



# People in Mississippi

## 1. Trial by Tape Recorder

WILLIAM LEE MILLER

ON SEPTEMBER 27 the citizens of Holmes County, Mississippi, took a vote and told the Coxes and the Minters to get out.

David Minter is a friendly doctor, and the doctor in Holmes County, as elsewhere, is a figure to whom extraordinary deference is given. Mrs. Cox is an able Sunday-school teacher, and Sunday-school teachers in Holmes County rate almost up with doctors. Eugene Cox is a tall, quiet, unassuming man, and Mrs. Minter a friendly, pleasant young woman. Their families abound in missionaries and ministers: their youth was filled with Presbyterian Sunday schools, Y.M.C.A. work, and Methodist student movements; their day begins with family devotions around the breakfast table and toast crumbs on the Bible.

County Attorney Pat Barrett said earnestly of the vote against the Coxes and Minters, "There is nothing personal in this," and J. P. Love, who chaired the meeting at which the vote was taken, talked wistfully about Dr. Minter to the *Presbyterian Outlook*: "I wish he weren't inclined as some think he is. He is well liked personally in the community and a real fine doctor."

### Experiment in Living

The Coxes and Minters came to Mississippi in the late 1930's to help in a new project called the Delta Cooperative Farm up in Bolivar County. The farm brought some dispossessed and poverty-stricken sharecroppers together on a plantation they could own and run themselves. The idea was "realistic religion as a social dynamic," and in the somewhat extravagant language of a promotional pamphlet written in 1936, it was to replace "an outworn economic system by a new one." The *New Republic* carried a lyrical article saying, "It is a social act of strict heroism. Here are men and women—disease-ridden, illiterate, ex-

ploited—conducting one of the most daring, complex, highly civilized experiments in living the Western Hemisphere has known."

The two families would now admit, if Holmes County would listen, that the project in its early days was somewhat overpromoted. The directors were not expert farmers, the problems were immense, and the producers' co-op, far from replacing any outworn economic system, eventually failed.

### Providence and the 'Nigras'

The Delta Farm was sold, and a second farm that had been bought in the meantime, called Providence and located in Holmes County, became the center of the work. Now all that remains of the earlier religious, health, educational, and economic objectives are Dr. Minter's clinic in a reconverted dairy barn, a credit union helping some two hundred Negroes, a small and battered nonprofit store that sells rubber boots and Oxydol to Negroes, summer camps for colored children in a few old buildings on the place, Sunday meetings every fourth week consisting chiefly of religious movies, and some tired and dusty acres for timber and cattle.

"We haven't got much here," says Cox, "except maybe a few principles." Those principles have changed a bit, too. The Coxes and the Minters do not now speak of building any new social orders. They have wanted only to bring unpretentious and unpublicized help to some people in one little part of the Mississippi Delta.

In their present distress they have hoped that Holmes County would reconsider the decision to expel them, and they have tried to avoid the intervention of any national organizations.

Providence Farm is isolated in the country, eight miles from the little town of Tchula (Choola), in the

heavily Negro Delta section of the county, and part of the feeling against it reflects the wary curiosity and suspicion a small town generates for anyone or anything it cannot watch and does not understand: Why don't they grow any cotton or soybeans out there? Where do they get their money? What are they doing at those Sunday meetings? But the most persistent rumors of all stem from the subject most prominent in the county's fears: "They are stirring up the Nigras."

County Attorney Pat Barrett, who says his best friend is a Negro, will sincerely try to make the Northern stranger understand. It was, as the motion adopted at the meeting said, for the "best interests of the county" that the citizens told another friend of his, Eugene Cox, to leave. It was even for the good of Cox himself, who would be happier somewhere else. But most of all, it was for the good of Mr. Barrett's friends the Negroes. "We don't want a lot of good Niggers getting killed," he said.

The leap from the gentle ministrations of Cox and Minter to the violent death of Negroes may be hard for the outsider to make, but in Holmes County it seems to be automatic. It's not that the speaker himself will do anything. Nobody will be responsible, exactly. It will just happen.

To help the outsider understand the violence that will happen, those skips and jumps, those logical and moral lacunae in the minds of Holmes County's people, Mr. Barrett and his fellows have a figure that they cite regularly—the proportion of Negroes in the county. Edwin White, who is a lawyer and a legislator and seems to have a sort of specialization in these matters, has it worked out to the decimal: 74.8 per cent.

Mr. White, in his office across the square from Mr. Barrett's in the county-seat town of Lexington, will volubly explain to you the position of Holmes County. "What state are you from?" he asks, and, being told, he tells you, like a bright kid who knows the capitals of all the states, the number of Negroes there.

