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by Jonathan Soucek

The Black community in Marks, Mississippi, a small Delta town, finally saw its first tangible political victory following the civil rights movement of the 1960s on November 8, 1983. That night, Manuel Killebrew narrowly defeated two White candidates to become the first African American county supervisor in Quitman County. This victory, however, came after years of electoral losses and legal battles. In 1979, Killebrew ran against Leroy Reid "to succeed longtime board of supervisors' president W. B. Moore," who had decided not to seek reelection. Reid defeated Killebrew 533 to 410 and then easily won the general election that November. However, after the 1979 election, a political battle ensued as county supervisors redrew the districts to suppress the Black vote further.[1]

Led by Samuel McCray, local African Americans protested the redistricting plan, and it was subsequently rejected by the U.S. Justice Department. After a federal judge approved a new plan, Killebrew again challenged Reid in the Democratic Primary in 1983. Both candidates tied on election night with 582 votes apiece, but "affidavit ballots, cast by voters who claimed they had been placed in the wrong districts under a redistricting plan, gave the election to Killebrew" by a margin of eight votes. Leroy filed a petition claiming that these "ballots were cast illegally" and asked "the court then declare him the winner . . . or . . . order a new election for that position." The circuit court judge, Gray Evans, ruled in favor of Reid and ordered a special election to take place on October 28. In the rematch, the African American community mobilized, and Jesse Jackson came to Marks to show his support. Jackson, who had announced his bid to become the Democratic Party's nominee for the presidency earlier that year, led a voter registration

[1] "Quitman Decides Supervisors Races," *Clarksdale Press Register,* November 9, 1983, p. 2; "In Quitman County: Most Incumbents Qualify," *Clarksdale Press Register*, March 18, 1979, p. 1; "Quitman Results," *Clarksdale Press Register,* August 29, 1979, p. 2.

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campaign in several southern states throughout 1983. As part of that bid, Jackson came to Marks, a town of only two thousand people but of importance to Jackson's work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its Poor People's Campaign (PPC) of 1968. Jackson spoke at Valley Queen Baptist Church, where his dear friend, the late Martin Luther King Jr., had delivered a sermon and cried at the sight of the area's poverty nearly seventeen years prior. With Jackson helping to mobilize the vote, Killebrew won the primary handily, 546 to 491, and then defeated two other opponents in the general election to become the first Black supervisor in Quitman County.[2]

Manuel Killebrew's struggle to become one of the first elected African American officials in his county came from his participation in the local civil rights struggle and the local community's role within the national movement. The little-known town of Marks, Mississippi, briefly entered the national consciousness when it became a focal point for the civil rights movement during the early months of 1968, as SCLC decided to launch the Poor People's Campaign there. Most historians consider the campaign to be a colossal failure, often repeating the words of SCLC executive director Bill Rutherford, calling the campaign "the Little Bighorn of the civil rights movement."[3] Despite this negative representation of the campaign, the city of Marks memorializes the Poor People's Campaign. Dozens of monuments lay throughout the town, and each year Marks hold its Mules and Blues festival. If the

[2] "In Quitman County: Elections to be Held Under Compromise," *Clarksdale Press Register,* July 29, 1983, p. 9; "Quitman Candidates File Challenges," *Clarksdale Press Register,* August 23, 1983, p. 2; "Election Review Petition Filed in Quitman Supervisor Race," *Clarksdale Press Register,* September 23, 1983, p. 2; "Quitman Prepares for Special Election," *Clarksdale Press Register,* October 22, 1983, p. 1; "Feds to Observe Quitman Election," *Clarksdale Press Register,* October 27, 1983, p. 1; "Marks' Light Voting Expected," *Clarksdale Press Register,* October 28, 1983, p. 2; Steve Neil, "Jackson Marches South with Black-Vote Crusade," *Chicago Tribune,* May 16, 1983, p. 1; "Rev. Jackson to Preach in Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* August 20, 1983, p. 11; "Killebrew Declared Winner in Election," *Clarksdale Press Register* October 29, 1983, p. 1; "Quitman Decides Supervisors Races," *Clarksdale Press Register,* November 9, 1983, p. 2; Manuel Killebrew, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

[3] William Rutherford, in *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s,* edited by Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer with Sarah Flynn (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 480. Historians who repeat this view include Charles Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection: The Poor People's Washington Campaign* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1969); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1987); Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); Joan Turner Beifuss, *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 14-16.

Poor People's Campaign failed so utterly as most historians insist, then why does the city of Marks still celebrate and commemorate it?

The reason is that the Poor People's Campaign represented the moment Marks's Black community directly challenged the White power structure and gained fruitful experiences in the process that informed their decisions for years to come. The campaign coincided with local protests in Marks, including a student walk-out and a series of courthouse protests. As a result of decades of devastating poverty and civil rights activists' efforts, thousands of students and townspeople protested, with most deciding to bring their local protests to a national level through the Poor People's Campaign.[4] During the early months of 1968, SCLC conducted extensive community organizing, mainly through educational workshops and the creation of a "Tent City," where families moved after their landowners kicked them off plantations for participating in the campaign. These activities intensified after police arrested six SCLC organizers at the African American high school in Marks on May 1. As a result, hundreds of students and teachers marched to the courthouse, where police officers violently attacked them. The Black community responded by marching downtown two more times the next day. After gaining a sense of solidarity from these marches, these people continued their protest by going to Washington D.C. to show the nation how the War on Poverty had left them behind. Many boarded Greyhound buses to live in Resurrection City, a shantytown on the National Mall, while others decided to take a "Mule Train." Despite the many obstacles that faced African Americans in Marks and surrounding communities, these resilient poor people overcame those obstacles. From the experience of protesting, they gained valuable experiences and networks that helped the community

[4] Despite the importance of the local movement in Marks to the national Poor People's Campaign, relatively few works exist on the campaign in Marks, with all of them giving the lion's share of attention to the Mule Train rather than the other civil rights activities occurring in Marks at the same time. To date, there are only five works that focus solely on the movement in Marks, including Hilliard Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publishing, 2014); Roland Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1997); Simon Thomas Cuthbert-Kerr, "The Development of Black Political Organization in Quitman County, Mississippi, 1945-1975," (PhD diss., University of Strathclyde, 2006); Amy Nathan Wright, "The 1968 Poor People's Campaign, Marks, Mississippi, and the Mule Train: Fighting Poverty Locally, Representing Poverty Nationally," in *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement,* edited by Emily Crosby (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 108-143; Robert Hamilton, "The Mule Train – Adult Learning and the Poor People's Campaign," *Studies in the Education of Adults* 48, no. 1 (2016): 38-64.

win limited political gains at the end of the twentieth century.

The White Power Structure and Poverty

Economic, political, and social structures within the Mississippi Delta reinforced a strict racial hierarchy that kept African Americans in positions of inferiority. Economically, most African Americans in Quitman County lived in poverty and labored on large plantations as sharecroppers. The contracts that landowners made with tenants allowed the tenant to raise a crop on a plot of land, which occasionally included a loan of tools and equipment, in exchange for a share of the crop. Almost always, the tenant either broke even or went into further debt to the landowner. Landowners held a considerable amount of economic and political power, often holding public office. A small example includes O. L. Garmon, heir to Sabino Farms, who became a state legislator in the late 1950s. The county seat, Marks, had a population of just under 2,500 people, with 1,500 living under the poverty line.[5] Socio-economic conditions worsened during the 1950s and 1960s, as planters mechanized, and sharecropping jobs began to vanish. [6]

Local White people used violence and intimidation to reinforce the racial hierarchy and plantation paternalism. The Quitman County

[5] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 21-28.

