovered in a cave. “This is willful pollution by concealed discharges,” the inspector wrote.

The plant was so broken down, an April 1978 inspection by the state Air Pol-

lution Control Commission noted, that a foot-wide crack stretched diagonally across one coke oven battery. Several ovens were beginning to lean over and some had collapsed within, allowing poisonous gas to escape.

Three workmen suffered heart attacks while working on the ovens, and others complained of short breath and dizziness from the smoke and gas, according to Kenny Springer, president of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers local at the plant. “Nothing was being kept up,” says Springer, a man with a weather-beaten face and slow drawl. “Say an oven needed to be relined. That takes six to eight weeks to do right. But they’d be throwin’ in bricks and gettin’ it fired again as fast as they could.”

The debt Posner had accumulated to purchase the plant impelled him to squeeze every dollar he could out of the operation. “We weren’t making a good product anymore,” a supervisor with more than 30 years seniority says. “Our tar got so bad that Reilly Chemical, a big buyer, couldn’t use it.”

Tests by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) showed that some coke oven workers were exposed to nine times the maximum daily

*Photo by Ric MacDowell*



**FORMER POLICE CHIEF WAYNE STUTLER WANTS TO SEE JUSTICE DONE AT THE CONTAMINATED PLANT.**

dose of carcinogens. In December 1978, the agency cited Sharon for exposing workers to dangerous emissions, failing to provide safety equipment, and failing to regularly inspect and maintain the ovens.

In a news release, Posner scoffed at the OSHA inspection as "pie in the sky," but Sharon eventually paid \$10,000 in fines. (In keeping with his long policy of "no comment" to the press, the financier refused to be interviewed or to answer written questions about Sharon submitted to publicist Chuck Nolan.)

The state also cited the plant for massive violations of air pollution laws, but delayed taking action. Posner was promising to rebuild the plant — and state officials believed him.

"Victor Posner strung out the state of West Virginia," charges Charles Beard, who was director of the Air Pollution Control Commission. "His people told us, 'We're going to build a completely modern coke oven battery. Spend \$20 to \$25 million. Just give us more time.'"

The Miami Beach mogul did not directly communicate with state officials, but used his brother Bernard and other Sharon officials as go-betweens. One time Bernard, known as Bob, jetted into Charleston to attend a meeting with the air pollution staff.

"I won't forget it," says Robert Weser, a member of the staff. "When we have compliance hearings, company officials tend to dress and act very formal. But Bob Posner comes in wearing a shirt unbuttoned to his navel, with a gold chain and gold bands around his arm." Posner sat through the meeting, saying very little, Weser says. "The impression I had was they could care less what happened to Fairmont. They acted very cocky."

**SHARON SHUT DOWN** the Fairmont coke works on May 31, 1979. Two hundred people lost their jobs, and miners at Joanne were idled by the simultaneous shutdown of the old Sharon mine.

The village of Rachel became a virtual ghost town. Sumac and saplings sprouted at the mine head and soon reclaimed the B&O branch line that wound down Buffalo Creek to the city.

To this day, many people in Fairmont mistakenly believe that "the environmentalists" and "the government" were responsible for the closing. In fact, papers filed in Clarksburg show that the plant was shut the very day its low-cost supply con-

## A DIRTY BUSINESS

Fairmont is not the only place where a Posner-controlled company has been embroiled in environmental disputes. Here's a partial list of other recent cases:

▼ Graniteville Co. last year entered a consent decree with the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control after the agency found contamination in Langley Pond. The textile maker, required to submit a report on the pollution, recommended that pond sediments be left undisturbed. The agency has responded by requesting additional information, but a local citizens group is fighting to make the company clean up its toxic wastes.

▼ Last November, the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation notified a unit of DWG that waste water discharges at its citrus processing plant in Auburndale were "acutely toxic." The company responded by claiming "the absence of any continuation of any such alleged discharge." If convicted, the company is subject to a \$10,000 fine and criminal penalties.

▼ Sharon Steel paid a record \$500,000 penalty last year to settle pollution suits dating back to the mid-1980s by the EPA and the Pennsylvania Depart-

ment of Environmental Resources.

▼ Earlier, the steel company was accused of lying about toxic waste discharges at its works in Pennsylvania, leading EPA official Maureen Brennan to urge the federal government to cease buying steel from Sharon because of its flagrant disregard for the Clean Water Act.

▼ Posner's NVF has allegedly dumped PCBs in a creek and landfill near Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, spawning several long-running battles with state and federal officials. Delaware authorities have also asked for civil penalties against NVF for allegedly dumping oil discharge into White Clay Creek.

▼ NVF paid \$150,000 under the EPA's "Superfund" program to clean up wastes the company buried in a landfill in New Jersey, and faces potential liability for environmental contamination at another site in Elkton, Maryland.

▼ The EPA filed suit in U.S. District Court in Cleveland accusing Sharon Steel of discharging pollutants at its Brainard, Ohio division throughout the 1970s and 1980s without applying for a federal permit. The company recently agreed to pay \$175,000 to settle the complaint.

— M.R.

tract with Eastern Associated expired. State and federal officials had granted Sharon permission to operate the ovens until "on or before June 30, 1979," thereby enabling Posner to wring out the last drop of profit before his contract ended.

Sharon officials pleaded poverty, saying the company couldn't afford new coke ovens that met environmental regulations. Posner, meanwhile, was waging another lucrative war on Wall Street. This time his target was UV Industries, a precious metals and coal company with mines in Alaska and the Southwest.

Hoping to elude the raider, UV stockholders had voted to liquidate rather than be acquired by Sharon Steel. Under the liquidation plan, Posner could have sold Sharon's 3.4 million shares in UV for about \$110 million in cash — plenty to build new ovens at Fairmont and undertake other needed improvements.

Instead, he bid for UV. "Victor is convinced that everyone who fights him is trying to cheat him," observes a former associate, and he wanted to teach Martin Horwitz, UV chairman, a lesson for

"cheating" him.

The raider did not propose to pay for UV out of his own pocket. That would be foolish. He arranged for Sharon Steel to float \$411 million of subordinated debentures — better known as "junk bonds" — to cover the takeover. But to consummate the deal, he still needed to win SEC approval for registration of the bonds. In January 1980, the commission staff launched an investigation of alleged insider trading at Sharon Steel.

A month later, the Environmental Protection Agency moved against Sharon, filing suit in U.S. District Court in Clarksburg for air and water pollution violations at the Fairmont works. The agency sought \$16.5 million in civil penalties for disregard of the Clean Air Act during 1978 and 1979, and \$379,000 for the illegal discharge of water pollutants.

Within months, however, the two federal agencies backed off. Despite a critical report by the SEC staff of "suspect trades" among Posner companies, the commission brought no formal charges. As a result, the UV bonds were floated

and Posner won control of the company in late 1980.

