

## HOW I LEARNED ABOUT FREEDOM TO VOTE

*By Mrs. Classie McCullough*

The first thing that I knew about freedom was when a "freedom train" passed through and carried people to Jackson, Miss. The people on the train came from the North (I don't know what place). Rev. McCullough said that the train had the Constitution written on it in large letters. The white people knew what was happening, but we didn't.

The next thing, a white preacher came to the community and said the whites had run him away from his church. He came from Sharon, Miss., to a little colored church by the name of Smithville. He came to our home and he would ask questions about how the whites treated the colored. He would ask us not to give anyone information about what he asked us. If we did they would hand his neck to a limb quicker than they would us. We would tell him all about how our people were killed and then thrown into lakes and rivers. We told him how they would castrate our men if they just looked up at a white woman. We told him now white men were raising families by colored women; and that they would beat and kill colored men over colored women.

Every two weeks the white preacher would leave and go back to wherever he came from and make a report, then come back to us. He would bring clothes for the poor. After two or three years of teaching Sunday School at our church, he had obtained all the information he needed and he left.

Then came Mr. Andrew Green. He would slip from house to house getting people together. He began to organize the people by having meetings. When he had gotten us well together, other colored and white people came in and met with the group.

We had an empty house on the farm; and we made the organizers welcome to live in the home with us, both white and colored. Some of the colored people in the community were afraid to let them come in their homes - afraid that the white people would burn them out, but Mrs. Matten, Steve, Miss Gloria and Miss Nancy lived in our home six weeks and taught school at my church. They (the whites in the community) didn't hurt anyone at our church nor did they arrest anyone, but they burned our church down. I attended every meeting I could.

One night I came home after a meeting and my husband told me a white preacher had been there and wanted to spend one or two nights with us, I immediately said, NO!" "He probably just calls himself a preacher and he may get as in the night and kill us all!" The white preacher had gone to look at the church and said he would be back soon. He did come back soon. When he returned I was in the kitchen cooking supper. I was mad at the man and had not even seen him before. He walked into the kitchen where I was and asked me about spending a night or two. Before I could say anything God stepped in and my anger was gone; my mind changed and I made him welcome.

From then on things went from better or worse. The "freedom riders" (as we called the colored and whites from the north) began to tell us we had a right to vote. We went to the courthouse to

register. We were pushed around on the streets, as though we were not human. I can't remember what day it was; but one day when we arrived in Canton it seemed as though every six or eight feet, all around the courthouse square, was a white man with a gun. We paced around the courthouse yard all day, until about three o'clock, and no one was allowed to even lean against the fence.

The more they tried to prevent us from registering, the more determined we became. We would try to slip people to the courthouse in cars. When the cars were stopped by police and asked where they were going, the occupants would replay (as they had been instructed in our meetings) that they were going shopping. "Why does it have to be a bunch of you to go shopping? If you don't, go back where you came from, we will put you all in jail," the police threatened.

The first group of people got afraid and turned around and came back. The organizers asked ten more volunteers to stand; I stood up -- also Mr. Mack Omens, Mrs. Mary Johnson, Miss Nichols, Miss Small and I cannot name the rest. We did just as we were instructed to do; and as we marched through the streets of Carlton, two white men stepped in to march with us (do not know their names). When we got to the railroad crossing, Mr, Mack Ownes and I were leading the march. We were stopped and questioned.

One policeman questioned Mr. Mack and the others questioned me. We told them what we were told to say: "We are going up town shopping."

"Why does it take a bunch to go shopping?." The police asked.

"I guess we all wanted to go," we answered.

"If you all don't go back, we will arrest all of you and put you all in jail." We said we were not going back. The white men who had joined the march with us asked for the policemen's names (they were keeping a record of everything that went on). We didn't go back, so they loaded us all on a truck. After we were loaded, the white men told us to sit flat on the floor and if everybody didn't do as he said we would be hurt. Everyone sat on the floor and sometimes it felt as if the thing we were riding in would turn over. I don't know where all they took us, but we went all across ditches and everywhere before we finally arrived at the jailhouse.