[6] A vast amount of scholarship exists on both the civil rights movement and poverty in the Mississippi Delta, and more often than not, the two are not mutually exclusive. See James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 253-276; Angela Jill Cooley, "Freedoms Farms: Activism and Sustenance in Rural Mississippi," in *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop: Rethinking African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama,* edited by Jennifer Jensen Wallach (Fayetteville AK: University of Arkansas, 2015), 199-214; Françoise Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 209-243; Simon Thomas Cuthbert-Kerr, "The Development of Black Political Organization in Quitman County, Mississippi, 1945-1975"; Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1996), 271-296; Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Ellen B. Meacham, *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2018). My research contributes to this already large body of work by demonstrating the interconnections between civil rights and economic justice, which not only led to the Poor People's Campaign but also contributed to an outpouring of civil rights activity through organizations such as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the Poor People's Corporation, and federally funded War on Poverty programs like the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM).

courthouse, built in 1911, embodied the mentality of Whites with big black letters on the building's façade, spelling out an Orwellian warning to local Blacks: "Obedience to the Law is Liberty."[7] Those who defied the law and racial order found themselves on the receiving end of violent and economic reprisals. According to a report written by journalist Sally Belfrage, "[In Quitman County,] the local authorities have stated that they intended to rely on private violence to intimidate [civil rights] workers."[8] One such incident of violence occurred when four White teenagers forced Frank Morse, a White civil rights worker from California, off the road and beat him. The local sheriff's office alleged that it received no complaint.[9]

The Mississippi Delta's high poverty rates caused activists in Marks to focus on economic justice in their struggle for civil rights. As local activist Bertha Johnson explained to Roland Freeman, one of the photographers following the campaign, people in Marks protested because "[t]hey are tired of being on these plantations—being poor and not being given their equal rights."[10] From the perspective of economic justice and plantation paternalism, the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty left most African Americans in the Mississippi Delta behind before 1966. Plantation paternalism affected the way local officials distributed poverty and hunger relief. New Deal legislation, which provided subsidies for farmers and relief for the poor, primarily helped wealthy Delta planters and left the poor at the mercy of local white officials (whose mercy tended to be absent when African Americans fought against the southern caste system).

Policies from the New Deal and the Great Society provided poor African Americans with surplus foods. Congress, however, passed these hunger relief policies with the intent to control agricultural markets. As historian Angela Cooley states, "New Deal policy provided such subsidies, not with the primary purpose to feed people, but rather to provide an outlet for surplus crops."[11] Furthermore, these

[7] "Quitman County Receives $400K to Restore Historic Courthouse," Quitman County, accessed September 6, 2020, https://quitmancountyms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/QC_courthouseArticle20.pdf.

[8] Sally Belfrage, "Violence and Intimidation," 1964, Micro 599, Reel 1, Segment 13, Sally Belfrage Papers, 1962-1966, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

[9] Associated Press (A.P.), "Beating Charged," *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson MS), October 22, 1964, p. 16.

[10] "Interview with Bertha Johnson Luster," in *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered,* edited by David B. Levine (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 113.

[11] Cooley, "Freedom's Farms," 204.

foods did not provide adequate nutrition and included lots of starches and fats, with welfare recipients only receiving "cornmeal, flour, rice, and dry beans."[12] Of the thirteen types of supplemental foods that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided to poor communities, only five were enriched with nutrients.[13] As the Poor People's Campaign's letter to the Department of Agriculture pointed out, supplemental foods only covered little "more than three-fourths of minimum diet requirements and never includes green vegetables, eggs, sugar, citrus fruits or fresh meats."[14]

Adding insult to injury, local White officials manipulated these programs to keep sharecroppers in the fields and punish them if they began violating the current social order. In other words, these poverty programs reinforced the racial hierarchy through a paternalistic distribution of poverty relief. White officials designed government policy, especially poverty programs, to reinforce their supposed "white superiority," primarily through putting Black welfare recipients through numerous scenarios that made them feel inferior. The nature of poverty relief in the Mississippi Delta made poor Blacks dependent on poverty programs. White officials and employers used this dependence to control African Americans when they protested. Local governments usually distributed foods in the winter but not in the summer, forcing African Americans to labor during the harvest season. When civil rights protests intensified in the Mississippi Delta during the mid-1960s, many local governments entirely shut down supplemental food programs to attack the civil rights movement.[15] Later, poor people in Quitman County also suffered intimidation and humiliation when they went to the local welfare office to apply for food stamps. Although applying for assistance tends to be a humbling experience anywhere in the country, counties in the Mississippi Delta made Black applicants go through several humiliating and Kafkaesque procedures that local Whites did not have to go through. These included multiple demeaning

[12] "Hunger in the Mississippi Delta," Papers of Fannie Lou Hamer, Freedom Summer Digital Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

[13] Department of Agriculture to Ralph Abernathy, June 14, 1968, Item 3, Folder 86, Box 11, Memphis Search for Meaning Committee Records (hereafter referred as MSMCR.)

[14] "Hunger in the Mississippi Delta," Papers of Fannie Lou Hamer.

[15] Laurie Green, "Battling the Plantation Mentality: Consciousness, Culture, and the Politics of Race, Class and Gender in Memphis, 1940-1968" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999), 11-12; ProQuest (9943070), 1-21; Cooley, "Freedom Farms," 204-207.

tasks, such as repetitive trips to the welfare office and taking out loans to buy food stamp vouchers.[16]

Great Society programs also gave local White officials options when choosing which food assistance program to adopt, almost always to the detriment of poor African Americans. The Food Stamp Act of 1964 allowed counties in the Delta to choose between the surplus commodities program and food stamps. The food stamp program allowed low-income people to buy food vouchers that reduced their price for groceries. However, this required that people pay for food stamps, and many African Americans in the Delta could not afford the government assistance. Quitman County adopted the voucher program causing many families to go hungry. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) notified its readers in its Mississippi newsletter that the "[p]oor people in Quitman County are really suffering under the Food Stamp program" and called for people to send "petitions for Free Food Stamps."[17]

The experience of Josie Williams exemplifies the typical experience of African Americans applying for food stamps in Marks. As a participant of the Poor People's Campaign, Josie Williams testified before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty on May 28, 1968, detailing her struggles to get food stamps. To buy into the voucher program, she had to take out a loan from the Mississippi state welfare office. After seven months, Williams could no longer pay back the loan, so the state of Mississippi stopped giving her assistance. Williams asked where she could get the money to pay back the loan, and the worker at the welfare office sent her to a plantation owner to get another loan. Williams took out a loan of $22 and owed him $28. Because she had no money, she paid him back with the food stamps she received. Williams did not disclose the name of the plantation owner, but his son-in-law operated a grocery store. Furthermore, the stamps only lasted for three weeks, but applicants could not apply for more stamps until thirty days had passed since they last applied. Josie Williams's testimony particularly startled the Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman, who told the subcommittee chair, Joseph Clark, that

[16] Cooley, "Freedom's Farms," 208-209.

[17] Freedom Information Service, *Mississippi Newsletter,* March 31, 1967, Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, accessed on November 7, 2018, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fis/670331_ms_newsletter.pdf

Williams had inspired him to open an investigation into the matter.[18]

Initial Cracks in the Power Structure

Although the Poor People's Campaign dealt the White power structure its lethal blow in Marks, African Americans in Quitman County increasingly began to attack the racial hierarchy in the time leading up to the Poor People's Campaign. As stated earlier, Quitman County, in the mid-1960s, remained relatively untouched by the forces that fostered the civil rights movement, such as a significant Black middle class and a significant presence of national civil rights organizations.[19] Cracks in the White power structure, however, became apparent during Freedom Summer when the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) attempted to register African Americans to vote. With Quitman County on the periphery of COFO's attention, Freedom Summer failed to find widespread support among Blacks and Whites throughout the rural county. Whites in Quitman County met COFO and their efforts to register African American voters with intimidation and violence, and many African Americans declined to help the movement because they feared violence and economic repercussions.[20]

White violence did not kill the movement in Quitman County, but Whites succeeded in stunting growing attacks on the power structure. The MFDP and the Mississippi Farm Labor Union (MFLU) retained a constant, yet small, presence in the county between 1964 and 1968. Before 1968, most of Marks' civil rights activity centered around the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Although the MFDP is remembered mostly for its role in the 1964 Freedom Summer and its attempt to unseat the regular White supremacist delegation of Mississippians at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Atlantic City, after 1964, MFDP turned its attention to attacking poverty and providing relief.