Then, in June 1981, the EPA dropped all proposed fines against Sharon. In return, the company pledged to build a \$2.5 million facility to contain wastes at the Fairmont plant. The change in heart came just five months after President Reagan took office and named Anne Burford as chief of the EPA.

"We had a total reorganization and shifting of staff and orientation," acknowledges Ray George of the EPA office in West Virginia. Under Reagan, the agency decided to allow Sharon to bury the wastes in Fairmont rather than remove them. "The cost would have been inordinate, and there was the question of public exposure to the material during transport," says George. "It was done for the best of reasons."

**THE "BEST"** of reasons left the people of Fairmont facing the prospect that the city's largest parcel of land —

nearly 100 acres — would become a permanent waste dump. Under the consent agreement, a single clay-lined vault would be built for the disposal of wastes near the river, and a betonite slurry cutoff wall with "impervious cover" would surround oxidation pond #2, "which will also contain excavated sludge from pool #1, the redeposited sludge, light oil area wastes, and tar pit wastes."

"It was a mockery," says Rosemary Ruben. A nurse and mother, Ruben formed CHOKE with other residents to fight the consent decree. "At first I got phone threats to my life," she recalls. "People said, 'Who are you to stop jobs?' The company was promising to reopen the plant and the workers thought they'd get their jobs back. It was a lie, but even my late husband said I shouldn't get involved."

CHOKE sold t-shirts, held a benefit dinner in Morgantown, and raised over \$600. An engineer hired by the group found serious flaws with the containment plan. The "impervious cover" would crack over time, he stated, and a single-lined

vault was not adequate to hold the landfill wastes. ("A double-lined clay vault would be the way it would be done today," concedes Ray George of the EPA.)

At the same time, a study by Battelle Laboratories found that the dump contained higher levels of cyanide, phenol, and arsenic contamination than originally believed. And even the EPA faulted Sharon for continuing to dump wastes surreptitiously into the Monongahela River.

Frustrated by the lack of state and federal protection, the city decided to defend itself. In 1983, City Council passed an ordinance making it illegal to dump hazardous waste within city limits. "The Council decided that they didn't want Posner's pigsty in our parlor," says George Higinbotham, then city attorney.

Sharon immediately filed suit to block the ordinance. Over the next three years the case ground through the courts. Although the company lost nearly every action it brought, attorney Blair McMillin bluntly told the *Charleston Gazette* that fighting the city in court would cost the

## FROM COAL TO COLA

Gulp down an RC Cola or chomp through an Arby's roast beef sandwich and you've added pennies to the Posner realm.

After piling up disastrous losses as an industrialist, Victor Posner has moved into the consumer world, becoming a fast food and soft drink tycoon, with a sideline in leisure wear.

Three companies based in Georgia and South Carolina now form the heart of his shrinking empire: Royal Crown Cola, makers of RC, Nehi, Diet Rite, and Upper 10 soft drink concentrates; Arby's, Inc., the nation's largest roast beef franchise, with 2,100 restaurants, and Graniteville, a textile maker specializing in cotton-polyester leisure and sports wear.

For the most part, these companies were purchased courtesy of about \$250 million in "junk bonds" sold through Posner's former friend Michael Milken of Drexel Burnham Lambert. In the case of Graniteville, the former owners terminated the pension plan, purchased annuities for the employees, and used the \$36 million surplus to help Posner pay for the acquisition.

Controversy dogs Posner in his latest ventures. "We're builders, not liquidators," he pledged shortly after buying Graniteville. He then padlocked several

mills, dismissed employees, and even lopped off police and garbage service in Graniteville, South Carolina, one of the country's last company towns.

Last year Posner became embroiled in a battle with Arby's franchisees after Leonard Roberts, the head of the unit, resigned in a public spat with the raider. According to Roberts, Posner siphoned money from the chain via unjustified management fees and refused to make capital improvements — moves right out of his Fairmont, West Virginia play book.

"He has no feel for a business. He only looks at the numbers," says Roberts, now chairman of Shoney's. In a court hearing in Cleveland, Roberts gave an unprecedented account of the inner workings of the Posner domain, which is housed in the former Victorian Plaza Hotel in Miami Beach, where the short, frail-looking powerbroker runs his companies surrounded by security cameras and his ever-present bodyguards.

"Let me tell you, your honor, there is a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde situation here," Roberts testified. When a DWG director once suggested that a statement dictated by Posner might be a bit exaggerated, the financier erupted into "a vicious personal attack on that individual," Roberts said, with "language like, 'you goddamn mother fucking son of a bitch, you never question

me. I'm sick of this shitting loyalty. You are a piece of shit now, you were a piece of shit before I put you here, and you are still a piece of shit. I control this goddamn place.'"

Roberts also quoted Posner's philosophy of life as expressed in his Miami Beach bunker and over Scotch at Tiberio's, his favorite hangout in neighboring Bal Harbour. "That lecture [was that] these are all small people, and small people don't survive, or get squashed by people with power and wealth, and he has all the power and wealth in the world."

Posner also has an image problem. He avoided jail in 1988 for federal tax evasion when he agreed to establish a \$3 million program for the homeless. The "Victor Posner Homeless Project" has since become the centerpiece of his campaign in Miami to shine up his image and reposition himself as a philanthropist and do-gooder.

But as with other masters of the universe, a time bomb ticks away in Posner's kingdom. More than \$265 million in junk bond bills will come due between 1996 and 1999. How will the debt be paid? With more firings? With more companies exploding into bankruptcy? With Posner already showing signs of Donald Trump wobbliness, his reign as a leisure wear and fast food baron may be brief. —M.R.

company five to 10 times less than obeying the ordinance.

“Posner’s initial strategy was to pose such an aggressive threat to EPA that they backed off,” Higinbotham says. “Then when Fairmont took up the fight, the strategy was to wear us out.” Sharon found an unlikely ally: the West Virginia attorney general. In a brief filed with the state Supreme Court in 1985, the state’s chief prosecutor accused Fairmont of trying “to obstruct the exercise of state power” by passing a law that preempted the state’s Hazardous Waste Management Act.

The court rejected the state’s argument and validated the Fairmont law. McMillin then took the case to the U.S. Supreme Court. By the time the high court rejected the appeal without comment, many more months had lapsed.

**BY THE START** of 1987, Wayne Stutler believed the company was finally going to comply with the law. The appeal process had been exhausted, and in his capacity as chief of police, Stutler had served a warrant on the plant guard, stating that Sharon was in violation of the city ordinance and subject to fines of \$500 a day.

