

Selma Still Has Problems

By MARGARET L. D. HATCH

IN 1963, for the first time, large numbers of Negroes in Selma, Alabama tried to register to vote. For a Negro to be seen in a line outside the court house in those days was for him to take his job, if not his life, in his hands, but two brave women who worked in a large rest home calculated the risk involved and took it. They had not been long in the line waiting to register when one turned to the other, saying: "Don't look now. There goes my job!" The supervisor of the rest home had seen them.

Before the day was over, the supervisor's secretary corroborated the prophecy with a telephone call to one of the women: "The supervisor says don't come back to work any more."

At that time, forty Negroes worked in the rest home as practical nurses, aides, and the like. Salaries ranged around \$16.00 to \$18.00 a week for ten-to-twelve-hour days with no breaks except one hour for dinner—no accumulated vacation time, no salary increases. The forty employees held a meeting that night to discuss the plight of their dismissed colleague; they decided to write a letter to the supervisor of the rest home asking him to reinstate her. "If this is not done," the letter said, "all forty of us will walk out."

The letter was to be delivered at 10 o'clock the next morning. At 7 a.m., the supervisor summoned the second woman who had stood in line to register. (She had gone back to work as usual the next day.)

"Eleanora," he said, "I don't need you here any more."

"Thank you," Eleanora replied quietly and walked back down the stairs. Furious at her equanimity, the irascible supervisor called her back, berated and threatened her, and then tried to take her picture. The photograph he wanted was for circulating around the town with a "Don't hire her" recommendation. When she held up her hands to shield her face and refused to put them down, the supervisor proceeded to try out the new electric cattle-prod he "happened" to have on his desk.

That did it. There had not been time to deliver the letter, but the whole group walked out anyway. Now all forty were out of jobs, and the thoughtful supervisor extended his appeal for no one in the area to hire any of them. Of course unemployment compensation was not available to them. This was a walkout, not an organized strike.

What could be done to help? Amelia Boynton, long a leader and advisor in the community, who had been consulted about the writing of the letter, remembered that her sister had once had a small factory in her home in Philadelphia where the rough sewing on coats was

done. Why couldn't something like this, only on a larger scale, be done in Selma?

She proceeded to send out letters all over the country, telling of the need for sewing machines in Selma. When several machines arrived, they were set up in the basement of the First Baptist Church. Two girls were sent to the Church World Service center in New Windsor, Maryland for training. Soon they returned to Selma with a bale of material and commenced to train unemployed women and two men to sew. For practice, small dresses and slips were made and later given to needy children.

This was a small operation, considering the need, but everything went well until July of 1964, when an injunction was issued forbidding three or more Negroes to meet in any public place. Since this included using churches for any gatherings other than services of worship, Operation Sewing-Center came to an abrupt end.

But unemployment did not. In fact, it was growing steadily. Along with the fame that came to Selma in the spring of 1965 with the great march to Montgomery, tensions grew, and more and more Negroes who joined civil rights activities lost their jobs. It seemed that the increase in unemployment kept pace with acceleration in the efforts for freedom.

Then, on April 28, 1965, a branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was organized in Selma, fifty years to the day after the League's initial meeting at The Hague. Since the Selma group, like all branches of the WILPF, is committed to working for peace and freedom on all fronts, its members took a good look around and decided to put their weight behind some project to help their townspeople to help themselves. From the Southern Christian Leadership Conference they obtained figures (compiled by the Dallas County Chamber of Commerce) showing that 85 percent of Negro families in the county earned less than \$3,000 per year and that 50 percent of all Negroes heading families earned less than \$1000 per year.

There were six times as many poor Negroes as poor whites in Dallas County. In general, these were the unskilled. They needed training for decent jobs. But where were the jobs, and who would do the training? (In factories now operating in Selma, the tendency is to exclude Negro women who may have had from six to twelve

Margaret Hatch, until recently assistant to the national legislative secretary of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, spent a number of weeks in Selma last year teaching adult literacy classes by the Laubach method, in addition to working on voter registration and on distribution of clothing and food. Sixteen of her short plays on "peace-and-freedom" themes are soon to be published by Beacon Press.

weeks of training in favor of white women with little or no training.)