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[18] U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, *Hunger and Malnutrition on Hunger in the United States: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare on S. Res. 281 to Establish a Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs,* 90th Cong., 2nd sess., S. Doc. 96-214 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968), 118-120, 474.

[19] Cuthbert-Kerr, "The Development of Black Political Organization in Quitman County," 70, 83-85.

[20] Ibid., 94-102.

MFDP attempted to mobilize support behind crucial War on Poverty programs, such as the Community Action Program (CAP) and the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM). Ideally, CAP sought to provide community-based solutions for fighting poverty, but in Quitman County, in the words of an MFDP report, "the black and white power structures" controlled CAP and attacked CDGM.[21] According to John Dittmer, "CDGM provided poor children with preschool training, medical care, and two hot meals a day; it also provided employment at decent wages for hundreds of local people who served as teachers and paraprofessionals at Head Start centers."[22] In Marks, members of MFDP also joined efforts with CDGM. In their county reports to MFDP headquarters, the Marks chapter raised many of the same issues that came to characterize the Poor People's Campaign at the end of the decade. Reports frequently expressed distress with local officials and, like the campaign, tried to give the poor some representation on welfare boards. They also sought discussions with the federal officials in charge of poverty relief (primarily the Department of Agriculture and President Lyndon B. Johnson). One grassroots organization in Mississippi, which directly attacked poverty and plantation paternalism by raising funds from liberal allies and distributing the funds to Black-owned co-operatives, even called itself the Poor People's Corporation.[23]

Some of the people who later joined SCLC organizing efforts began their activism during this period, such as Bertha Burres Johnson, who worked as a secretary for both the NAACP and the Voter's League. Although MFDP members likely saw the NAACP and the Voter's League as conservative organizations, Burres's time in these organizations helped her form contacts with SCLC organizers, including those who

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[21] "Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Key Mailing List No. 11: Counties Reports," March 22, 1966, p. 2, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Records, 1962-1971, Wisconsin Historical Society Library, Madison WI, posted 2013, https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/40563 (hereafter referred to as MFDP Records).

[22] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 368-369.

[23] "County Reports: Key Mailing List #6," January 22, 1966, 2, MFDP Records; "County Reports: Key Mailing List #7," February 5, 1966, 1, MFDP Records; Dittmer, *Local People,* 367-368. For more on the Poor People's Corporation see, William Sturkey, "Crafts of Freedom: The Poor People's Corporation and Working-Class Activism for Black Power," *Journal of Mississippi History* 74, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 25-60.

eventually came to Marks for the Poor People's Campaign.[24] Not only did some African Americans continue to protest, but they changed the movement's goals to suit their struggle, protesting through organizations such as the MFDP, MFLU, and CDGM. According to historian Simon Cuthbert-Kerr, a notable change occurred in Marks in the years leading up to the campaign, with local African Americans denouncing leadership by the Black middle class in favor of the lower classes.[25] The fact that Martin Luther King Jr. had come to Marks in 1966 to give a eulogy for Armistead Phipps, a local who died of a heart attack during the Meredith March, demonstrated that the power structure in Marks had weakened since Freedom Summer. Meanwhile, during this time, King began to formulate his idea for the Poor People's Campaign with Marks in mind as the starting point.

When King visited Marks for the second time on March 19, 1968, the racial hierarchy had weakened enough that hundreds of African Americans came out to see him, and no whites threatened him. In preparation for the Poor People's Campaign, King took a break from helping the sanitation workers in Memphis and toured towns throughout the Delta "in a dented white station wagon crowded with his lieutenants."[26] Towns included in King's Mississippi tour included "Batesville, Marks, Clarksdale, Greenwood, Grenada, Laurel, and Hattiesburg."[27] Of all these appearances, Marks again touched King the most, causing him uncharacteristically to cry when he "met boys and girls by the hundreds who didn't have any shoes to wear, who didn't have any food to eat in terms of three square meals a day," and whose parents "are not getting any kind of income . . . [or] any kind of welfare."[28] King then met with poor people at Eudora African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, where, for approximately twenty minutes, he answered questions and heard cries and pleas from the crowd. Some

[24] "Interview with Bertha Johnson Luster," in *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered,* edited by David B. Levine (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 113.

[25] Cuthbert-Kerr, "The Development of Black Political Organization in Quitman County," 165-188.

[26] Curtis Wilkie, "Dr. King Flays Plight of Poor in America," *Clarksdale Press Register,* March 20, 1968, p. 1.

[27] Michael K. Honey, *To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice,* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 161.

[28] "Conversation with Martin Luther King," in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle,* edited by Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine (1987; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 407.

in the crowd at Eudora criticized the War on Poverty, while others lamented their struggles to feed their children. King originally planned to stay the night in Marks with Andrew Young in a shotgun shack owned by Jimmy Holman on Third Street. King could not stay that night due to his busy schedule, but Young did stay, and Holman's home turned into SCLC's headquarters for the Poor People's Campaign.[29]

King's decision to make Marks the focal point of the Poor People's Campaign marked a new phase for the movement locally and nationally, but in many ways, race relations in the county remained the same. When King spoke at Silent Grove Baptist Church in Marks, a White farmer, W. B. "Money" Mobley, interrupted King's speech to hand him a one-hundred-dollar bill. Despite the donation, Mobley's true intentions were questionable because he said afterward: "Ain't nobody hungry down here in Mississippi," and he called Ralph Abernathy a "boy."[30] Mobley's offering resembled the more peaceful aspect of plantation paternalism and the opinion held by Whites in Quitman County towards the civil rights movement. Although the race hatred among some Whites cooled down by the time SCLC organizers canvassed the area, civil rights activists' increased presence caused retaliation from some Whites in the county, especially among plantation owners. Photographer Roland Freeman talked to people throughout Marks about the situation there. Freeman heard of one incident "where a plantation owner, after finding out that a woman had been visited by the SCLC field-workers, came the next morning with a shotgun in his hand, kicked open her door, and scared her kids half to death." The plantation owner threw away all of the woman's belongings, "which only consisted of a couple of spreads, ties, and rags," and kicked her off the plantation.[31] Many African Americans faced similar repercussions, with one historian estimating that approximately "fifteen percent of those signed up to participate in the PPC were evicted from their homes." After King's death on April 4, 1968, organizing in Marks increased rapidly, and so did racial tensions, causing more activists and media personnel to come to town. As a result, a crisis ensued for SCLC organizers because

[29] Ben A. Franklin, "Dr. King Plans Mass Protest in Capital June 15," *New York Times,* March 20, 1968; Samuel McCray, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

[30] Curtis Wilkie, "Marks Farmer Gives $100 to Confront King's Crowd," *Clarksdale Press Register,* March 20, 1968, p. 1.

[31] Freeman, *The Mule Train,* 122.

not only did many local participants lack housing but so did "out-of-town activists and media."[32]

Obedience to the Law is not Liberty

In the immediate aftermath of King's assassination, Ralph Abernathy announced that the campaign would go on, although he moved the start date from April 22 to early May.[33] The original plans to start the Poor People's Campaign included a memorial service in remembrance of Dr. King at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, a walk through the slums in Memphis, taking buses to Marks, and a Mule Train from Marks to Washington. Several civil rights activists spoke at the memorial service, including James Bevel and Coretta Scott King. However, the newspapers quoted most frequently from the speech of Dr. King's best friend and successor as the president of SCLC, Ralph David Abernathy. Abernathy struggled to fill King's shoes. One of his staff members, Hosea Williams, accidentally and frequently called him "Martin."[34] Although Abernathy's speeches were not as moving or charismatic as King's, time and time again, he gave rousing speeches to build at least a mild enthusiasm for the campaign. In particular, he tried to kick off the Poor People's Campaign at the Lorraine Motel in dramatic fashion on May 2, saying, "The moment has come. The day of weeping has ended; the day of the march has begun."[35] Abernathy, however, was only partially right. In many ways, "the day of the march" had begun the day before at the grassroots level in Marks, with the arrest of seven SCLC activists, which sparked a series of marches against the local White power structure.