As to Cox and Minter on their Providence Farm, Mr. White is very blunt. "They were practicing social equality out there," he says, "and we

won't have that." Mr. White does not say, "We don't like it," or "We wish it were not so," or "We will try to talk to them about it." He says, pleasantly but with unmistakable meaning: "We won't have it."

### The 'Break'

What happened in Holmes County was this: On September 23 a white girl reported that some Negro boys had whistled at her. Four teen-age Negroes were brought into Holmes County Courthouse in an atmosphere flavored by Southern resentment of the Supreme Court decision, by Mississippi's dislike of the "bad publicity" of the Till case, and by Holmes County's suspicion of Providence Farm. Edwin White speaks tenderly of "the little white girl" who was whistled at, though he can't right off remember her name. But he remembers well his version of what the Negro boys said, and repeats it several times so his listener can enjoy the full impact: "All white girls are whores, that's what the Nigra boys said."

Angry rumors circulated in the county to the effect that Cox and Minter had tried to get the boys released. When the boys were interrogated someone turned the question to Providence Farm, and someone suggested that the answers be recorded, and someone decided the tape recording should be played to a meeting of the county's citizens.

Sheriff Richard Byrd, County Attorney Pat Barrett, member of the state legislature Edwin White, and William Moses, an automobile salesman of Lexington, all questioned the boys. Other local whites were present to record the "testimony" of the four teen-age Negroes.

Why question the boys about Providence? Their whistling may be a result of what Negroes are taught at that place. Why tape-record the answers? We might want to use it at their trial. Was it used? No. Why call in extra, outside persons for the questioning? We wanted to be sure there was no question of coercion. Why play the tape to a meeting of citizens? Well, there were all these rumors about Providence Farm, and, in Mr. White's words, "We have been trying to get in on the inside of it for a great long time, and this was the break."

### 'Strong for What?'

The tape recording was made on Monday. By Tuesday evening, without any open publicity, more than five hundred citizens from all over the county gathered in the Tchula High School auditorium to hear it.

Dr. Minter and Mr. Cox were not told about the meeting until the afternoon before it was held; they made an attempt to get legal advice, but the two lawyers they called said they couldn't help them.

The meeting opened when chairman J. P. Love, a new member of the state legislature from Tchula, announced that they were met to defend the American Way of Life. There was an invocation, and then the playing of the tape recording took two hours. The tape consisted of questions put to the Negroes, one after another, by various of the white interrogators: Did you see colored children swimming with whites out there? Does the Minter family attend the meetings with the colored? Do they talk about the Supreme Court? About the Federal government? Did Dr. Minter just have one waiting room for colored and white? Do they tell you you can go to white schools?

ONE EXCHANGE went something like this: What do they do at those fourth Sunday meetings? They pray. Pray for what? Pray make us strong. Strong for what?

In the discussion after the tape was played one young man from Tchula stood, hands on his hips, before the crowd and said that what they were doing was disgraceful; he could get four scared "Nigger kids" from his field, he said, with all those big white men standing around, to testify to anything.

Dr. Minter denied that there was interracial swimming, and denied that they advocated integration, and denied that he had only one waiting room.

But this assembly of Mississippi white men, ordinarily quite nonchalant about the testimony of a Negro against a white man, this time knew whom it wanted to believe. "You have heard the truth!" cried Edwin White, pointing to the tape recorder.

Mr. Cox tried to make a distinc-

tion between what he inwardly believed and what he outwardly advocated, but this was too subtle a point for the now angry crowd. They shouted for him to state his own belief, and, in the climactic moment of the meeting, he replied that he believed that segregation is un-Christian. There was a stir in the crowd, and one loud-voiced man called out, with an eloquence greater than he knew, "This isn't a Christian meeting!"

A PLANTER MOVED that the Coxes and Minters be requested to leave—"for the best interests of the county." When the chairman asked for the affirmative votes, most of the assembly stood. Someone then insisted that the negative votes be made to stand. Some so minded had left the hall; some remained seated; one man came to the Minters after the affair to confess that he had been too scared to vote for them at the meeting. Cox and Minter say only two stood when the negative was called for. One was a blacksmith who felt such a drastic action should be prayed about before it was decided upon. The other was the Presbyterian minister from Durant, the Reverend Marsh Callaway. He had told the assembly that though he believed in segregation, he thought that the meeting was improper, un-American, and un-Christian. A week after the meeting Mr. Callaway learned that the elders of his church had voted a request that he resign. Last month members of the church unanimously asked that he be fired because he "got interested in politics."

