

Civil Rights and the Transformation from Tenant to Mechanized Agriculture

Black Belt counties in the rural South became battlegrounds over voting rights during the 1950s and 1960s

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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On Christmas night 1951 in Mims, Florida, sticks of planted dynamite exploded underneath the home of veteran organizers for the NAACP and the Progressive Voters League (PVL) resulting in the deaths of Harry T. Moore that same evening enroute to the hospital and his wife of 25 years, Harriet V.S. Moore, on January 3, 1952.

The Moore family were representative of the persistent struggle of African Americans in the South extending from the 1930s to the early 1950s.

Although declassified FBI documents revealed decades later that the federal government and local authorities knew that the Ku Klux Klan had carried out the assassinations of these two leaders, yet nothing was done to bring the perpetrators to justice. This same pattern of official complicity in the terror inflicted against African Americans would continue throughout this important decade of the 1950s. (See [this](#))

Just three-and-one-half years later in the state of Mississippi, a series of murders would prove pivotal in the eruption of the mass Civil Rights Movement beginning in 1955. Two African American leaders in Mississippi, Rev. George Lee of Humphreys County and Lamar Smith of Brookhaven, were assassinated on May 7 and August 13 respectively.

Lee was a leader of the NAACP in his area while Smith was affiliated with the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) formed in 1952. Both Lee and Smith were organizing Black people to vote in the Jim Crow era Mississippi where the White Citizens Council and the Ku Klux Klan were committed to suppressing the democratic rights of African Americans. (See [this](#))

During late August 1955, in Money, Mississippi, 14-year-old Emmett Till of Chicago was kidnapped and brutally lynched after being falsely accused of making inappropriate comments to the wife of a white landowner and merchant. Till's murder gained international attention after his mother demanded the arrest and prosecution of her son's killers. After a show trial, both killers were exonerated by an all-white jury.

These acts of racial terror enhanced the already burgeoning militancy among the African American people in the post-World War II period. Later in December, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began which lasted for one year leading to a landmark Supreme Court decision striking down the segregation laws governing municipal transportation in Alabama. The Montgomery Bus Boycott would catapult Ms. Rosa L. Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. into world renown pioneers in the popular movement for Civil Rights in the United States.

Struggles for Civil Rights and Black Suffrage in Southwest Tennessee (1957-1969)

During the mid-1930s, John D. Rust and his brother Mack D. Rust, two white agricultural workers, inventors and engineers, produced a blueprint for the first practical cotton harvesting machine. The Rust brothers were influenced by socialist ideas and viewed the cotton picking machine as a means to liberating southern farm labor. They would establish a company in Memphis to produce and market their machines. Nonetheless, it would take another three decades for this technology to make significant inroads in the production of cotton. (See [this](#))

The machine would transform the cultivation of cotton throughout the South eliminating the demand for African American farm labor. These changes in the character of production came at a time when African Americans were demanding their civil and human rights. Consequently, in response to the developing struggle for full equality and self-determination, the implementation of the new technology facilitated the undermining of Black labor and the further migration to the urban areas of the South, North and Western regions of the U.S.

Fayette and Haywood County, Tennessee, which bordered the Mississippi Delta, in the 1950s were areas where due to the legacy of African enslavement and Jim Crow, remained populated by a Black majority. Fayette, along with neighboring Haywood and Tipton counties, were major producers and marketers of cotton.

Image: Fayette County Burton Dodson on trial for killing white man 18 years before 1958 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)



After the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which purportedly empowered the U.S. Justice Department to enforce non-discrimination in access to the franchise, people began to organize in Haywood and later Fayette counties. The organizing efforts gained impetus when a former resident of Fayette County, Rev. Burton Dodson (then 78), was extradited from St. Louis, Missouri to Somerville, Tennessee in 1958 to stand trial for second degree murder of a white man participating in a racist mob attempting to lynch him in 1940.

In a timeline published by the University of Memphis it notes that:

“Prominent African American attorney James F. Estes represented Dodson. He was convicted of second-degree murder in April of 1959. Much of the Black community asserted that it was forensically impossible for Dodson to have committed the murder. The trial sparked interest with the Black citizens to register to vote and serve on juries. Attorney James F. Estes, with ties to the Memphis NAACP, spurred action for civil rights in both Haywood and Fayette Counties by assisting and/or recruiting local leaders to organize and register Blacks to vote. Estes works with Haywood County civil rights activist Currie Boyd to establish a ‘Civic League’ in Haywood. When McFerren (Viola and Charles) and Jameson (Harpson and Minnie) attended the trial of Burton Dodson, Estes seized the opportunity to encourage them to organize Blacks to register to vote in Fayette County. Understanding both the political and legal process as well as the power of the media, Estes, in December 1959, obtains affidavits from Blacks in Fayette and Haywood Counties where they make sworn statements that they have been denied their constitutional right to vote by local whites. In February, the Civil Rights Commission investigated Fayette Voter registration books. Later, in June and July of 1959, Black citizens lined up in Fayette County to register to vote. This is the beginning of a registration drive that will turn the county upside down. Black voters were blocked from voting in the Fayette County Democratic Primary. White party officials claim that primary elections are not covered under the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and that the party has the right to deny any citizen the ability to vote in the party’s primary.”