Organizers came from all over the South to Marks and met with African Americans in public and private spaces. SCLC interacted with the local community at the high school, before church services, on the streets, and in people's homes. Marks did not have a hotel at the time, so all SCLC staffers, including King before his death, had to spend the

[32] Wright, "1968 Poor People's Campaign, Marks, Mississippi, and the Mule Train," 120.

[33] *Clarksdale Press Register,* April 5, 1968; *Memphis Press-Scimitar,* April 19, 1968, Folder 4, Box 36, MSMCR.

[34] Paul Good, "'No Man Can Fill Dr. King's Shoes'—But Abernathy Tries," *New York Times,* May 26, 1968.

[35] Larry Scruggs, "Emotion Outpaces Mules as Poor People's March Steps Off from Fatal Spot," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), May 3, 1968.

night with a local Black family. According to Marks resident Hilliard Lackey, "To this day, scores of residents recall who slept where from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Chester Thomas of Canton."[36] In charge of SCLC's operations in Marks, Willie Bolden arrived in Marks around April 20 and soon became a popular and controversial figure in the community. One Marks resident, Lillie V. Davis, recollected, "Willie Bolden came in and interrupted our Sunday school," and the pastor paused every class allowing Bolden to speak and entice people to join the campaign.[37] Other SCLC staffers came from Atlanta to assist Bolden, including Andrew Marrisette, Jimmie L. Wells, and Margie Hyatt. Local Mississippi civil rights veterans, who helped organize the Marks movement, included Major Wright from Grenada and Leon Hall from Mound Bayou. Hall also helped mobilize the Poor People's Campaign's Southern Caravan, which left from Edwards, Mississippi.[38]

These organizers created a sudden burst of activity. On May 1, 1968, the Black principal of Quitman County Industrial High School, Madison Shannon Palmer, called the sheriff to arrest Bolden and his cohort for "disturbing the peace and trespassing on school property."[39] Bolden had met with the principal and the school's superintendent, Cecil Sharp, the day before asking for permission to use school grounds for meetings and as a campsite. Palmer and Sharp sternly said "no," because they believed that such demonstrations would disrupt students' learning process. Bolden defied Palmer and Sharp and went to the high school the next day. Expecting the support of many students, he walked onto school grounds around noon to have a lunch hour meeting. Eventually, Bolden and his cohort went to the auditorium to sign up students for the Poor People's Campaign. Hundreds of willing students formed a crowd around the activists eagerly signing up to go to Washington. Word reached Principal Palmer, an intimidating man who, according to one Marks resident, stood tall at 6'6" and wielded a paddle for disobedient students with the words "Board of Education" written

[36] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 36.

[37] Lillie V. Davis, in "Mule Train Story (Marks MS)," Vimeo Video, 9:55, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100. The Black community in Marks created this documentary in 2015 through a grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council. Unfortunately, many of the participants interviewed in this documentary have since passed away.

[38] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 36.

[39] Vincent Lee, "Marks Peaceful After Brief Outburst," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 2, 1968.

on it. Palmer, however, did not intimidate the seasoned civil rights activists, who repeatedly refused to leave the school and eventually the sheriff, L. V. Harrison, "literally arrested [Bolden] while he was in the middle of talking."[40]

Students and teachers responded to the arrest by marching to the jailhouse for a sit-in until the deputies released Bolden. Presumably, Andrew Marrisette led the march, and five other SCLC organizers followed.[41] The students, however, wanted to march as well. According to one student, Samuel McCray, immediately after Bolden's arrest, students from the auditorium returned to the cafeteria and saw "students [who did not witness Bolden's arrest] . . . refusing to eat . . . tossing food all over the place."[42] Many students ran outside and got in line to march down to the courthouse to protest the arrest. According to Vincent Lee of *The Clarksdale Press Register*, "Thirteen teachers and about a third of the school's 900 pupils participated in the demonstration."[43] The teachers risked losing their jobs and joined the march because, according to Margaret McGlown, "sometime you just have to take a stand, and sometime that stand might mean you have to suffer for it, but . . . something in your heart sometime tells you it's worth suffering for."[44] The students and teachers marched over a mile to the jailhouse singing protest songs, such as "We Shall Overcome" and "We Shall Not be Moved."[45] Meanwhile, the sheriff called state troopers to handle the situation.

A standoff ensued when the protesters reached the jailhouse and met a line of about twenty state troopers wearing riot gear, who then, unprovoked, advanced upon the students. The way the troopers looked in the riot gear and with guns pointed at the students reminded

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[40] Hilliard Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 37-38; Samuel McCray, in "Mule Train Story (Marks, MS)," Vimeo Video, 10:59, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100.

[41] "Poverty: 'We're On Our Way,'" *Newsweek,* May 13, 1968, p. 32; "Marks March has Rugged Start," *Commercial Appeal*, May 2, Folder 1, Box 37, MSMCR.

[42] Samuel McCray, in "Mule Train Story (Marks, MS)," Vimeo Video, 11:55, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100.

[43] Vincent Lee, "Marks Peaceful After Brief Outburst," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 2, 1968, p. 1; Samuel McCray, in "Mule Train Story (Marks, MS)," Vimeo Video, 12:22, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100.

[44] Margaret McGlown, in "Mule Train Story (Marks, MS)," Vimeo Video, 13:45, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100.

[45] Booker Wright, Jr., in "Mule Train Story (Marks, MS)," Vimeo Video, 14:09, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100; Vincent Lee, "Marks Peaceful After Brief Outburst," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 2, 1968, p. 1.

Samuel McCray of World War II movies he had seen on television. To intimidate the protestors, one student, Manuel Killebrew, remembered years later that the state troopers kept "walking right up towards [the protesters] just clicking [their triggers]," and Killebrew thought "a bullet was in the gun."[46] Andrew Marrisette nervously demanded that the local police release Bolden. The police declined and threatened to arrest the six other SCLC organizers, all of whom went peacefully into police custody. After these final arrests, troopers advanced upon the students and began to hit protestors with the butts of their guns. According to Laura Morris, the students waved their hands at the police to not hit them, but the police did and "one young lady had her teeth knocked out."[47] McCray, along with other protesters, had seen demonstrations on television, and they expected the troopers "to use tear gas . . . so when I see them moving across the street, the first thing I did, was something a lot of us, if not most of us, just bowed our head down, lay down on the ground and cover-up." However, tear gas did not go off, and as McCray lay on the ground he "just start[ed] hearing people scream and yelling . . . and so I raised up and there was this guardsman that literally hit me with a gun butt" right between the eyes breaking his glasses.[48] Like others, McCray got up and ran away, but some were not so lucky. For instance, Lydia McKinnon got caught in the action and suffered the most severe injuries of the day. Not every protester nonviolently resisted the blows, as, according to Killebrew, "We had some football players that hit back."[49]

Within minutes, state troopers broke up the demonstration with brute force, causing the protestors to run across the railroad tracks into the other side of town. While many people ran away from the police, some White business owners stood outside of their shops with shotguns aimed at protestors. One White man, Tommy Bullard, fired into the air. Even worse for the protesters, a train came down the tracks preventing them from getting to the safe side of town. One student, the athletic Alexander Mumford, beat the train, but many did not make it and had to resort to hiding between buildings and running along the tracks until the train passed. Dozens, if not hundreds, of protesters,

[46] Manuel Killebrew, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

[47] Laura Morris, in "Mule Train Story (Marks, MS)," Vimeo Video, 16:30, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100.

