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The Marianna Boycott: Healthcare, Political Organization, and Federal Intervention in the Arkansas Delta

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The Marianna Boycott:
Healthcare, Political Organization, and Federal Intervention in the Arkansas Delta

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters in American History since 1877

by
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Section I: Introduction

On June 8, 1971, a Marianna, Arkansas, police officer arrested an African American school counselor named Quency Tillman for “ordering a pizza under false pretenses.” Her arrest kicked off the thirteen-month-long Marianna boycott that inflicted millions of dollars of damage, closed twenty-seven businesses, and fundamentally altered racial politics in Lee County. The African American boycotters demanded jobs in the city’s White-owned establishments, the removal of abusive police officers, fair elections, respect, and opportunities for their children. Though it resulted in more political participation for African Americans respect from Lee County’s White leadership, The boycott failed to generate the widespread changes the boycotters demanded.

The pizza incident was not a random act of racist aggression but a targeted attempt by an embattled small town’s White leadership to hurt a prominent member of the Black community at the height of an ongoing political protest. Tillman, who worked at the Black only Robert R. Moton High School in Marianna before full integration in 1970, would become an active participant in the boycott. During her lunch hour on that June day, she went to a local drive-in called the Mug and Cone and ordered a two-dollar pizza. The restaurant took too long, so Tillman canceled the order. A Mug and Cone employee demanded that she pay for it, but Tillman refused and went back to work. Later that evening, long after Tillman had returned home, a police officer came to her house and demanded that she pay for the pizza. When Tillman refused, the police officer arrested her.

Tillman’s charge was “ordering a pizza under false pretenses.” County Judge Haskell Adams held Tillman on a \$2500 bond, and, when asked how she should pay for the bond, Judge Adams told her to put a mortgage on her house.¹ By itself, Tillman’s arrest was a deep insult to African Americans in Lee County,

¹ William Adler, *Land of Opportunity: One Family’s Quest for the American Dream in the Age of Crack* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 156.

but it was later brought to light that the arrest was, in part, grew out of an altercation between Tillman's brother, Skippy Tillman, and the police officer that arrested Quency. Skippy Tillman, who had just returned from the Vietnam War and had insulted the police officer earlier in the day while wearing his dress uniform. The police officer ordered him to change out of his uniform, and Skippy refused. Quency's brother then insulted the police officer again. The event demonstrated that even an educated and well-respected African American woman could be thrown in jail and heavily fined whenever powerful Whites demanded it.²

The Marianna Boycott was not simply a result of the arrest of a Black school official but was part of a larger post-Civil Rights Era struggle over economic opportunity and full citizenship rights. While federal laws and court rulings of the Civil Rights Era destroyed the legal underpinnings of Jim Crow and disfranchisement, they did not necessarily change who controlled access to jobs, who ran local courts, who had land, and who oversaw local schools. It was Great Society programs that had the potential to do these things. In Lee County, the same White politicians and community leaders who had run the county before the Civil Rights Movement were still in power in 1970. The Marianna Boycott was how one community wrestled over what the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement would mean and who would rule. Lee County was not alone in this conflict; the Delta was rife with Civil Rights protests during the early 1970s. Earle, Brinkley, and Forrest City experienced significant unrest during this time, but the Marianna Boycott was the largest in scale and most notable of these events.³

Tillman's arrest came amidst a series of local conflicts that threatened White control of the town. The most important of these centered around healthcare. The Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), a program born out of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, was helping local Neighborhood Action Councils (NACs) build a free health clinic in Marianna and facing steep opposition. VISTA, the domestic equivalent

² Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, 157-158.

³ "Earle March Commemorates King," *Many Voices*, January 11, 1971, 1; "Backlash Follows Brinkley Walkout," *Many Voices*, March 11, 1971, 3; "Guard, State Policemen Clear Downtown Area in Tense Forrest City," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 29, 1969, 1.

of the Peace Corps, entered Lee County in 1969 to help address the severe health issues that African Americans faced in the county. African Americans were forced to use segregated waiting rooms to see local doctors, pay before receiving service, and be transported over sixty miles to either Little Rock or Memphis to get emergency care. Then governor Winthrop Rockefeller allowed VISTA to set up a free clinic in Lee County to help mitigate the high infant mortality rates and poor health outcomes.⁴ Local White leadership immediately opposed the creation of the Lee County Cooperative Clinic; they believed that African Americans could not handle large sums of money and bankrupt their pharmacies, moreover they feared the clinic would encourage “communism.”⁵ After the county hospital refused clinic physicians admitting privileges, the clinic sued the local medical board to allow its doctors to admit patients to the local hospital instead of sending them to Memphis.⁶ Many African Americans, including Tillman, had joined the NACs to help form the clinic.