But he and other Fairmont officials couldn’t have anticipated what happened next: Sharon Steel filed for bankruptcy in April 1987. Sharon had defaulted on the UV bonds — the very debt Posner had floated to stage a hostile takeover while the Fairmont coke works were discarded. The company also suffered when Evans Products, another Posner operation, went broke. In all, the company was staggering under \$350 million in debt.

In January 1988, Bankruptcy Judge Warren Bentz took the unusual step of removing Posner from control of Sharon for “gross mismanagement” and ordered a trustee to run the company. Last fall, Posner walked away from the wreckage of Sharon by agreeing to pay \$7.5 million to settle legal actions brought by the trustee and creditors.

The settlement was a pittance to a man who made the cover of *Business Week* in 1986 as America’s highest paid executive. Court filings in Erie, Pennsylvania show that as Sharon lurched toward bankruptcy between 1984 and 1987, Posner reaped \$12.7 million in salary and bonuses. Regardless of the disasters that befell his company or the



**KENNY SPRINGER WAS HEAD OF THE UNION AT SHARON. HE WATCHED WORKERS GET SICK AND THE PLANT DETERIORATE AFTER POSNER TOOK OVER.**

citizens of Fairmont, the raider was not to be denied his cash by a board of directors composed of his brother Bob, his son Steven, his daughter Tracy, and other relatives and cronies.

The Sharon bankruptcy effectively stalled efforts to clean up the Fairmont wastes. Finally last October, the city won a small but significant victory when the company removed an estimated 5,000 cubic yards of deadly waste from the tar pits. According to a report by the Center for Hazardous Materials Research at the University of Pittsburgh, another 120,000 cubic yards of wastes remain.

City Manager Edwin Thorne says Fairmont is still waiting for post-Posner management to come up with a clean-up schedule for the remaining waste. The company emerged from bankruptcy late last year under the control of New York financier George Soros, whose Quantum Fund held a large block of the defaulted bonds.

According to Higinbotham, Sharon officials still assert that their only “responsibility” is to contain the waste on site. “If the EPA or West Virginia stepped in decisively, I’m convinced that the problem could be cured very quickly,” he says.

Despite the delays, citizens in

Fairmont say they have learned a lesson about the value of community organizing. “I think our group and the city did accomplish something,” says Rosemary Ruben of CHOKE. “All the necessary laws to control toxic waste dumping are on the books.”

She and others hope their fight for local control of toxic waste dumps will have long-range benefits for West Virginia and other states plagued by industrial waste. But for now, they’re still worried about the mess Posner left in the Monongahela Valley.

Standing outside his home on Hoult Road, Stutler, a solidly built man with a deliberate manner of speaking, says, “I’d sure like this place cleaned up. It could be used for industrial or recreational purposes. The property has real potential ...”

Then he looks out at the ovens sprawling across the hills like gravestones in some gigantic and decaying cemetery, and shakes his head. Reality has returned. □

*Mark Reutter is an investigative reporter and the author of Sparrows Point: Making Steel — The Rise and Ruin of American Industrial Might (Summit Books).*



G R E E N

M O V I E S

Grassroots films that document environmental dangers.

T H E

# BOMB

**Working on a shoestring budget, two filmmakers give a whole new meaning to the phrase "Lights, Camera — Action!"**

# SQUAD

By Steve Dollar

**ATLANTA, GA.** — What a difference Oscar makes.

Atlanta filmmakers Mark Mori and Susan Robinson were already moving ahead on new projects when their 1989 documentary *Building Bombs* nabbed an Academy Award nomination last February.

The 55-minute film documents environmental hazards at the Savannah River Plant (SRP), the nuclear power and weapons factory in Aiken, South Carolina. Though it didn't win the award, its presence in a strong, issues-oriented documentary field won a fresh burst of media attention for a modest, virtually handcarved project that took its

first-time directors a full five years to complete.

"It's a major boost," says Mori, who initiated production in 1984 as an extension of his lifelong political activism and his growing interest in filmmaking. "It meant we got blurbs in *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. People take my phone calls now. Libraries are buying it now. I mean, it's the same movie. But some people who weren't interested in it before — now, all of a sudden they want it."

"It's the Academy cachet," Robinson agrees with a laugh.

The timing could not have been better. For local residents, Savannah

River has been a source of both daily income and deadly contamination since it opened in 1950. Owned by the Department of Energy (DOE), the plant plays an essential role in the production of nuclear weapons, manufacturing tritium and plutonium-239 for hydrogen bombs.

Although safety violations have kept the plant closed since 1986, federal officials plan to restart one reactor this summer. The DOE also plans to open a new plutonium processing center at the site — the first entirely new plant to produce nuclear weapons since 1960.

Yet by all indications, troubles persist at the plant. In May, two top site officials were transferred amid charges

of financial mismanagement involving millions of taxpayer dollars. The National Academy of Sciences has dubbed the plant “an American Chernobyl waiting to happen” — a conclusion that *Building Bombs* vigorously underlines.

Mori and Robinson, a freelance writer for corporate videos who joined the project in 1986, were granted a rare opportunity to shoot footage inside the plant, despite initial refusal of their request. As Mori recalls, a plant official asked camera operator Bruce Lane what sort of film he was making. Lane replied, “We’re not making

## FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

The film’s focus, however, is on the people who work at the plant. In scene after scene, *Bombs* introduces the men and women who profited from the economic boost the plant gave to an area where the primary industries had been farming and tourism — only to discover they were part of something they didn’t want to be a part of.

“We wanted to make a movie about the human side of this,” says Mori, who traveled to Aiken each weekend during the summer of 1984 to shoot footage of