[48] Samuel McCray, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

[49] Manuel Killebrew, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

had to tend to injuries and two downtown stores had their windows broken.[50]

Many protesters, both students and teachers, received multiple injuries from the police attack; however, the sheriff said, "Nobody was seriously hurt."[51] Nobody received life-threatening injuries; however, the police still knocked people unconscious, broke their limbs, and bloodied and bruised them. Across the tracks, local SCLC activist Bertha Burres Johnson helped set up a temporary infirmary for people injured in the police attack.[52] Despite the many injuries sustained by protestors, the press only reported two people injured: Lydia McKinnon and a student, Halen Carthan. McKinnon had severe bruises and cuts all around her body, including her face. The papers reported on her bruised forehead, but she also most likely sustained a concussion. Carthan suffered from stomach pains, and the newspapers dismissed her injuries as insignificant. The next day, the newspapers also reported a possible miscarriage and then dismissed the claims. However, because most people went to the infirmary and not professional hospitals, the newspapers downplayed the number and severity of injuries, only reporting the most severe cases.[53]

In their attempt to reinforce the power structure through brute force, local police and state troopers caused a significant reaction in the Black community. Seeing so many people beaten, along with the death of Dr. King, represented the breaking point for many people. According to Bertha Johnson, "They decided that they wanted their freedom and they wanted it now."[54] Black townspeople channeled their anger by immediately marching again. Later that night, SCLC activists Leon Hall and Reverend L. C. Coleman organized another, much smaller, march at the Eudora Church consisting of "about 250 people."[55] The

[50] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 48-49; Vincent Lee, "Mule Train Leaves Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 9, 1968.

[51] "Seven Freed from Jail at Marks," *Memphis Press-Scimitar,* May 2, 1968, Folder 5, Box 36, MSMCR.

[52] Samuel McCray, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018; McCray says Bertha Burres, assumed to be Bertha Johnson.

[53] Vincent Lee, "Marks Peaceful After Brief Outburst," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 2, 1968; "Marks March has Rugged Start," *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis TN), May 2, 1968, Folder 1, Box 37, MSMCR; Vincent Lee and Curtis Wilkie, "Negroes Boycott Classes, March Again at Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 3, 1968.

[54] "Interview with Bertha Johnson Luster," in *The Mule Train*, 114.

[55] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 50; "Seven Freed from Jail at Marks," *Memphis Press-Scimitar,* May 2, 1968, Folder 5, Box 36, MSMCR.

marchers left the SCLC headquarters on Third Street and headed down to the courthouse. This time police did not bother the marchers and allowed them to sing and pray on the courthouse lawn.

Meanwhile, in Memphis, Ralph Abernathy and other SCLC leaders heard about the earlier student protest, immediately bailed out Bolden and the six others, and made plans to lead a large-scale march the next day. The news reached Abernathy while he was giving a late-night speech with Coretta Scott King at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, where King gave his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. Conveniently, Abernathy and many Memphians already had planned weeks before to take buses down to Marks the next day regardless. The trip to Marks took place after the kickoff for the Poor People's Campaign and a memorial service for Martin Luther King Jr. at the place of his assassination, the Lorraine Motel, at 10 a.m. on May 2. At the memorial service, SCLC placed a golden star at the spot where King died and a large marble memorial stone out front. Mrs. King did not join the caravan to Marks, but three hundred Memphians and SCLC staffers, including James Bevel, Hosea Williams, and Anthony Young, did.[56]

All and all, thousands of people marched onto the courthouse lawn in a triumphant nonviolent march. However, the large number of police officers present in Marks scared many of the Memphis marchers, with one passenger commenting right before they got off the bus, "I hope I don't get shot down here."[57] The buses arrived at Eudora Church around 5 p.m. on May 2, where an impromptu rally began, with an estimated one thousand in attendance.[58] However, Abernathy counted as many as "3,000 as they marched toward the courthouse."[59] The police did not resort to violence because of the national media's presence at the march. However, one White man, Thomas L. Davis,

[56] "Seven Freed from Jail at Marks," *Memphis Press-Scimitar,* May 2, 1968, Folder 5, Box 36, MSMCR; Wright, "The 1968 Poor People's Campaign," 118; Gregory Jaynes, "Poor People's March Tales Emotion-Charged First Step," *Commercial Appeal,* May 2, 1968, Folder 1, Box 37, MSMCR; *What Will Become of His Dreams? Excerpts from a Service in Which a Marker was dedicated to the Memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. and in which the Poor People's Campaign March to Washington was Begun* (Memphis: Southern Christian Leadership Conference, May 2, 1968), Item 2, Folder 31, Box 6, MSMCR.

[57] Gregory Jaynes, "Marks Stopover May be Longer," *Commercial Appeal,* May 3, 1968, Folder 1, Box 37, MSMCR.

[58] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train*, 54.

[59] Vincent Lee and Curtis Wilkie, "Negroes Boycott Classes, March Again at Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 3, 1968.

fired a 22-caliber bullet at the CBS helicopter, hitting it and causing it to make an emergency landing.[60] At the courthouse, A. D. King, Martin Luther King's brother, spoke first at the rally, introducing Abernathy as "our new dreamer."[61] Then Abernathy spoke, calling for wealth redistribution, demanding "that the rich share with the poor and" inviting "poor whites of Marks to join the march." During the speech, Abernathy looked up and saw the inscription on the courthouse façade. Immediately after, he answered, "Obedience to poverty is injustice."[62]

Tent City: A Prelude to Resurrection City

After this final march on the courthouse grounds, all the organizers, protesters, and media personnel needed a place to stay for the coming weeks as the community prepared for the Poor People's Campaign. SCLC responded by creating "Tent City" on May 4, which provided housing and safety for activists throughout the campaign. SCLC originally came into Marks on May 2, expecting the local government to have already erected tents. Abernathy and SCLC previously agreed with White officials to set aside a vacant industrial lot on the south side of town, approximately forty-four acres in size. During the speech at the courthouse that night, Abernathy accused Marks's officials of breaching their agreement. He threatened to violate the racial status quo, stating, "When we have to use restrooms, we'll come down here to the courthouse."[63] Trying to prevent negative press coverage, Mayor Howard C. Langford explained to the press that he did not know which spot the protestors chose until 2:30 p.m. and that he planned to set up the tents as soon as possible.[64]

This possibility of negative press coverage caused White officials in Marks "to permit the visitors to erect large circus-type tents on city property" the next day on May 3.[65] The city gave protestors the site to

[60] "'Copter is Target for Rifle Bullet," *Commercial Appeal,* May 3, 1968, Folder 1, Box 37, MSMCR; "'Poor People' Study Tactics," *Commercial Appeal,* May 4, 1968, 10, Folder 1, Box 37, MSMCR.

[61] Vincent Lee and Curtis Wilkie, "Negroes Boycott Classes, March Again at Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 3, 1968.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Walter Rugaber, "March in Mississippi," *New York Times,* May 3, 1968.

[65] "Walter Rugaber, "Mississippi Mayor Backs Goals of March of Poor," *New York Times,* May 4, 1968.

set up the campsite and also provided "electricity, running water, and chemical toilets" along with "an office with free Cokes for the press."[66] According to both *Newsweek* and *The New York Times,* this very uncharacteristic goodwill gesture came out of the fear "at thus being held up as a bad example," and the White power structure also hoped to make the activists leave town faster en route to Washington. Mayor Langford even partially endorsed the campaign saying that he agreed with "the goals of the campaign but not the methods."[67] Not every local White person agreed with Langford's accommodating the activists, and many tried to push him "to declare a curfew."[68] The situation put so heavy a strain on Langford that he went three days straight without seeing his wife and eventually was "ordered to bed by his physician."[69]

Although other civil rights campaigns employed the tactic of erecting tent cities, the one in Marks also served as a positive precursor to Resurrection City in Washington, D.C., with educational opportunities and community-building activities. On the first day of Tent City, over two hundred people from Memphis alone attended lectures given by James Bevel on several topics, such as economics, political science, and philosophy.[70] At one point throughout the next week, Bevel told his students, "I'm going to show you how a lion lives in the jungle," and proceeded to instruct them on how to go door-to-door in the Black community to ask if they could take a bath in their home. This tactic served the purpose of bathing for the outside activists from Memphis while also encouraging their kind hosts to return just a few hours later to recruit for an upcoming mass action the next day.[71] Other educational opportunities existed as heavyweights of the civil rights movement came to Marks to speak, including SCLC people like Abernathy, Hosea Williams, and Andrew Young and controversial figures like Stokely Carmichael.[72] While Tent City provided educational opportunities for some, it brought a chance to leave a dreary life momentarily. James

[66] "Poverty: 'We're On Our Way,'" *Newsweek,* May 13, 1968, p. 32.