The conflict over the clinic quickly spread into the political arena. The local NACs had organized together in late 1970 to run candidates against the leaders of Lee County and were beaten through election fraud. Sherriff Langston and his deputies had openly intimidated voters, limited access to polls, and prevented poll watchers from accessing the ballots. There were even rumors of Mayor John Oxner throwing whole boxes of ballots into the Mississippi River.⁷ Despite African Americans making up 61% of the population of Lee County and a record turnout, only one candidate backed by the Black community won.⁸ Tensions were so high after the election that a riot almost broke out.⁹

⁴ “Marianna,” *Arkansas Gazette*, November 30, 1969, 70.

⁵ Olly Neal, *Outspoken: The Olly Neal Story* (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2020), 77-82.

⁶ “4 Member Medical Society Blocks VISTA Doctor,” *Arkansas Gazette*, November 16, 1969, 3.

⁷ “Lee County Election Should be Thrown Out,” *Many Voices*, November 11, 1970, 3; Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, 167.

⁸ Neal, *Outspoken*, 90.

⁹ Antony Hobbs Interviewed by Linda McDowell, August 8, 2014, The Civil Rights Movement in Arkansas: A Struggle for Freedom Fayetteville, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System, Little Rock, Accessed July 8, 2022,

<https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15728coll5/id/2360/rec/4>.

The integration of Marianna schools added yet more fuel to the growing conflict. 1971 was the first year of effective school integration in Lee County. Lee County, like many Delta school districts, had tried to avoid integration through “freedom of choice” plans by which thousands of Black students were excluded from White schools through custom and bureaucracy. It was only after the Supreme Court ruled that such programs were unconstitutional in 1969 that Eastern Arkansas school districts began to integrate in earnest. With Black schools being suddenly shuttered, from 1969 to 1971, thousands of Black teachers, administrators, and other school employees were fired in Arkansas.¹⁰ Several Marianna Black teachers, principals, and coaches were fired and replaced with White staff after 1969 by the Lee County school board, and the boycotters demanded the reinstatement of these fired educators. At the same time, Whites in Marianna, like school board president Lon Mann, began building a private segregation academy called Lee Academy.¹¹

The abuses, firings, opposition to the clinic, and stolen election combined with Tillman’s arrest to create an unexpected explosion of anger. The Marianna Boycott lasted thirteen months. The conflict witnessed the burning of twenty-seven businesses, half a dozen shootings, the firebombing of the homes of both Whites and Blacks, the county judge attempting to run down a protester with his car, and the Marianna Fire Department turning hoses on children in the middle of January. Despite the relatively simple demands and the determination of the boycotters, the boycott failed to bring about these changes. The abusive police officers remained and most of the businesses that the boycotters wanted to employ African Americans went out of business. Local factories either closed down or laid off hundreds of employees.¹² The boycotters won

¹⁰ Gordon D. Morgan, “Marianna: A Sociological Essay on an Eastern Arkansas Town,” (Jefferson City, MO: New Scholars Press, 1973), 25.

¹¹ Neal, *Outspoken*, 136.

¹² “Black Boycott, after ‘Ruining’ Downtown Marianna, Apparently Backfiring,” *Arkansas Gazette*, June 18, 1972, 8A.

respect, their clinic, and employment at what few businesses survived, but Lee County had become poorer than it was when they had started.