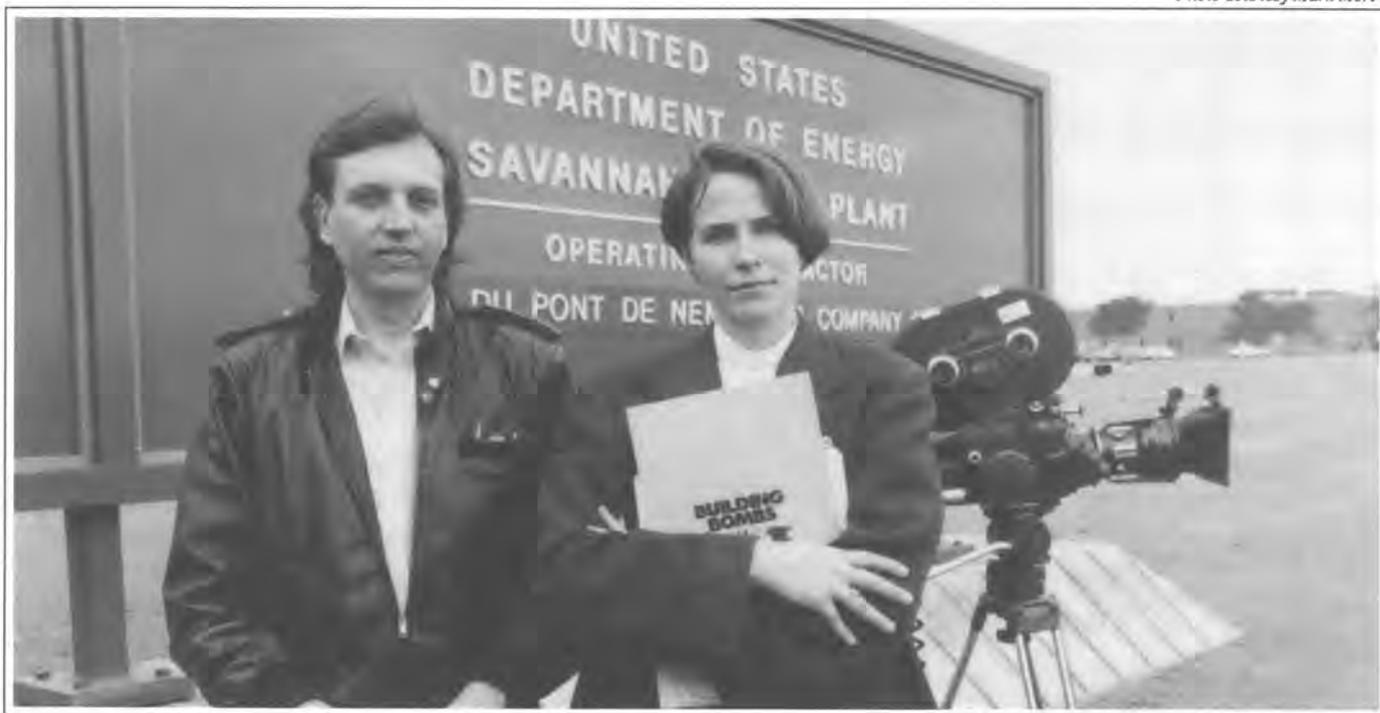
— each one representing a bomb.

“I think that it’s ironic that in my zeal to avoid the Korean War, I wound up in a plant manufacturing the world’s most destructive weapons,” Dexter told the filmmakers.

Lawless became a thorn in the side of his employers. As environmental monitor at the plant, he quickly discovered that “only superficial reports could be sent to DuPont — and the more superficial, the better.”

Branded as an alarmist for blowing the whistle on health hazards at the factory, Lawless finally quit and went

*Photo courtesy Mark Mori*



**MARK MORI AND SUSAN ROBINSON EARNED AN ACADEMY AWARD NOMINATION FOR THEIR LOOK AT THE SAVANNAH RIVER NUCLEAR PLANT.**

a public relations film for you guys.”

That independent spirit is ringingly clear in the devastating arsenal of facts quoted with smooth authority by narrator Jane Alexander, star of the nuclear holocaust drama *Testament*. At one point, she tells viewers about 51 tanks at Savannah River that hold 35 million gallons of highly radioactive liquid waste — “the high-yield hangover from a 40-year binge of building bombs.”

The waste, she adds, is leaking into the soil — and the film brings home the danger by showing scenes of contaminated turtles wandering onto neighboring land.

protest rallies. “We thought that people could get into this subject on the basis of people and their stories.”

Two former plant employees, physicist Arthur Dexter and engineer Bill Lawless, supply personal testimony of the almost Faustian bargain that the region struck with the Department of Energy and its original contractor, DuPont.

Dexter, now retired and active in anti-plant protests, recalls how he embraced the chance to work at the site as a young man anxious to avoid the Korean War. Later, during the Vietnam era, he began to have profound doubts about his purpose, spurred by a visit to a vault stockpiled with 30,000 tritium containers

public with his findings about radioactive contamination, inadequate and outdated disposal, and threats to the Tuscaloosa Aquifer — a deep underground water source that runs from Alabama through north Georgia and into South Carolina.

Chillingly, the filmmakers intercut such nightmarish testimony with footage of children at play in pools of sparkling water. It’s a crude technique, but effective — as is the use of eerie, *Twilight Zone*-type music synched to aerial shots of the plant.

For the most part, though, *Building Bombs* is subtly constructed. Editor Philip Obrecht worked miracles

stitching together a crazy-quilt assortment of archival footage, old DOE industrial films on the plant, and stunning scenes of workers tossing cardboard boxes of nuclear waste into trenches — the latter acquired from rolls of film shot during SRP's early years.

## NO CHICKEN LITTLE

Mori started the film after he bumped into Larry Robertson, an old acquaintance, at the Atlanta Film Festival. "I knew him from protesting the Vietnam War," Mori recalls. "He wanted to get some experience as a cameraman, and said he would put together a crew if I would do a film on Savannah River."

Mori got to work, raising the film's initial \$100,000 budget from such disparate sources as the Methodist Church, the Athens-based rock band R.E.M., and the Playboy Foundation. Robinson, who had protested at the nuclear plant as a teenager, signed on in 1986. "I could see she had a lot of talent," Mori says. "It was wide open — anybody who wanted to come and help could join us."

Mori knows the film breaks no news. But it illustrates public fears in vivid, personalized terms.

"When the whole Chernobyl thing was happening, we were actually on the plant site," Mori says. "I remember saying to the cameraman, 'Now tilt up to the reactor to show there's no containment dome.' Technically, the reactor is the same era as Chernobyl. I sort of got goose bumps when I heard the news on the radio."

It's *that* sort of feeling that the film conveys best. The *Hollywood Reporter* blurbed that it was a scarier viewing experience than *Silence of the Lambs*, and there's a disquieting edge at work — more than enough to throw a few psychic speed bumps in the onrushing path of Reagan-era opportunists who've left their consciences on cruise control.

And yet, *Building Bombs* is a far cry from the despairing, Chicken Little school of documentary film, which identifies some harrowing transgression against humanity — atomic testing, political torture, poverty amid plenty — but never gets much past screaming about how awful it all is. Nor does the film terrorize its audiences with some perverse form of entertainment (instead of anonymous ski-masked serial killers, we're stalked by *lead poisoning!*).

## "I WATCHED MY HOMETOWN DIE"

*The following excerpt from the script of Building Bombs tells the story of the early days of the Savannah River Plant, when thousands of families were uprooted to make way for the world's first hydrogen bomb factory:*

EVELYN COUCH WALKING THROUGH WOODS

NARRATOR: The Ellenton, South Carolina birthplace of Evelyn Couch was condemned by the government to build the Savannah River Plant. That was just the beginning of a startling change in her life.

COUCH AT KITCHEN TABLE: From the way I would describe it, it was almost like the Gold Rush days — everybody coming in from everywhere all over the United States to work. We had 35,000 people to move in here, you know, where we had a 13,000 population, so you can know what that can do.