However, by 1960, through the legal actions of local activists, the Justice Department and the Federal Courts backed the claims made by African Americans that they did have the right to vote in these counties. Over the course of several months, African Americans began to register to vote in Fayette County. In retaliation, white landowners and businesspeople initiated an economic boycott against African Americans who registered. Whole families were evicted from the land they had farmed for generations. The white ruling interests refused to sell food, household supplies, gasoline, medical services, pharmaceuticals and

other essentials to African Americans.

The mass evictions in 1960-61 created a Tent City in Fayette and Haywood counties where over one thousand families lived until 1962. The economic boycott of African American sharecroppers, tenant farmers and independent small landowners gained national attention prompting material assistance from northern-based labor unions and social justice organizations to the Tent cities, later called “Freedom Villages”, which sustained the people until the crisis was mitigated.

By the spring 1964, dozens of student volunteers travelled to Fayette County to assist in a mass voter registration drive and the organization of an election campaign which challenged the legacy of segregation in Southwest Tennessee. The bulk of the youth volunteers were from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. These students lived with African American families involved in the Civil Rights Movement and were subjected to arbitrary arrests and racist violence alongside the local people residing in the rural and small-town areas of Fayette County. Their efforts were carried out under the West Tennessee Voters Project (WTVP) which established an office in Somerville while working alongside the Fayette County Civil and Welfare League founded in 1959 by John McFerren and Viola McFerren, Harpson and Minnie Jameson, among others.

Two candidates, one African American named Rev. J.W. Dowdy and a liberal white farmer, L.T. Redfearn sought to be elected to the offices of Sheriff and Tax Assessor. Even though they did not prevail due to the illegal voter suppression and irregularities, it provided the political strength for the community to take further actions.

The following year in 1965, the mass struggle for Civil Rights expanded into neighboring Tipton and Haywood counties. To break the remaining vestiges of segregation still in practice despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sit-ins and boycotts were carried out by the African American youth and their adult counterparts. (See [this](#))

A series of actions labelled “Freedom Week” witnessed sit-ins and mass arrests in Covington in Tipton County beginning on July 19. A mass demonstration demanding a unitary non-segregated public school system occurred on July 24, 1965 in Covington, marching from the town square to the headquarters of the Tipton County School Board. The march mobilized 1,500-2,000 people from Tipton, Haywood and Fayette counties. During the following week, African American youth under the leadership of the Tipton and Fayette County Student Unions organized a strike against the segregated schools which was successful for several weeks until economic pressure forced many families off their tenant farms and out of their places of employment controlled by whites.

Federal lawsuits against the county school boards led to a four-year legal battle which resulted in the imposition of federal consent decrees mandating the integration of the public schools and the elimination of split sessions for African Americans, where their time in the classrooms was centered around the planting and harvesting of cotton. (See [this](#))

Implications of the Defeat of Legalized Segregation in Rural and Urban Areas

During the spring and summer of 1965, efforts aimed at forming Freedom Labor Unions took place in the Mississippi Delta and in Southwest Tennessee. In several Mississippi counties, African American agricultural workers refused to go to the fields to harvest cotton demanding pay increases and improved conditions of employment.

In August 1965, the founding meeting of the Tennessee Freedom Labor Union (TFLU) was held in Fayette County. The organization, which was heavily influenced by the WTVF, brought together farmers and agricultural workers from Fayette, Haywood, Tipton and Hardeman Counties. (See [this](#))

However, the rapid mechanization of cotton production coinciding with the repressive apparatus of the local landowners and capitalists, curtailed the potential for organizing tenant farmers, sharecroppers and agricultural laborers. The rapid population influx into the urban areas and the institutional racism and economic exploitation African Americans were subjected to sparked urban rebellions throughout the U.S. in more than 200 municipalities from 1963-1970.

By 1966, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), headed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), then chaired by Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture), were compelled to focus their organizing efforts in southern and northern urban centers. However, the struggle within rural counties such as Fayette and Haywood would continue utilizing the right to vote and the expanded educational opportunities won through the mass campaigns for Civil Rights.

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Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of the Pan-African News Wire. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: African Americans line up to register to vote in Fayette County Tennessee (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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