[67] Ibid; Wright, "1968 Poor People's Campaign, Marks, Mississippi, and the Mule Train," 120.

[68] Walter Rugaber, "Mississippi Mayor Backs Goals of March of Poor," *New York Times,* May 4, 1968.

[69] "'Poor People's Study Tactics," *Commercial Appeal,* May 4, 1968, Folder 1, Box 37, MSMCR.

[70] Ibid.

[71] "Washing Time in Marks Finds Drive on Doors," *Commercial Appeal,* May 5, 1968, Folder 1, Box 37, MSMCR.

[72] Samuel McCray, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

Taper, a teenager at the time, remembered being able to eat more at the campsite than at home. Others, like Alexander Mumford's family, brought fresh food from their farm. In these various ways, Tent City helped bring the Black community closer together and provided for the needs of the poor.[73]

Conveniently, Tent City probably provided the only educational opportunities for African Americans in Quitman County during the protests. The all-Black schools closed as both the students and teachers went on strike after the student walk-out. Superintendent Cecil Sharp "said that the school was not closed by any official directive, but because no teachers or students showed up for classes."[74] In other words, the schools technically remained open, but the strong solidarity among Black teachers and students kept the schools closed while the community prepared for the Poor People's Campaign. According to Samuel McCray, graduation did not happen that year, and he did not even receive his diploma until 2018. Instead, they had summer school, the first time McCray recalled the school ever doing so.[75] The Poor People's Campaign even affected White schools, as attendance there dropped by about half. Sharp, however, attributed the drop to the tense racial situation in Marks as Whites, for the most part, did not participate in the movement, and the presence of activists likely kept rural Whites away from town. After a week of local protests, the school did not fire any teachers, and they returned to work by Friday, May 10.[76]

On the Way to Washington, By Greyhound and Mule

Tent City prepared participants for their time in Resurrection City, but the travel to Washington, D.C. also proved to be a learning experience. Most African Americans in the Mississippi Delta rarely got the opportunity to travel for reasons other than economic necessity (and in many ways joining the Poor People's Campaign still represented an economic necessity.) Activists left Marks either by the "Freedom Train"

[73] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 60.

[74] Vincent Lee and Curtis Wilkie, "Negroes Boycott Classes, March Again at Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 3, 1968.

[75] Samuel McCray, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

[76] Vincent Lee, "All-Negro Schools Still Closed in Marks Area," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 6, 1968; Vincent Lee, "Marks Exodus is Underway," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 8, 1968.

or the "Mule Train." The Mule Train idea originated with Dr. King, and local activists carried out his plans in his memory and to demonstrate the poverty that African Americans faced in the Mississippi Delta.[77] Though less dramatic than the Mule Train, the Freedom Train carried far more people from Marks and gave many people different learning opportunities. Initially, James Bevel, who coordinated the Freedom Train, intended it to be a literal train to Washington, but no train company agreed to carry that many people from Marks.[78] Instead, the poor people took ten Greyhound buses to D.C. and then lived in Resurrection City for a month. Although historians who have written about the Poor People's Campaign provide lengthy discussions about the Mule Train, scholars only put the Freedom Train in their narratives' background.[79] Nevertheless, travels along both the Freedom Train and the Mule Train helped participants gain new experience and form social capital.

The Freedom Train presented a unique and exciting opportunity for the poor people of Marks. The Freedom Train carried approximately three hundred and fifty African Americans from Marks on ten double-decked Greyhound buses. People boarded the buses at eight in the morning on Wednesday, May 8, and left Marks by 10:00 a.m. According to one person who rode the Freedom Train, Dafphine Edwards, "We were supposed to have twelve Greyhound buses leaving here that day, for some reason we only had ten." That did not deter her, for she stood in line for hours wanting to be the first person on the first bus because she "was just so excited about going because we've had such a terrible living."[80] So many people boarded the buses that the passengers soon ran out of seats, and many, such as Manuel Killebrew, had to stand for a hundred or so miles until more buses joined the caravan.[81] Occasionally poor mothers brought all their children to Resurrection City because life there would be better—as one historian put it, a "break from

[77] Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 481.

[78] Vincent Lee, "Marks Exodus is Underway," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 8, 1968.

[79] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train;* Freeman, *The Mule Train.*

[80] Dafphine Edwards, in "Mule Train Story (Marks MS)," Vimeo Video, 19:05, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100.

[81] Manuel Killebrew, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

poverty."[82] For example, thirty-nine-year-old Minnie Lee Hills brought her eight children along the Freedom Train. On the other end of the spectrum, some people took the Freedom Train alone, such as Alvin Hamer, a minister from Memphis.[83] Buses played a significant role in the civil rights movement, not only with the Poor People's Campaign but also for the Journey of Reconciliation in 1947 and the Freedom Rides in 1961. Buses typically brought people together from widely different backgrounds.

Through the very act of leaving the Mississippi Delta, residents learned more about the United States, racism, and poverty. The buses first drove to Memphis, where the riders "were fed sandwiches and cupcakes by representatives of the Committee on the Move for Equality (COME) and Women on the Move for Equality Now (WOMEN)."[84] After Memphis, the Freedom Train stopped in Nashville, Tennessee. Manuel Killebrew remembered spending the first night in Nashville "at the Coliseum," where large numbers of friendly White people handed out food to the protestors. Throughout the rest of the stops, from Nashville through Knoxville and all through North Carolina and Virginia, White people assisted and cheered on the Freedom Train. This experience made Killebrew, and most likely others, "change my mind about peoples [sic], and I found out that not everybody's the same."[85] Others, like Margaret Henley, just found the experience fascinating and enlightening. Years later, Henley fondly remembered stopping and seeing each city and their churches, commenting, "It was really like learning [sic] experience for me."[86] All in all, the mere fact of traveling to Washington D.C. impacted the trajectory of these people's lives, showing them the world outside of Mississippi, introducing them to new people, and allowing them to testify to the government and the rest of the nation about their terrible poverty.

The Mule Train, which left five days after the Freedom Train,

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[82] Wright, "Labour, Leisure, Poverty and Protest: The 1968 Poor People's Campaign as a Case Study," *Leisure Studies* 27, no.4 (October 2008), 448.

[83] Poor People's Campaign Registration Cards, 1968, Folder 29, Box 572, SCLC Records.

[84] "Marks March is Gathering Steam," *Commercial Appeal,* May 9, 1968, 18, Item 1, Folder 30, Box 6, MSMCR.

[85] Manuel Killebrew, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

[86] Margaret Henley, in "Mule Train Story (Marks, MS)," Vimeo Video, 21:08, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100; Nathan Chambers, in "Mule Train Story (Marks, MS)," Vimeo Video, 21:21, posted January 16, 2017, https://vimeo.com/199758100..

presented a unique experience for many Poor People's Campaign protesters. Unlike the Freedom Train participants, who lived in Resurrection City, people aboard the Mule Train usually did not testify before Congress or spend a significant time in Washington, D.C. However, the Mule Train garnered much more media coverage than the Freedom Train and reminded the nation of the broken promise to African Americans of forty acres and a mule following emancipation. The focus on the forty acres and a mule juxtaposed against the images of poverty in the Mississippi Delta underscored the centrality of economic justice to the Poor People's Campaign.