EXTERIOR OF B&W TRAILER

COUCH VOICE OVER: We even turned horse stables into apartments. We had a lot of trailer courts set up, a lot of new towns and communities set up.

JAMES GAVER, DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY: I think the relationship between the communities surrounding the Savannah River Plant and the operation itself and the people who work here is very, very good, it's very strong. It has taken some time for it to get to that point.

AERIAL VIEW OF PLANT

NARRATOR: To make way for the world's first hydrogen bomb manufacturing complex, the Atomic Energy Commission swallowed up 300 square miles in three counties ...

CLOSE UP OF HOUSE WITH BARBED WIRE

... an area four times the size of Washington, DC. Whole towns were wiped off the map forever.

TRUCKS MOVING HOUSES

6,000 people in 1,500 families had to move.

BULLDOZER UNEARTHING GRAVES

Even the dead left their final resting

place. Evelyn's homeplace became a temporary office for Dupont.

GAVER: The construction of SRP is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records and it certainly is one of the largest construction projects that has been undertaken in modern times.

COUCH: They had to move the people out and bought their land. Some got a fair price for it ... not many got the fair price that they could set up another place to live in at all.

FARMER ON TRACTOR WATCHES MOVING HOUSES

BLACKS EMERGE FROM RAM-SHACKLE HOUSE

GAVER: Uh, those relocations were done without a great deal of turmoil or upset. Of course, there were deep family ties to some of the areas, to some of the small towns, and naturally those people hated to leave.

COUCH: They had one couple in the area that refused to sell. They had lived in this old home place, a brother and a sister, and they got their shotguns out, but then they put them in a mental institution and took the land anyway.

CLOSE UP OF ELLENTON PROTEST SIGN

SONG: Where the broad Savannah flows along to meet the mighty sea, there stood a peaceful village that meant all the world to me.

'Twas a home of happy people, I knew each and every one, All my kin and all the friends I loved, the town was Ellenton.

ZOOM IN ENERGY COMMISSION STREET SIGNS

But the military came one day and filled our hearts with woe, We'll study war right here, they said, the little town must go.

Then they came with trucks and dynamite,

the din and dust rose high,

STILL OF CONSTRUCTION WORKERS EATING LUNCH

And I stood encased in silence there and watched my hometown die.

Instead, *Bombs* invites active participation in mobilizing against the danger at the Savannah River Plant.

"I wanted a film that would inspire activism — something that would encourage people to go out and *do* something," Mori says. "In some of

these films, you see some horrible nuclear explosion and then you go home depressed. I wanted the opposite kind of feeling — something hopeful, something uplifting, something inspiring."

The key, Mori explains, was Dexter and Lawless. "We put these guys

forward as role models. We designed it to say: 'Here are people who are doing something. They are actually making a difference. Therefore, you can make a difference.' And we showed that they changed. Here were guys who were pro-nuclear, who were in that plant, and who went through a process and confronted themselves. We emphasize that. Some people come out of it and think, 'Well, what am I doing?'"

One of the people empowered by the film was Nancy Lewis, an environmental activist aligned with the grassroots organizations Campaign for a Prosperous Georgia and Georgians Against Nuclear Energy. "It was inspiring," Lewis says. "Here were two people who were also in the neighborhood and busy with activist issues, who made a film. They showed me that a film was certainly something you could do, that you didn't have to be a big Hollywood-backed production."

Lewis got to work with a video camera to document community efforts to block a proposed hazardous waste incinerator in Taylor County, Georgia. The result was *Burned*, a half-hour video that features an opening comment from R.E.M. vocalist Michael Stipe. The tape, Lewis says, "has been seen by like a million community groups."

Likewise, the groups Lewis works with have used *Building Bombs* in their organizing efforts, screening it for 40 or 50 people at a time as a touchstone for discussions. "It's such a rallying point," she says. "It tells a story in visual terms, rather than having somebody droll stand up there and speak."

### DRAWLS AND DIGRESSIONS

Although *Bombs* has been screened at 18 film festivals and won 14 awards, it has yet to receive a national broadcast in the United States. "It has been on TV more outside the U.S. than inside the U.S.," says Mori.

The film has been shown several times on VH-1, the cable rock video network aimed at post-teen viewers, but Mori says the Public Broadcasting System rejected the work as too one-sided. "The issues raised in this film are important and it needs to be seen by the American people," he says. "For PBS to say we don't give enough say-so to the proponents of nuclear weapons is just ridiculous."

To gain wider exposure for the film, Mori and Robinson are using grant

money to supply a new, 30-minute version of *Bombs* to public schools, offer free satellite feeds to PBS stations nationwide, and give video cassettes to grassroots organizations.

Mori acknowledges that the conventional form of the film — it's anti-slick, even down to the intentionally flat voice-overs of narrator Jane Alexander — met with some resistance.

"Some people didn't understand," he says. "When we went to New York and showed it to some anti-nuclear activists, they weren't really that interested in the film. They wanted something that would be aimed at opinion leaders, but we wanted to influence Average Joe TV-watcher who'd be sitting there drinking a beer who'd maybe never heard of the Savannah River Plant."

"We were urged to do just an expose," he continues, "a very simple sort of thing. But we debated that and decided we didn't want to do that. The film interweaves the environmental, the social, and the personal responsibility — rather than just telling a single point."

The film was also shaped by its distinctively regional viewpoint, a sense of identity that goes well beyond the mere location of the camera's subject.

"The fact that people talk with Southern drawls — we like that," says Mori. "These are real people, and they say very intelligent things with a thick Southern drawl. For some people, that's a contradiction."

Robinson feels that the film's Southern form separates it from standard docu-fare, establishing a laid-back tone that balances its urgent message.

"It's been said of it that slowly it tells you there's an emergency," she says. "It makes digressions along the story line. It's characteristic of a Southern storyteller that there are all sorts of little digressions that fold into one another."

"Some people would call this beating around the bush," she notes. "Myself, I didn't watch television between the ages of 7 and 16. I was used to hearing our neighbors in the country tell a ten-minute story about whatever the cow did that day. And every little point along the story had its own meaning and fun and eventually accumulated into this big laugh. A Northerner or someone from a more post-print culture would go crazy over this."

"The Californians who saw the film just went nuts because it took three

minutes to get to the title," Robinson adds with a laugh. "The Los Angeles people said, 'Wow, you should start with this high-energy opening and grab them upfront.' But to me, that sensibility didn't really fit the story we were telling. It's about this ambling area that's suddenly taken over by a force much greater than its own."

Deploying some of the clever collage techniques that served the ironic, 1982 documentary *The Atomic Cafe* so well, the filmmakers include a bluegrass number called "The Death of Ellenton" over footage of one of the old South Carolina cotton towns paved over to make way for the Savannah River Plant.