### Trio in Unison

Some residents of Holmes County would like now to say that the whole affair was just the work of a "few rough fellows." But chief officers and outstanding citizens of the county—the sheriff, county attorney, old and new legislators—were prime movers. A clue to the identity of the agency through which they moved may be found in this: J. P. Love is president of the Citizens Council of Tchula; Pat Barrett is president of the Citizens Council of Lexington; and William Moses, the auto salesman whose presence with the distinguished company at the tape re-



cording is otherwise unexplained, is chairman of the Citizens Council of Holmes County.

The Citizens Councils were founded shortly after the Supreme Court's decision against segregated schools. They are dedicated to the maintenance of segregation, literally with a vengeance. They began in Mississippi and are spreading, sometimes under other names, throughout the South; there are now reported to be some 263 of them in Mississippi alone. The distinguished Mississippi editor Hodding Carter has called them an "uptown Ku Klux Klan."

Some of the official literature denies that the Councils will use intimidation and economic pressure. But critics cite a striking list of recent Southern incidents, numerous and widespread, of men fired, blackballed, put off farms, cut off from business, arrested, newly taxed, threatened, and attacked for indicating any resistance to segregation.

The Councils may, in theory, just plan, suggest, co-ordinate, and, as some of their literature says, "share ideas," in this fight, while the rough work is sublet to individuals. Perhaps this makes it possible for more respectable and restrained members to be technically dissociated from what the more militant operatives will do. Of that, the affair in Holmes County is, by all reports, only a mild sample.

### Conformity—the Best Policy

But it hasn't seemed mild to the Coxes and the Minters. For Dr. Minter, who gets into town to see patients, it isn't so bad; even the man who said, after the mass meeting, that "What we need tonight is a couple of grass ropes," has spoken to him almost as though nothing had happened. But for the women, who mostly stay out at the farm, the bark of a dog at night can bring the vision of a mob of men gathering around their houses. It has been hard to sleep.

The Coxes and the Minters each have three young children, ranging in age from seven to thirteen years. The thought that the parents could telephone for help was reassuring, but then one morning the telephone wires were down. They were not down in time, however, to forestall the anonymous threats: "How soon

are you Communists out at Providence going to leave?"

Sheriff Richard Byrd came out with his deputies to protect them and set up a little campfire that could be seen all night down at the crossroads. But since the sheriff was one of the main figures in the movement to drive them from the county, they received his protection with mixed emotions. They learned that cars had been stopped, occupants questioned, and license numbers of their visitors taken down.

One morning in the mail there was a stark notice from the United States Fidelity & Guaranty Company. With the five days' warning the policy required, the insurance on the equipment in the clinic was canceled. Later the Providence-Washington Insurance Company followed with a notice that the policy on the Minters' household goods was



also canceled. When they asked about all this, they were told, though not in writing, that they had suddenly become "unusual risks." The Lexington agent of the U.S.F.&G. is on the executive committee of the Citizens Council for the Congressional district.

Two other families who work on the farm are dependent on the project. Dr. Minter has built his practice through the years. The credit union is a complex operation that can be dissolved only by a vote of the members, and it has been impossible to hold a meeting because the Negro members have been told to stay away from Providence.

### Insulated Conscience

The citizens of Holmes County recognize the personal virtue of the Coxes and the Minters. They had to be prodded by the Citizens Council and stirred up with a tape recording before they could be moved to go

against the plain testimony of their own daily experience.

But the ordinary man anywhere is not prepared to concede a motivation radically higher or even different from his own, and is suspicious of it: Why does Doctor Minter stay out there in the back country with all those Nigras? He's a good doctor, and could make lots more money in town. Why would a college graduate like Cox go off into the hills to live his life with sharecroppers? There must be something shady about it. It's like the ward leader who encounters the enthusiast who wants to ring doorbells just for love of the cause; he'd rather the fellow would just do it for the ten bucks that's in it for him, like everybody else.

The Presbyterian pastor who has both the church in Tchula of which the Coxes and Minters were active members and also the Lexington church in which Edwin White is an elder has tried to stay completely away from the controversy. His sermon topic one Sunday shortly after the mass meeting, was "Infant Baptism." He is reported to have said that he has had trouble selecting topics, texts, and even hymns. Perhaps it might be hard to sing "God Send Us Men."

Whereas Providence Farm's Christianity tries to relate its compassion to the forms of a society, most of Holmes County's Christianity does not. At best, the latter becomes the source of a private decency carefully insulated from public affairs. At worst, it becomes a strong support for whatever patterns exist—like segregation.