Riders of the Mule Train had experiences similar to those of the Freedom Train, but they did not have as many chances to build social networks. The Mule Train left Marks for Atlanta on May 13, expecting to board a train to Washington. The entire trip took over a month because of challenges its riders had to overcome, such as the agonizingly slow speed at which mules moved and continued violent attacks against the participants. Delta author William Faulkner described the mule experience in his novel, *Light in August,* saying, "Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress."[87] The Mule Train moved only tens of miles per day and frequently broke down, certainly teaching those onboard patience. The Mule Train broke down on its first day out of Marks on its way to Batesville.[88] The slow pace made threats directed at the team of wagons worse. James Taper remembered "hearing the dreadful whine of a bullet before the sound of gunfire" as passing motorists fired several rounds into the teams of wagons without hitting anyone.[89] The walk proved especially hard on the mules, and at one point, wagon master Willie Bolden openly thought of shipping them by truck to the Alabama border. Nevertheless, the mules held up, and the train lost only one wagon throughout the whole trip.[90]

The Mule Train's final hurdle came on June 13, when Georgia Governor Lester Maddox ordered state troopers to arrest every adult on the train for blocking Interstate 20. Police initially arrested the

[87] William Faulkner, *Light in August,* introduction by Cleanth Brooks (1932; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 1968), 4.

[88] Vincent Lee, "Mule Train Washington–Bound," *Clarksdale Press Register,* May 14, 1968.

[89] Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 84.

[90] George Metz, "Hoof-Sore Already: Mule Train Limps Off, Bound for Alabama," *Birmingham News,* May 14, 1968.

children too, but eventually let them stay with their parents. Georgia law prohibited pedestrians and non-motorized vehicles from traveling on the highway, and Maddox, known for obscene and racist comments, jumped on the opportunity to block the Mule Train. However, Maddox said he ordered the arrest of activists to "protect their own safety and welfare, as well as the safety of motorists."[91] Bolden doubted the altruism of Maddox because Mississippi and Alabama had allowed the Mule Train to travel on interstates. Governor Maddox also offered to haul the train to Atlanta on flatbed trucks, but SCLC refused the offer. All of the people on the Mule Train "were taken to a National Guard armory where a state patrolman filled out warrants."[92] Meanwhile, the wagons lay on the side of the road with the mules tied to a nearby fence. Willie Bolden worked out a deal with Douglas County Sheriff Claude Abercrombie, which allowed the Mule Train "to travel along the emergency lane of Interstate 20." The Mule Train did that for the next day until it reached Atlanta. From Atlanta, the Mule Train passengers boarded trains to Washington, D.C. and arrived in Resurrection City just in time for the Solidarity Day festivities.[93]

By the time the Mule Train rolled into Resurrection City, the enthusiasm for the campaign had waned because the federal government largely had ignored their demands, and grassroots activists had become disillusioned with SCLC. At its height, Resurrection City had a population of approximately 3,000 people and even had a zip code, but by Solidarity Day, only three hundred protestors remained. Nonetheless, protesting poverty on SCLC's dime allowed the poor people from Marks to take a momentary break from poverty. On May 13, Minnie Lee Hills and eight of her children had the privilege of being the first family to move in. She also had five other children die before the Poor People's Campaign, perhaps from the lack of adequate food and health care. Minnie Lee Hills's only form of subsistence came from her husband's monthly income of $155, which he earned as a city employee. Although SCLC turned the move-in into a moment of grand celebration, SCLC did not allow Hills to speak to the press. Instead, Abernathy gave a speech to commemorate the moment. Despite the fanfare around the Hills's move in, most protestors could not move into

[91] "Georgia Yields on March Mule Train," *Washington Post,* June 15, 1968.

[92] Don McKee, "Mule Train Halted Just Outside Atlanta," *Clarksdale Press Register,* June 14, 1968.

[93] "Georgia Yields on March Mule Train," *Washington Post,* June 15, 1968.

Resurrection City until the next day.[94]

Despite troubles with the campaign, some positive experiences came from life in Resurrection City. For instance, interactions between peoples of different backgrounds occurred every day, providing opportunities for developing social capital through the intersection and expansion of worldviews. Manuel Killebrew had life-changing experiences when kind Whites in Washington invited him and other protestors into their home for supper and a night's rest. Already stunned from the sight of kind Whites, Killebrew spent weekends with some families who gave him much-needed clothes and life advice. Killebrew noted the excellent living conditions of both Whites and Blacks who told him that if he and his friends wanted to succeed in life, they needed "to go back and make sure we finished school."[95] Nonetheless, very few people, including Killebrew, remained in Resurrection City long enough to see its end. The Mule Train never got the opportunity to enter Resurrection City because it entered Washington the day after bulldozers demolished the shantytown. The shantytown only stood for five days after Solidarity Day. The police evicted the protestors with tear gas and billy clubs. With little legislation accomplished, most historians labeled the campaign as a failure.

Success Through Failure: Coming Back from Resurrection City

In this instance, success in the long term came from short-term failures, which transformed and taught individuals important skills. To view the Poor People's Campaign as a failure oversimplifies both the campaign and the notion of failure. The Poor People's Campaign represented an embarrassing failure for SCLC, one that damaged its reputation for years to come. Nevertheless, for grassroots activists and oppressed peoples, who had never participated in activism, the campaign represented the moment Marks's Black community united to attack the racial hierarchy. In doing so, the protests transformed the participants' lives. The African American community in Quitman County still commemorates the Poor People's Campaign, not because of the national press coverage it brought to the area or because of Dr.

[94] Fager, *Uncertain Resurrection,* 35; Poor People's Campaign Registration Cards, 1968, Folder 29, Box 572, MSS 1083, SCLC Records.

[95] Manuel Killebrew, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

King's influence, but because the campaign changed the trajectory of many lives and began to shift the local power structure. Although the Mississippi Delta's socio-economic conditions did not improve, these people used the education, experiences, and social capital they gained in the Poor People's Campaign to take political power in their local and regional governments.

After the Poor People's Campaign, African Americans in Marks became disillusioned with SCLC and formed local political organizations. By September of 1969, the Quitman County Youth Movement (QCYM) formed as an extension of the local SCLC project there. The Quitman County Action Committee (QCAC) led QCYM and included many of the Mule Train organizers, such as Reverend L. C. Coleman, Bertha Burress, and Evon Richmond. Most other members of QCAC, such as Robert Morris, came from either the Freedom Train, the student movement, or both.[96] On September 13, QCYM sent a passive-aggressive plea directly to Ralph Abernathy for assistance. The letter made it clear that QCYM had attempted to reach Abernathy multiple times before, saying, "We have kindly corresponded to your office seeking your help, but there has been no response . . . We are willing . . . to make Dr. King's dream a reality if you would only co-operate with us."[97] QCYM also informed Abernathy about their upcoming convention, with speakers from all over the country to present on poverty or Black Power. Despite being an extension of SCLC, QCYM members felt they needed to invite SCLC to attend, revealing that SCLC, for the most part, had abandoned its Marks project. Someone, perhaps Rev. L. C. Coleman or Leo Martinez, took the invitation and handwrote to Abernathy, "[H]ave you forgotten about our staff and poor in Marks . . .?"[98] There is no indication in the historical record that Abernathy ever responded to these letters.

Although SCLC practically forgot about poor people in Marks, they did not forget their lessons learned from the Poor People's Campaign. Although material conditions did not improve in Marks, massive changes to the racial power structure occurred over the next thirty years. African Americans in Quitman County continued to protest and

[96] Quitman County Action Committee, 1969, Folder 13, Box 64, MSS 1083, SCLC Records.

[97] Quitman County Youth Movement to Ralph Abernathy, September 13, 1969, Folder 13, Box 64, MSS 1083, SCLC Records.

[98] Local SCLC Youth Convention, September 12, 1969, Folder 13, Box 64, MSS 1083, SCLC Records.

advocate for their rights. For instance, James Figgs, who participated in the student protests and lived in Resurrection City, held leadership positions in both the Quitman County Democratic Party and the NAACP throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[99] The Black community took some control of education in their county, when in 1978, for the first time, Quitman County elected a Black majority to the school board. This electoral victory preceded several African Americans' election to prominent local government positions throughout the 1980s.