"The song was originally written by a man in the town," says Robinson. The film's synthesizer score, she adds, "tries to mimic the way the guitar would be played. And we tried to use a little bit of electronic fiddle instrumentation."

### NO COMMENT

The Department of Energy has steadfastly refused any public comment on the film. But in the end, *Bombs* has won some grudging respect from officials at the Savannah River Plant.

Shortly before the Academy Award nominations were announced, Mori and Robinson returned to the plant to tape a segment for WTBS-TV in Atlanta. At first, DOE officials refused to let them in. "They told us we weren't allowed on the property," says Mori, "but then they realized that looked kind of bad."

Greeted at last by a DOE spokesman, Mori recalls receiving the mildest sort of praise, carefully couched in hospitable words: "He told us, 'I understand congratulations are in order.'"

But as *Building Bombs* sees it, the real congratulations belong to those who have struggled to confront the danger at Savannah River — and to accept their own responsibility in standing up to the nuclear threat.

"I slowly began to confront myself," engineer Bill Lawless told the filmmakers. "It's a very slow process, a very difficult process for most people — at least it was for me — to confront yourself and to come to terms with it and then to finally start doing what you think is right. The more you do it, the easier it becomes." □

Steve Dollar is a writer for The Atlanta Constitution.



G R E E N  
M O V I E S

# SPEAKING

# FOR

# THEMSELVES

**A new film from Appalshop helps Appalachian residents document their own stories and struggles.**

By Anne and Graham Shelby

**WHITESBURG, Ky.** — Past Carolyn's Diner and Pigman Cleaners, just the other side of King Motor Body, sits Appalshop.

Tucked away amid the mountains of eastern Kentucky, this unlikely-looking three-story building with diagonal wooden slats houses a film studio, video production unit, FM radio station, record label, and theater company. Their purpose: to record and present the history, struggles, art, and culture of Appalachia and its people.

Founded in 1969, Appalshop recently attracted national attention by sending its cameras a few hundred miles

up the Appalachian Mountains to Institute, West Virginia. The result was *Chemical Valley*, an award-winning documentary set to air nationwide on the PBS series "P.O.V.," on July 9.

Institute, a predominantly black community just outside Charleston, is home to the nation's only Union Carbide plant that produces MIC — the same toxin that killed 3,500 people and injured 50,000 in Bhopal, India in 1984. *Chemical Valley* focuses on the conflict between plant officials, workers, and local residents following the disaster.

Appalshop producers Mimi Pickering and Anne Johnson made

*Chemical Valley* on a \$150,000 budget compiled of foundation grants. Pickering, who has worked at Appalshop for 20 years, says the project began when Institute residents expressed concern about the lack of safety precautions after the Bhopal accident.

The filmmakers took their cameras into every corner of the community, talking to plant officials, workers, scientists, and those who live in the shadow of the pesticide plant. As residents fought for tougher safety guidelines at the plant, Pickering says, they began to sense the connections between India and Appalachia.

"This region is like the Third World in terms of the corporations and the way they treat their workers and the community," she says. The West Virginia plant is 10 times the size of its Indian counterpart. Three months after Union Carbide began operating the factory, a gas leak

community group that spoke out was really threatened and intimidated."

## WISDOM AND BEAUTY

*Chemical Valley* captures the competing tensions in the community, Pickering

*Photo courtesy Appalshop*



**MIMI PICKERING AND ANNE JOHNSON SAY THEY PRODUCED *CHEMICAL VALLEY* TO GIVE A VOICE TO APPALACHIAN RESIDENTS.**

sent 135 people to the hospital.

The accident also caused friction in the community. In an attempt to garner worker and community support for the corporation in the wake of Bhopal, the company held what Pickering calls a "Union Carbide pep rally."

Not everyone was cheering. A group of residents protested, arguing that company practices were hazardous to local residents and to the environment. But with job opportunities scarce in the area, many families who depend on company pay did not look kindly on neighbors biting the hand that was feeding them.

"There was a real polarization between workers and community residents due in large part to the terrible economic situation in West Virginia and a lot of Appalachia," Pickering says. "The small

says, by focusing on the "issue of jobs versus environmental safety. Are those two at odds?"

Johnson agrees, saying she and Pickering wanted to present a balanced view. "You get all sides — you get the company, you get the workers. And they're not in little sound bites — they're at length and in context." Johnson believes the film is "consistent with good documentary, which tries to make people think about things and not hit them over the head with a sledgehammer."

The approach worked. *Chemical Valley* has collected awards at the Aveda U.S. Environmental Film Festival, as well as festivals in Louisville, San Francisco, and West Virginia.

Perhaps more important to the producers, however, the film has been well received in Institute. Community people

"seemed really pleased with it," Pickering says. "It meant something that somebody had cared to tell their story. That was very satisfying."

Dee Davis, executive producer at Appalshop, says *Chemical Valley* represents some of the center's primary goals. "That piece is important not just because it looks at problems with toxics, but also because it looks at the community and how they deal with it. If you can see and understand and enjoy the vitality of that community, it gives you a better perspective on the problems of a toxic chemical plant in the middle of that community."

Davis, who has worked at Appalshop "off and on since 1973," says that the purpose and practice of the center haven't really changed since its founding in 1969. "We work in a couple more venues than we did then, but it's pretty much the same work. The idea is to try to get a little better at it."

A large part of Appalshop's work, Davis says, has always been to help give Appalachians their own voice in the documenting process. "We're a cultural arts center, and we're particularly focused on this central Appalachian region and people. What we do is try to let local people tell their own stories, speak for themselves, list the issues they think are important.

"There's a long tradition in this part of the world of outside media representing local people," Davis adds. "Our purpose is a counterpart to that approach. There may be some particular problems in this region, but there's also a lot of wisdom, a lot of lessons learned and a lot of beauty."

Nearly all of the 32 full-time employees at Appalshop are either natives to the region or have lived here for years. "It's important to have a sense of the totality of this place," Davis says. "Most of us are from here. This is our home. How it's depicted is important to us."

While Appalshop's purpose may have remained the same over the past two decades, the Appalachia it records has not. Davis and others expect dramatic changes in the years to come.

"The coal is running out," Davis says. "Geological surveys say approximately 20 more years of coal and that's it. That's a major problem. What are

people going to do to make their living? What are they going to hang on to, what are they going to change? It's not just an economic consideration. It's cultural. Mining coal is in many ways integrated into everything that's going on here."

## ON THE ROAD

To keep up with the changing region, Appalshop has branched out into a variety of media. A 12-member ensemble known as the Roadside Theater company writes and produces plays about Appalachian life and presents them both locally and across the country.

"The thing that differentiates us the most from other theater companies is that we're writing original work about the place where we live," says Carol Thompson, producer for Roadside. "Most of the members of the company have been here in excess of 10 years, and some as long as 15 years."