### Laying Sophistries Aside

The chief pamphlet now being distributed by the Citizens Councils in Mississippi, and given out by churches in the area, gives "A Christian View on Segregation." It is written by the former president of a Presbyterian college in Jackson. "Laying aside therefore the shallow sophistries, concerning so-called 'Civil Rights,' 'The Psychological and Sociological Effects of Segregation,' 'The Principles of Human Brotherhood,' . . . let us be realistic. . . ." Segregation, according to the author, is one of nature's universal laws; it tends to promote progress; it is a

well-considered, time-tested American policy; and it may be defended from the Bible.

But this pamphlet and the Councils do not represent quite all of Holmes County. A churchwoman rather apologized for her belief in segregation, saying that she almost changed it once, and she certainly admired the Coxes and Minters. An older man came surreptitiously out to Providence to plead with the folks there to stay. A spirited and courageous woman newspaper editor in Lexington has fought an editorial battle against the sheriff's brutality to Negroes which got her a prize and a libel suit.

**T**HE Coxes and the Minters are not organizers or agitators or resolution passers. They are not social reformers in the classic mold. They told the truth when they denied that they preached integration to the Negroes: They are quiet folk who don't preach much at all. But they do live and act according to what they believe.

What they believe comes from all those Christian summer conferences and work camps, from the Bible and the hymnbook, from *Day by Day*, the Southern Presbyterian devotion book, and the sermons—even on "Infant Baptism"—of Southern preachers.

This Christian source of their conviction means they should understand and forgive the malefactors on every side, and they make an impressive try at it. "In all this business I haven't heard them say one word against the people who are persecuting them," said one friend. They try earnestly to understand the truth in the rationalizations of the Southern white man, and they make what doctrinaire Northern voices might call "compromises." They don't insist on integration tomorrow morning before breakfast. They agree that there must be a long, slow, gradual process of education. But—they do want to start.

For they are led by their religious conviction to try to understand another, less articulate side, too: the Negro's. They remember the Holmes County Negro woman who said that they were the first white people she had been able not to hate. They show you the battered one-room school-

house where many Negro kids have had all their schooling, in struggling sessions of four or five months a year. They tell of a Negro being given thirty days, to punish Cox for trying to intervene on his behalf, and of the cheerful planter custom of settling their Negroes' misdeeds

among themselves. They want these things to change. They aren't extremists. They aren't sentimental.

But they do wish a few more of the people of Mississippi were willing to join together, Negro and white, to work at ways of getting along better.

## 2. A County Divided Against Itself

DAVID HALBERSTAM

**Y**AZOO CITY, the Gateway to the Delta, is a Mississippi town of eleven thousand people cradled in the eastern curve of the Yazoo River. The country around it is good for growing cotton. Like most such country, Yazoo County has undergone a steady decline in its Negro population. In 1900 the Negroes outnumbered the whites nearly three to one, 32,205 to 11,743; by the 1950 census the ratio had dwindled to about three to two, 22,071 to 13,632. Today about fifty per cent of a population of 29,500 are Negro.

Yazoo City is one of the five cities in traditionally segregated Mississippi that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has selected as targets for putting into effect the Supreme Court's desegregation decision. On August 6 this year, in keeping with the plans of the parent organization, the Yazoo City chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. submitted to the local school board a petition signed by fifty-three Negro parents asking for an immediate end to segregation in schools. Admittedly attempting to force the action through against the general wishes of the white population, it argued that integration worked in the Army and that therefore it can work in the schools. Even local liberals have generally opposed the petitions, arguing that the Army does not serve as a proper precedent because in wartime there was a common enemy and because economic fear stemming from job competition did not exist there.

### The Councils Strike

News of the N.A.A.C.P.'s petition jolted Yazoo City. What happened

next and who caused it is the subject of some disagreement. Whether the powerful economic sanctions used in retaliation against the Negroes stemmed directly from the Councils, or whether—as Nick Roberts, Yazoo Citizens Council chairman, claims—they were the result of Council information coupled with "spontaneous reaction of public opinion," is basically a technicality. Few Citizens Councils members would privately dispute that the basis for opposition to the N.A.A.C.P. was furnished by the Councils.

At any rate, the names of all fifty-three signers were listed in the weekly *Yazoo City Herald*, and reprinted the following week in a large advertisement paid for by the Councils.

About that time the firings and boycotts began. Either white men would fire a Negro worker immediately or a Negro would lose his job after another white man visited an employer and suggested that a petition signer be fired. Some Negroes removed their names immediately. Others held out a little while but eventually followed suit. Today two of the original fifty-three names remain on the list, and both names belong to Negroes who have since left Yazoo City.

Removal of a name, however, did not mean restoration of a job. Fourteen signers have left town; others are planning to go. Only those whose incomes come exclusively from the Negro section of town, such as undertaker Ben Turner, can continue a normal living. In a few instances, women who signed have continued to do washing for white families, but most of the remaining signers are now borrowing money