Other than brief mentions by authors like Ben Johnson, Marvin Schwartz, Olly Neal, and William Adler, the story of the Marianna Boycott has largely gone unnoticed. Ben Johnson's *Arkansas in Modern America Since 1930*, the most contemporary retelling of the event, frames the pizza story as the spark of the boycott.¹³ However, *Arkansas in Modern America* is a synthetic work and Johnson does not have the space or time to give the full story. Schwartz's work, *In Service to America: A History of VISTA in Arkansas, 1965-1985*, focuses on the history of VISTA in Arkansas in general and does not have the space to tell the whole story.¹⁴ While the Marianna Boycott takes up a significant portion of the piece, Schwartz focuses almost exclusively on the role of VISTA in the conflict and does not investigate conditions of Lee County prior to 1970. William Adler's *Land of Opportunity: One Family's Quest for the American Dream in the Age of Crack* discusses the boycott.¹⁵ He tells the story of the Chambers brothers, who were residents of Marianna during the 1970s. But the primary purpose of the piece is to link Delta poverty and the Detroit crack trade. Adler believes, correctly, that VISTA was only part of the reason for the boycott and spends ample time discussing political corruption and poverty in Lee County. However, as the primary purpose of the piece is the crack trade, only a small portion of the book is dedicated to the boycott. Olly Neal uses about a quarter of his autobiography, *Outspoken: The Olly Neal Story*, to explore the boycott and the various other protests centered around Lee County.¹⁶ While an important resource, *Outspoken* does not tell the whole story from beginning to end. It is a series of recollections that Neal dictated to a transcriptionist and not an

¹³Ben Johnson, *Arkansas in Modern America Since 1930* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2019), 169.

¹⁴ Marvin Schwartz, *In Service to America: A History of VISTA in Arkansas, 1965-1985* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Adler, *Land of Opportunity*.

¹⁶ Neal, *Outspoken*.

exact reproduction of the events. So, while the boycott has been covered by several historians and others, there has not been a stand-alone analysis of the event.

This study relies heavily on the work done by Greta de Jong in her monograph *You Can't Eat Freedom: Southerners and Social Justice after the Civil Rights Movement*.¹⁷ Her analysis of the Tufts Delta Health Center on the Mississippi side of the delta, the role of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the economic battle between poor African Americans and rich Whites, and the man-made poverty of the South partly inspired this work. De Jong posits that poverty in the Mississippi Delta is largely due to the need for cheap labor in plantation agriculture. White leaders purposely discouraged other forms of employment from entering their towns, and local leaders harried federal assistance programs to encourage poor Blacks to leave once their labor was made irrelevant through agricultural mechanization. The conflict in Bolivar, Mississippi in 1967 over the Tufts Delta Health Center was not dissimilar to the fight over the Lee County Cooperative Clinic in 1971.

The conclusions reached by historians Pete Daniel and Gavin Wright on the evolution of the Delta economy and the role of organizations like the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Agricultural Adjustment Agency (AAA) in creating and perpetuating Delta poverty inform this study. Daniel in his monograph, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880*, argues that the New Deal programs encouraged an American form of enclosure that forced thousands off of the land. His work is essential in explaining the evolution of poverty and agriculture in Lee County in the post-war period.¹⁸ Wright's *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* details the transformation of the Southern economy with extensive data tables and

¹⁷ Greta De Jong, *You Can't Eat Freedom: Southerners and Social Justice after the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Pete Daniel, *Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 1996)

graphs.¹⁹ His methods of using agricultural statistics to demonstrate the rapid changes in the agricultural system were a powerful inspiration.

This work is the first scholarly piece that is wholly dedicated to the history of poverty in Lee County and the Marianna Boycott and posits, using De Jong's framework, that the poverty endemic to Lee County and the Arkansas Delta was created through the actions of a dominant White class in an attempt to keep power, which has carried on to the present day; that the Office of Economic Opportunity's approach bottom-up approach to poverty relief represented a real challenge to the White economic powers in Lee County by the federal government, which explains the strong resistance to the clinic by White leaders; and, that the Marianna Boycott was a positive expression of African American resistance that was not possible without direct federal assistance.

¹⁹ Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1986).