With each production, Roadside attempts to document and preserve some aspect of Appalachian culture. "South of the Mountain" uses music and drama to convey a mountain family's adjustment from farming to coal mining. The simply-titled "Mountain Tales" features dramatic depictions of traditional Appalachian stories and music.

"I think the key thing that all of Appalshop is doing is creating ways of letting people tell their own stories," says Thompson.

Working for Roadside requires company members to be jacks of more than one trade. Everyone contributes to creating and assembling productions: writing, producing, acting, preparing sets, coordinating tour information, and collaborating with other arts groups while on tour.

Roadside members spend roughly 16 weeks a year on the road. The current touring schedule includes shows from Zuni, New Mexico to Red Wing, Minnesota. "It's a chance for us to change the idea of Appalachia and of Appalachian people, to correct some of the stereotypes," says Thompson.

Since the underlying philosophy is to perform and promote "community-based art" — art that originates from and centers around a particular locality — the company tries to spend two weeks at each stop. "The work has a lot more meaning for us and hopefully for the people involved if we can stay longer

## "HOW FAR CAN YOU RUN"

*The Union Carbide pesticide plant in Institute was built in the middle of a black neighborhood. One resident told the makers of Chemical Valley, "They killed the Indians — now they're trying to kill the hillbillies."*

MEDIUM SHOT, THREE WOMEN

JANE FERGUSON: My grandfather came here from Raymond City, where he was a coal miner. He wanted to bring his children here so they would have access to the college. There are nine of us. All of us were born here.

SUE FERGUSON DAVIS: It was a very close-knit community. You knew everyone. Everyone trusted everyone.

PRINCE AHMED WILLIAMS: It was very beautiful, it was very challenging. There was a time you could have found black representation from every corner of the state here.

B&W STILL OF PLANT

JANE FERGUSON: Once the plant started buying up land, I can remember the smells. Institute wasn't as fresh, airish like. It seemed like we were more confined.

B&W YEARBOOK PHOTO

MILDRED HOLT: I came to Institute when I was 17 and a half years old. I was a freshman at West Virginia State College. I thought this was the smelliest, dirtiest ... it was hard to breathe here. Yet this was where I was going to college.

FERGUSON: The plant didn't hire Negroes. Eventually they did, but it was menial work. I understand that one of the presidents of the college who was a professor of chemistry applied — he had a doctorate — and they were going to give him a job as a janitor.

SHOT OF HOMES NEXT TO PLANT

HOLT: They were already invading the community with pollution, terrible pollution. They would put the tanks right next to houses. I often wonder, if it had been a white neighborhood, would they have done the same thing? Maybe if it had been a white underprivileged neighbor-

hood, yes. But I know it wouldn't have happened if it had been people of affluency.... Powerlessness was the name of the game.

AERIAL SHOT OF PLANT

NARRATOR: On May 4, 1985, Union Carbide resumed MIC production at Institute after spending \$5 million to improve safety...

FLASHING LIGHT, SOUND OF SIRENS  
SIGN: "DO NOT ENTER WHEN FLASHING"

... On August 11, 1985, 500 gallons of highly toxic methylene chloride leaked from the Institute plant. Plant officials waited 20 minutes before warning the community.

VICTIMS ON STRETCHERS

WORKER: It looked just like a fog, a mist in the morning dew. My head's been hurting me and I'm sick to my stomach.

REPORTER: When they told you it was a leak, what was the first thing that crossed your mind?

WORKER: India. You're so helpless. There's nothing you can do. I mean, how far can you run?

AMBULANCE RUSHING TO HOSPITAL

HANK KARAWAN, PLANT MANAGER: There were about 500 gallons in the tank. It is now suspected that the material overheated, which resulted in a pressure buildup. This caused three gaskets on the tank to fail. In addition, a safety valve on the tank opened and discharged material to the emergency vent system.

REPORTER: After Bhopal occurred, didn't you in fact assure the people of this community that this kind of thing could not happen here?

KARAWAN: Bhopal? You're not suggesting this comes anywhere near Bhopal?

REPORTER: No, I'm saying that you suggested that this sort of thing that happened yesterday could not occur here.

KARAWAN: I don't think I said that unequivocally.

and be engaged with the community," Thompson explains.

Despite how far the company travels with a show, Roadside productions debut locally, usually in the 160-seat theater on Appalshop's first floor. "These are the waters you test," says Thompson. "If it doesn't make sense to the people here, then somewhere along the line we've messed up."

## IN YOUR EAR

Sixteen-year-old Christie Collins grabs a compact disc from the huge music rack behind her, scoots up to the control board, delicately inserts the shining disc, and pokes the CD player to cue up her next song. The studio walls are cluttered with orange-and-black "No Smoking" signs, a bright blue calendar

featuring a smiling University of Kentucky basketball coach Rick Pitino, and a bulletin plastered with overlapping pictures of disc jockeys clowning around in the studio.

Collins runs a show called "Street Talk" on WMMT-FM, the Appalshop radio station. Volunteers do almost all of the broadcasting, and they seem to take a certain pride in their gritty, anti-establishment sound. The cover of a recent program guide reads "WMMT 88.7 FM — The Non-Industrial Giant in Appalachia."

The cover also boasts a picture of two women wearing zany sunglasses. A caption declares: "Radio Like You Have Never Seen!"

The crazy-quilt schedule inside the program guide certainly supports that claim. In addition to talk shows like "Appalachian Perspectives" and a public affairs program called "Crossroads," the station broadcasts an old-time bluegrass show called "Deep in Tradition," followed by "The Eclectic Hour" with Whisperin' Ray and "Manic Monday Meltdown" with Nuke Wellington.

There's also the "Cudloe Stump Farm and Traffic Report," "Champagne Charlie's Psychedelic Flashback," and the "Biscuits and Gravy" morning show featuring film producer Mimi Pickering as Biscuits, an Appalachian feminist.

Program Director Jim Webb thinks the station's diversity is one of its chief assets. "Because of the complete variety of programming we have, we hope we provide something for everyone in the region. This is truly community radio."

High-school-age disc jockeys are fairly rare, and Christie Collins says she enjoys working at the station. "What I really like is that you have the freedom to say whatever you want on the air. It gives teenagers like me a chance to experience radio."

### "TV ISN'T REALITY"

Darren Day is another teenager who can boast of some unique experience. Since enrolling in a media class at Whitesburg High, Day has worked after school and sometimes late into the night at Appalshop, putting together video packages and mini-documentaries through an educational outreach

program that allows students access to the center's film and video facilities.

Day says once students learn how to use the equipment, the rest is their own responsibility. "We film, we edit, we interview the people. We do it all."