This was the first time I ever seen the inside of a jail. They were sending me to jail for no crime that I had committed, just for trying to vote. When they unloaded us, we were so glad to see the light, It had been as dark as pitch on the truck. They lined us all up in the hall. We had to stand up until we got tired. I begin singing "Near the Cross." And everyone around me began to join me.

"Shut up," the police said. "Shut up that singing!" We had to stop. They took our fingerprints just like we had murdered someone.

After locking us up, another truck came in with fifty young people, singing to the top of their voices. The young people were black and white.

They divided us all up. The older women were put together and the girls were put in a room together. No one was allowed to see us until Monday (it was Friday when they locked us up). They didn't pay much attention to what we older women wanted, but everything the young girls wanted they would bring to them.

I was never so afraid in my life. They talked about turning the hose on us and drowning us. The young people would sing and tell them to stop and they would stop a little while and start again. "Are you afraid?" they would ask. SURE WE WERE AFRAID! But we would not let them know it.

At home I used to lay down on the floor, cover myself up and think nothing of it. But in jail, I slept on the concrete floor until Tuesday of the next week. We had to be bonded out like we had stolen something. Mr. Charlez Evers came down from Jackson. He arrived Wednesday morning (I had been in jail for five days). Evers said, "If you had been in Jackson you could not have stayed in jail that long. My husband Rev, W,E.L. McCullough and Mr. & Mrs. Washington "bonded" me out.

We just kept trying first one thing, then another; until we were like the man in the Bible that wrestled with the angel all night long, and said I won't let you go until you bless my soul. The Northern whites stood by us until they saw to it that we had gained the right to register. Now we are able to go to the polls and vote like the white people have been doing all along.

After we had gained our right to vote we began struggling to build a church to replace the one the white folks had burned down in an effort to stop us from registering. God sent a man one Sunday to help us bear our burden. We were worshipping under a bush harbor and in came Brother Scot to let us know he was there to help us build a church. St. John has something now they never had before -- a nice brick church, planted grass, and flowers on the yard.

Then Mr. Scot asked us if we would like to have a Community Center. We did not know what he was talking about. He said if one of us had one acre of land, they would build the building; and we would not have to anything but help with the work. The good Quakers came from different places to help, I was there every day doing what I could to help.

One day Mrs. Arena Douglass came and asked us to go to lunch with them, but we decided we would stay and dig until they came back. When they came back they were amazed at the hard ground we had dug. With God's help you can do many things!

When the building was completed, they put in a library, seats and many other things we needed. Then they sent us a man who was with us for four years, to help us understand how to run our Community Center. The man's name was Mr. Jake Friesen and his wife's name was Jane. He was a most outstanding young man. He worked hard and looked after the poor people in the community.

I rode around to many homes and carried clothes that were sent in. I also transported some to the doctor and helped them pay their doctor bill. Many people weren't treated right and if we let Mr. Friesen know about it, he would straighten it out. At Christmas time Mrs. Friesen would fill her car with friends and they would act as Santa Claus and go to different homes singing and leaving gifts.

I do not have enough praise for the Mennonites and the Quakers. They meant everything good to us. Just as God gave Peter the key to the Kingdom and told him, "upon this rock I build my Church" (Matt. 16:19), it seemed like the Quaker and Mennonites gave us the key to success. Many times the way seems dark but behind all dark clouds there is sunshine somewhere. When it seems as though we cannot make another step, we must keep pressing. When the way got hard for us, God sent many good people. I cannot remember them all. He sent lawyers to help plead our cases. He sent Mr. Charles Evers to step in and speak out for his people (after his brother was killed for trying to enter a Mississippi college). He was brave enough to step into his brother's place and say "For my race I will live, for my race for my race I will die."

"For God I Live and for God I will Die."

Composed by Mrs. Classie McCullough  
Age 81