Section II-Lee County and Delta Poverty

In 1967, a group called the Citizens Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States released a report on hunger and poverty in the United States that identified Lee County as among the most impoverished places in the nation. Members of the group included the heads of two universities, the presidents of three unions, the directors of seven high-profile charities, and more than a dozen doctors and nutritionists.¹ The report, known as *Hunger U.S.A.*, analyzed the state of the poor in America, the efficacy of America's anti-poverty programs, and the effects of malnutrition and poverty on the United States' economy. The results were damning and sent a shockwave through Congress. Senator Robert Kennedy, appalled at the report's results, stated that: "I saw such conditions two or three years ago in Africa and Latin America: the swollen bellies, the crippled bodies, the vacant stares of hopelessness and despair. But I also saw them in the nation which contains half the world's wealth; among Negro cotton choppers in the Mississippi delta."² The report identified 271 "hunger counties," places of exceptional poverty that existed inside the most wealthy and powerful nation on the planet. Of these 271 counties, all but twenty-two were located in the South, and of those 251 southern counties, twenty-four were part of the Arkansas/Mississippi Delta. The nation's ten worst counties for poverty included seven Delta counties, and number six on this list was Lee County, Arkansas.³

In 1967, the year the report was compiled, 72% of Lee County residents lived in poverty, the infant mortality rate was 15.5/100, yet only 8% of people in the county received welfare and only 32% received food stamps.⁴ In contrast the national average poverty rate and infant mortality rate were 12% and 6.5/100

¹ Benjamin Mays and Leslie Dunbar, *Hunger, U.S.A.: A Report by the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 2.

²Ibid., 7.

³ Ibid., 95-96.

⁴ Ibid., 94.

respectively.⁵ By 1970, 72.5% of African American homes lacked indoor plumbing.⁶ The per capita income was \$1434, compared to the state average of \$2155 and a national average of \$3139.⁷ Sterile numbers do not adequately convey the hopelessness and deprivation most non-Whites experienced in Lee County.

Barbara Conrad, an early VISTA volunteer in Lee County, recalled: "I'll never forget my first experience with the Lott family... They had five children and lived in the most deplorable, practically cardboard shack. The house was infested with roaches, you could hear the rats scurrying around in the attic, and we were always removing cockroaches from the children's inner ears. I cried for over an hour after my first visit to them."⁸

This poverty was not accidental; it was created and sustained deliberately for over a century by wealthy Whites in Lee County. Lee County, formed at the tail end of Reconstruction, was initially a place where African Americans could vote, elect Black candidates, and access land. Over a century, these things would be worn away through violence, disfranchisement, and control of the political machinery by the planter class. The cotton agriculture that dominated the Delta required a large population of cheap laborers to maintain profitability.⁹ In the years following Reconstruction, the planter class in Lee County used fusion, disfranchisement, murder, federal assistance, and local politics to maintain control and a large pool of cheap Black labor. However, as national policy toward agriculture changed during the Great Depression, Lee County planters swiftly embraced mechanization to rid themselves of dependence on Black labor. This transition to mechanized agriculture eliminated thousands of jobs, and left Lee County with a large population of impoverished African Americans. The VISTA volunteers and the researchers for the Citizens

⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, 1970 United States Census Data General Population Characteristics Arkansas: 5-394, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1973/dec/population-volume-1.html#par_list_113.

⁷ Ibid., 5-194.

⁸ Susan Daggett, "Marianna Arkansas: A Study of Small-Town Race Relations," (Master's thesis, Mount Holyoke College, 1986), 27.

⁹ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 180.

Board of Inquiry, who came to Lee County in the closing stages of this decades-long process of mechanization chronicled the lives of people who had become economically obsolete. No longer needed for their labor, White leaders encouraged Blacks in Lee County to leave and find employment elsewhere.¹⁰ The Marianna Boycott was, more than anything else, a reaction to the poverty created through purposeful obsolescence and intentional neglect.

Lee County sits on the western side of the Mississippi River and near the southern tip of Crowley's Ridge. The fertile Delta soil attracted plantation agriculture, which ensured that the region was the site of some of the largest concentrations of enslaved African Americans before the Civil War. Lee County was formed out of the political shakeup that followed Reconstruction. The new county was created to serve the interests of loggers and planters in and around Marianna but was a place filled with opportunities for African Americans. The ratification of the 1867 Reconstruction Act and the 1868 state constitution gave African Americans the right to vote in Arkansas. This newfound suffrage resulted in the election of many African Americans to state governments around the South. In Arkansas, several African American state legislators were elected, including William H. Furbush of Phillips County. Born in 1839 in Kentucky, Furbush worked as a photographer, barber, Union Army soldier, and even briefly settled in Monrovia as a Liberian colonist before moving to what would become Lee County in 1870. Furbush, seeking to gain prestige and political favors from the local planter elite, proposed the bill to create Lee County, naming the new county after the famous Confederate general, in 1873. Furbush, in addition to securing a political position for himself, also created Lee County as a place where Black men had access to land, safety, and opportunity.¹¹

African Americans initially had access to the ballot and virgin land in Lee County, despite the name. Many African Americans moved to the new county for a better life. Lee County's Black population

¹⁰ De Jong, *You Can't Eat Freedom*, 55-57.