As at WMMT, the film and video crew at Appalshop allows students the freedom to work at their own pace, with few restrictions. "You can just come down here and work and there's no distractions," Day says. "People trust you. They're really excited about what you're doing, and they understand that you're working, too. It's real exciting being able to do your own project and put it together and see what it looks like."

Through the media class, Day has learned how television news programs are pieced together — and picked up a measure of skepticism in the process. "I watch TV differently now. Watching news, I think about how they put it together. You start to realize that TV isn't reality. Somebody sat down and edited it. You're seeing it through the editor's eyes."

Down the hall, Anne Johnson sits in a dark editing booth, her long years of experience evident in the deftness with which she manipulates the images on the screen. Her fingers glide over the buttons like a flat rock skipping over still water, her glasses reflecting one of the thousands of images of Appalachia that Appalshop has documented.

In addition to her work on *Chemical Valley*, Johnson serves as director of Headwaters Television, an Appalshop unit formed in 1979 to provide a television outlet for its films and to expand into video.

"It seemed we were getting our films out, but more people were seeing them in New York City than were seeing them locally," Johnson explains. "Productions are aimed for public television now. Initially it was for a very small audience right here in Letcher County."

Headwaters receives some funding from PBS and Kentucky Educational Television, but like other Appalshop operations it must struggle to find money to finance productions.

"We have to raise funding from a combination of different foundations and federal agencies," says Johnson. "Basically, it's film by film by film or tape by tape by tape. We don't make very much by selling them. It's not a very profitable occupation."

### MOUNTAIN LABEL

At Appalshop, the bottom line is always measured in terms of cultural preservation, not commercial profit. That philosophy certainly extends to June Appal, the record label at Appalshop. Throughout the year, the recording studios leap to the sound of fiddles and mandolins, as local musicians record traditional mountain music which otherwise might never find its way to vinyl.

According to staff member Rich Kirby, June Appal was created in the mid-1970s by local musicians "who felt there just wasn't a label that was responsible to the people around here." Since its founding, he says, the studio has served as an outlet "for traditional music from Appalachia and new music inspired by the traditional."

Maintaining the integrity of the music is more important to the label than the popularity of the record once distributed. "One of the main features of June Appal is that it's never been commercial," Kirby says. "We didn't feel like taking our hat in our hand and taking this music to places like Nashville" where the musicians wouldn't have a say in how the music was recorded. At June Appal, "traditional Appalachian musicians could record their music their way."

Like all the media at Appalshop, June Appal tries to provide a vehicle for Appalachia's cultural and historic identity. Producer Dee Davis insists that the center has simply tapped into an existing resource. "Had we not been around, there'd be just as much artistic talent and as much interest in talking about issues, but it would've had to find a different channel to come out."

Whatever social, economic, and cultural upheavals the next two decades bring to the mountains, Davis says he expects Appalshop to remain true to its roots.

"I don't want us to try to be Hollywood or Broadway or Nashville," he says. "That way lies madness. I'd like to see us keep doing the same stuff — just getting better at it." □

*Anne Shelby, a writing instructor in Lexington, Kentucky, worked at Appalshop during the mid-1970s. Her son Graham is a journalism student at the University of Kentucky and a staff writer at The Kentucky Kernel.*

# THE LAST WORD

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

It took a strong stomach, but I finished your article on the poultry industry and its devastating contamination ("Fowling the Nest," Spring 1991).

The picture painted was so revolting, it's hard to see how anyone can ever eat another bird raised under these conditions — an issue not even dealt with in your article. The approach of the article was: How do we continue to raise millions of these birds in horrid, chemical-and drug-infested conditions, continue to sell them to a culture of people who already eat too much meat, and get away with it by effectively hiding the mess?

We must stop allowing huge industrial farms to tell us that the "stuff" they ship to our grocery stores is food! Can we not remember what a good, chemical-free tomato, fresh from the garden, tastes like compared to the red styrofoam balls sold in the supermarket?

There will *never* be a way to produce food on the scale described in your article, if it is to be done in harmony with the earth.

— Shannon Freeman  
Americus, Ga.

## PILLARS OF STRENGTH

I am a native New Yorker, born and raised in Brooklyn, but I have lived in the South for over 25 years. I believe that the answer to homelessness and other problems in the black community lies in the building of strong families of people who are not necessarily related by blood. I believe that these families have a better chance of being built in the South.

Even after many migrations to the North, the South remains the most Afri-

can portion of the United States, and it is here that blacks own acreage which can be used to create self-sufficiency. The one requirement is that the people who own will have to see that it is in their best interest to share with those who don't.

I am an African-American who would like to share what he has, who believes that he can help himself by helping others. I am willing to share with a family or individuals who are willing to work, and who are honest and trustworthy.

We are living in a political and economic tornado. During a tornado, people go down to the basement and cling to the pillars.

If the '90s will be the decade of the tornado, people will have to go down to the basement and cling to the pillars of what they know best: their family, their ethnic group, their culture. What I propose is not just for African-Americans, but for African-Brazilians, African-Cubans, African-Filipinos — for any people who recognize that they are an African people.

I say to those people who don't have a basement to come share my basement with me. If your pillars have begun to crumble, bring what you have and together we may be able to restore and reinforce each other's pillars.

— Sean Brown  
Jacksonville, Fla.

## GIVING GRANTS

*Southern Exposure* readers may be interested in a new grant-giving and networking organization that has just been launched in Washington, D.C. The Poverty and Race Research Action Council (PRRAC) was founded by major civil rights, civil liberties, and anti-poverty groups to link research with local, state, and national level advocacy

around the intersection of race and poverty. One of our primary functions is to provide grants for research tied to advocacy work. We can also help connect advocates with appropriate researchers, or vice versa.

PRRAC has just awarded its first 18 grants to organizations in 13 parts of the United States, including Louisiana, Alabama, and Washington, D.C. We are funding research to document the adequacy of education provided to homeless children in Chicago; to investigate the affordability of housing for the low-income population of fast-growing California; to support a suit brought by the ACLU in Montgomery County, Alabama, charging that the state requirement to provide minimal adequate education is not being met; and to support a survey documenting the lives of undocumented Latin American women in Washington, D.C., especially around the issue of domestic violence. All are connected to an advocacy strategy involving either community organizing, litigation, public education, or legislation.

Readers interested in receiving additional information or submitting funding proposals should write us at: PRRAC, 1875 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 714, Washington, DC 20009.

— Chester W. Hartman  
Executive Director, PRRAC

*We welcome letters from our readers. Send your comments and criticisms to The Last Word, Southern Exposure, P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702. Please include your name, address, and daytime telephone number, and try to hold letters to no more than 250 words in length. Longer letters may be edited for length.*



SOUTHERN EXPOSURE  
P.O. Box 531  
Durham, NC 27702