By this time, the injunction had been lifted, and groups of Negroes could meet in public once more. So the WILPF members met and decided to help resurrect the idea for a sewing center. They found an unused concrete structure on a corner lot in the Negro section of Selma and commenced negotiations for its purchase. But the growing list of unemployed caused them to rethink their project in larger terms. Instead of a sewing center, why not have a garment factory? The search for a larger property began. By the first of this year, a site had been found and fifty acres of land had been purchased in the hope that additional factories and possibly low-rent housing might later be built there. The site is three miles from the city limits. (If this seems far from town, consider the life of one mother of five who leaves Selma at 6:30 every morning to drive thirty-five miles to the factory where she puts labels on salt and pepper containers. To her, the new factory site will seem to be at her back door.)

On November 15, 1965, the Selma Opportunity Industries, Inc., was formed. Before the incorporation papers could be recorded a thousand dollars in cash was needed. Selma WILPF members raised this sum, but \$10,000 more was necessary in order to buy land needed for expansion. (\$5,000 of this has been raised.)

Before long, government resources, both state and national, were being explored. The Small Business Administration has promised a generous loan; the State and the Regional Economic Development offices have agreed to cooperate in setting up an integrated training center for employees; catalogues of needed Federal Government garments have been received. In other words, the new corporation has land and promises, but still nothing concrete—not even a building. As spokesman for the group, Mrs. Boynton says: "We also need professional and legal help to operate the factory. That is why we would like to see some factory open an outlet by either building or cooperating with us in building a factory here that will employ at least a hundred persons as a beginning."

For Mrs. Boynton and other members of the WILPF, the plans thus far made represent hundreds if not thousands of hours of travel (to Montgomery, Washington, Philadelphia, New York), of talks with officials of the Ladies' International Garment Workers Union asking for assistance in finding a garment factory to work with them, of interviews with state and other political figures of Alabama. They all speak favorably and want to help, but so far little has been done. The planners might well be discouraged. Two applications for loans, made to Selma banks, have been turned down, "thus" (says the indomitable Mrs. Boynton) "opening the way for some-

one or some loaning institution to work with us." Members of the Negro community are enthusiastic about the project—eager to offer their services and to work with those who need training, both Negro and white, but helpless to do anything until the project gets going. The group has a list of more than five hundred persons who are unemployed in the Selma area. More are constantly being added to the list because, with King Cotton almost dead, growers are asking sharecroppers and tenant farmers to leave the plantations. Where will they go?

The Selma Opportunity Industries, Inc., is now a reality. But it has been uphill work all the way, with here and there a ray of light. The latest word from Mrs. Boynton is that the government agencies involved have decided to let the Selma group borrow the necessary funds without too much red tape, and to see that people receive the necessary training. A weaving company has indicated an interest in contracts. "I feel almost like David, who slew Goliath," observes Mrs. Boynton. "Once, obstacles were so great it seemed impossible to overcome them. Things are looking brighter."

Birthday Meditation on Resurrection

By EVE TARTAR BROWN

Twenty thousand seven hundred times have I
Been resurrected,
Dying with each exposing day,
Borning in the hope-brimmed night;
Yet thirty thousand lives
Are not enough

To purify my soul,
Distill my spirit,
And free me from
The mathematics of my matter.

Still, here and now,
By the grace of my generous God
I am being given
The only life I need.

From the Bottom of a Deep Place

By ELIZABETH GULICK

When need lies heavy like a great weight,
plunge down a shaft of stillness
to the center of all being.
There ore is mined; and
from the bottom of a deep place
one sees the stars,
though the sun be high,
and a harsh light glances off the surface
of the earth.