¹¹ Blake Wintory, "William Hines Furbush: African-American Carpetbagger, Republican, Fusionist, and Democrat," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 63(Summer 2004): 110.

exploded between 1880 and 1910; from 9150 in 1880 to 19,003 in 1910, an increase of 108%. The White population only grew from 4138 to 5229 in the same period, an increase of only 21%.¹² Even after the new state constitution ratified in 1874 ended Reconstruction in Arkansas, Lee County remained a place where African Americans could vote and elect Black people to positions of power. The new constitution guaranteed a form of “home rule” that allowed planters and large landholders to hold most of the power, but the new constitution did not disenfranchise African Americans. White leaders, organized through the Arkansas Democratic party, however, still wanted to guarantee that they remained in power. Lee County, in 1874, had a population of 13,228 people, 9,150 of them African American.¹³ Therefore, a compromise was needed, and that compromise was fusion. Fusion politics was a form of backroom political dealing that attempted to maintain a balance of power between Democrats and Republicans in the South without an outbreak of violence. Fusion allowed African Americans in the Delta to have representation. In Lee County, fusion politics reigned from 1873 to 1879. During that time, Republicans, most of whom were Black, controlled the offices of the sheriff, coroner, assessor, and state representative. Democrats had the judge, clerk, surveyor, and treasurer. Lee County ended fusion in 1880 when Democrats took control of almost all of the county offices, but a few Republicans remained in minor offices until disenfranchisement in the early 1890s.¹⁴ How exactly this happened is unclear; in neighboring Phillips County, the local Democrats brought two cannons and set them up at the polling place to intimidate voters.¹⁵ *The Memphis Daily Appeal* stated in 1878 that there were similar incidents of violence and intimidation, but likely nothing on the same scale as the events in Helena. While disfranchisement was never total in Arkansas, the state legislature restricted voting with a “ballot reform measure” in 1891 and voters passed an amendment in 1892 that brought the

¹² “Population by Race and County,” Arkansas Economic Development Institute, accessed July 8, 2022, <https://arstatedatacenter.youraeedi.com/past-census-data/>.

¹³ Wintory, “William Hines Furbush,” 117.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 117-119.

¹⁵ “Election Violence in Helena,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 11, 1878.

poll tax to Arkansas. Disfranchisement brought an end to the possibility of African Americans electing public officials in Lee County, but it did not end efforts to obtain higher wages and access to land.

The poll tax and ballot reform laws that disfranchised African Americans in Arkansas were accompanied by an increase in racial violence in Lee County. The Colored Alliance, the African American branch of the Farmers Alliance movement, put ads in papers throughout the South that called for a general strike of cotton pickers.¹⁶ This call to action was generally ignored, except in Lee County, Arkansas. The strike almost instantly turned violent. Over ten days, the strikers killed two Blacks who refused to strike and burned two cotton gins. White posses gathered up eighteen strikers and executed them.¹⁷ However, according to Matthew Hild, the Cotton Pickers Strike, was a part of the larger redemption of the state of Arkansas, and represents far more than a single incident of racial oppression. Instead, the strike was the opening salvo of a new phase of White supremacy in Arkansas and the South. The strike was initially successful; one planter increased wages for workers that had struck on his farm by 20%. However, the reaction to this event was violent, swift, and organized. To stop the strike, the planters of Lee County organized themselves together and brutally crushed the revolt. Hild posits that the Cotton Pickers Strike, along with similar events in Mississippi, the segregation of the Farmers Alliance, disfranchisement, and the decline of the inclusive Knights of Labor, left African Americans in Arkansas with few options for collective organization. White planters organized together to set low wages, utilized the poll tax to disenfranchise thousands of African Americans, and wielded the threat of violence as a cudgel to keep laborers in line.¹⁸

¹⁶ William F Holmes, "The Arkansas Cotton Pickers Strike of 1891 and the Demise of the Colored Farmers' Alliance," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 32(Summer 1973): 110-113.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁸ Matthew Hild, "Black Agricultural Labor Activism and White Oppression in the Arkansas Delta: The Cotton Pickers Strike of 1891," In *Race, Labor, and Violence in the Delta: Essays to Mark the Centennial of the Elaine Massacre*, edited by Michael Pierce and Calvin White Jr. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2022),13-28.