A shift occurred in Quitman County politics and race relations throughout the 1980s as more and more African Americans won county seats. At the beginning of the 1980s, when Killebrew first ran for office, politics in Quitman County was "black versus white," with Black candidates mostly receiving the African American vote and Whites receiving the White vote. However, as the decade bore on, many Whites started to support African American candidates. For example, when Killebrew ran for reelection in 1988, he was unopposed. When he ran again four years later, he soundly defeated his White opponent. As a supervisor, Killebrew made sure that the majority-Black community college, Coahoma (located in Clarksdale), and the majority-White community college, Northwest (located in Senatobia), received equal funding from the county government. After Killebrew, other Black officials slowly began to replace White government appointees as they retired or quit. Usually, Black officials did not fire White appointees, and in fact, Killebrew kept some White officials and helped them improve their work and themselves.

Jimmie Holman's path to become the first Black mayor of Marks mirrored that of Killebrew. In 1983, the same year Killebrew won his first election, Holman ran for supervisor of Beat 3 but lost to James H. Reed in the Democratic primary.[100] In 1987, the incumbent, Mayor L. J. Vincent, decided not to seek reelection. Holman defeated a tough primary challenge from Lee Lundy, and in the general election, "Holman edged Independent candidate Jimmy McArthur by a 20-

[99] Ben Pryor, "Marks School's Failure to Change Sex Segregation by Suit," *Clarksdale Press Register,* October 19, 1977, p. 1; Connie White, "Most Quitman Demo Delegates Fail to File Important 'Card,'" *Clarksdale Press Register,* April 3, 1980, p. 1.

[100] "Harrison Faces Runoff for Sheriff," *Clarksdale Press Register,* August 13, 1983, p. 2.

vote margin, 400-380."[101] Both Lundy and McArthur (who then joined the Republican Party) again challenged Holman for office in 1989 but lost.[102] Holman remained in office until he lost a reelection bid in 1993 against Dwight "Figgs" Barfield. Barfield, an African American, became the youngest mayor in Mississippi and won reelection against Holman in 1997.[103]

As more African Americans became officials in Quitman County, they worked towards two primary goals. First and foremost, to try and improve the socio-economic conditions within the county. Unfortunately, in Quitman County, and throughout most of the Mississippi Delta, socio-economic conditions have not significantly improved since the 1960s. However, the Poor People's Campaign probably could not have changed the deeper historical currents behind rural poverty, such as mechanization and the resulting emigration to urban areas. Officials, both Black and White, in Quitman County continue to struggle to find ways to bring capital to the poor county. In the 2010s, Quitman County officials scored a significant victory when Amtrak agreed to build a station in Marks as part of "its 'City of New Orleans' route between Chicago and New Orleans," popularized by the Arlo Guthrie's song of the same name. Quitman County officials also tried to bring tourists to the county by showcasing the birth sites of music legends Charley Pride and John Lee Hooker.[104]

Another effort to promote tourism characterizes the second goal of the officials in Quitman County—memorializing the Poor People's Campaign. Black officials found allies among their White counterparts, who now viewed the commemoration of the Mule Train "as a source of economic opportunity."[105] In an editorial, Hilliard Lackey connected the rise in Black leadership with the celebration of the Poor People's Campaign, noting, "Concurrent with recent rise to leadership of homegrown black elected officials has been observance of the 50th

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[101] "Holman is Marks's First Black Mayor," *Clarksdale Press Register,* April 8, 1987, p. 1; Ray Mosby, "Elections in Marks and Tutwiler: Also Runoff for District 30 Seat," *Clarksdale Press Register,* April 4, 1987, p. 1.

[102] "4 Challenge Holman for Mayor in Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* April 10, 1989, p. 1.

[103] "Barfield New Mayor in Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* June 10, 1993, p. 1; "Vote," *Clarksdale Press Register,* June 4, 1997, p. 2.

[104] *Quitman County Mississippi: Civil Rights, Civil War, Music Legends, All in One Place,* (Jackson MS: Visit Mississippi, n.d.), 19.

[105] Bennie G. Thompson, "Foreword," in *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train,* 14.

Anniversary Poor People's Campaign." Signs greet visitors entering Marks saying, "Welcome to Marks Home of the Mule Train." Historical markers are scattered throughout the town commemorating the churches and neighborhoods where Martin Luther King visited and cried, the high school where students walked out, the courthouse lawn where protestors and police clashed, and the grassy lot where Tent City stood. Local leaders even hope to open a Mule Train Interpretive Center. Although to outsiders these markers may seem to romanticize a failed campaign, they demonstrate the reverence that Marks has for the day (as Martin Luther King said of Birmingham) they "decided to straighten their backs up . . . because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent."[106] The Poor People's Campaign and Marks demonstrate that, although a protest may not achieve legislative goals, the protestors still gained from the experience of protesting.

Perhaps no story represents this transformation, as well as Manuel Killebrew's struggle to become a county supervisor. After returning home from Resurrection City, Killebrew took the advice of many people that he met along the way to Resurrection City and finished high school. Afterward, he earned an associate degree in elementary education at Coahoma Community College in Clarksdale. Then he changed majors and received a bachelor's degree in industrial arts from Jackson State University. After college, Killebrew worked as a bus driver until he encountered a high school friend, Sylvester Reed, who pushed Killebrew into politics. Right out of high school, Reed had run for alderman in the small town of Crenshaw, Mississippi, just sixteen miles north of Marks on the border of both Quitman and Panola counties. Reed lost and went to college at Jackson State for a few years. While there, Reed and Killebrew became close friends because they happened to live in the same apartment building. Afterward, Reed moved back to Crenshaw and ran for county supervisor. Killebrew "helped him to campaign." Reed also encouraged Killebrew to go into politics, but Killebrew declined because he did not think of himself as a politician. Reed won the election, but White officials in the county prevented him from serving his term right away, and he had to sue to be seated on the board. Reed won reelection but again faced the process of opposition and legal battles to serve his term. According to

[106] Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968, in "*All Labor Has Dignity,*" edited with introductions by Michael K. Honey (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 194.

Killebrew, "[Reed] never did serve a full term."[107] Manuel Killebrew finally took Reed's advice to run for office. While helping Reed with his campaigns, Killebrew worked as general manager and vice president of a funeral home, Delta Burial Corporation, and as a schoolteacher in Quitman County.[108] With his election in 1983, Killebrew completed his rise from bus driver to county supervisor.

As Killebrew's story demonstrates, the Black community in Marks went through many trials and tribulations, learning each time they overcame challenges. Killebrew does not represent an anomaly because many other people who participated in the campaign later became community leaders. For example, Samuel McCray became a noteworthy local activist, working as social services coordinator for Coahoma Opportunities Inc. (a War on Poverty program) and as a field organizer for U.S. Representative Bennie Thompson. McCray focused his coordinating efforts to help the poor and frequently spoke about new economic initiatives.[109] With the Poor People's Campaign, Marks's Black community started to overcome decades of oppression under the White power structure and to take a firm stand, as a community, against poverty. Although teachers and students did not attend classes for a week during the campaign, they learned about poverty and protesting through workshops. Many continued to miss school but still learned by visiting cities and interacting with locals on the way to Washington, D.C. This experience changed the worldviews of many on the Freedom Train and the Mule Train, challenging their views on race and poverty and also the views of the people who watched the trains pass by.

[107] Manuel Killebrew, interview by author, Marks, Mississippi, July 30, 2018.

[108] "Delta Burial Corp. Held Its 53rd Anniversary Recently at Marks," *Clarksdale Press Register,* January 23, 1979; "Delta Burial Officers are Elected," *Clarksdale Press Register,* March 1, 1983; Bill Minor, "Pittman Undercuts Ethics Panel," *The Greenwood Commonwealth,* November 25, 1985.

[109] "COI to Co-sponsor Forum," *Clarksdale Press Register,* October 27, 1981, p. 2; Roshella Cole, "Glendora Celebrates Housing," *Charleston Sun-Sentinel* (M.S.), September 7, 1995, p. 1; David Healy, "Marks Gets New Center: Volunteer Efforts Pay Off Citizens," *Clarksdale Press Register,* September 9, 2004, p. 1.