The early twentieth century, 1900-1920, was a time of both promise and heartbreak for African Americans in Lee County, as new federal programs opened up hundreds of thousands of acres of land for settlement, and African Americans had access to some of that land. The federal government opened most of northern and eastern Arkansas to settlement with the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909. This act allowed lands in southeastern Missouri and northeastern Arkansas to be purchased in large plots for relatively little money. The land in Arkansas was distributed from four districts with Lee County and the rest of the Delta under the control of the Little Rock office. From 1909-1913 six percent of all federal lands in Arkansas were distributed through the Little Rock office. A grand total of 278,378 acres of land was distributed to 2118 claimants.¹⁹ The Delta was mostly swampland and forest for most of the nineteenth century. When the federal government opened up the land to be sold in large allotments for low prices, much of the land was bought up by speculators like International Harvester.²⁰ These companies lobbied the Arkansas state legislature to set up drainage districts to build levees and canals to eliminate the swampland endemic to the area.²¹ Once the land was drained, logging companies cleared the thick timber from the former swamps, and the lands were open to agriculture.

African Americans moved to this region en masse for the chance to buy the newly cleared land, and many were able to do so. Despite the violence and disfranchisement in 1891, over 200,000 African Americans moved to Arkansas as part of what Story Matkin-Rawn refers to as the “Other Great Migration.”²² This migration to Arkansas was part of the sizeable voluntary migration of African Americans

¹⁹ “Land Acquisition and Dispossession: Mapping the Homestead Act, 1863-1912,” Digital Scholar Labs, the University of Richmond, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/homesteading/>.

²⁰ Jared Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 20-25; Jeannie Whayne, *A New Plantation South: Land Labor and Federal Favor in Twentieth Century Arkansas*, (University of Virginia Press: Richmond, 1993) 20-23.

²¹ *Ibid*, 25-27.

²² Story Matkin-Rawn, “The Great Negro State of the Country: Arkansas Reconstruction and the Other Great Migration,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 72(Spring 2013): 3-7

to areas with easier access to land and opportunity. Lee County's population more than doubled in the years between 1891 and 1910.²³

A significant number of African American homesteaders purchased some of the undeveloped land. Olly Neal, director of the Lee County Clinic and one of the key leaders during the boycott, recalled that when his grandfather bought his farm in 1929 African Americans owned one-third of the land in Lee County.²⁴ Neal's numbers aren't precisely accurate but relatively close. In 1930, of the roughly 224,000 acres of farmland in Lee County, about 600 African American families owned about 25,000 acres of land.²⁵ In Lee County, the average family size was 4.1 people, and the Black population was about 16000. So roughly 15% of African American families owned land in Lee County, a not insignificant number. The large population growth in Lee County and other parts of Eastern Arkansas suggest that African Americans still saw the region as a place of opportunity, despite disfranchisement.

While many African Americans could purchase land, most were tenants or sharecroppers.²⁶ This led to the sharecropping economy that dominated Lee County from the early twentieth century until its decline in the 1930s. Due to Black illiteracy, the threat of violence, and disfranchisement, planters often cooked the books and kept croppers in a perpetual cycle of debt. In addition, falling crop prices, lack of access to credit, and planter-controlled stores, also contributed to the cycle of debt.²⁷ Despite this, many African Americans worked their way into some land over time.

²³ "Population by Race and County," Arkansas Economic Development Institute, <https://arstatedatacenter.youraedi.com/past-census-data/>.

²⁴ Neal, *Outspoken*, 14.

²⁵ Explanation of methodology in figure 3 of Appendix II, data used: U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau; "Decennial 1950 Census, Number of Arkansas Inhabitants- Tables 12, 38, and 39." <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/population-volume-2/18310273v2p4ch1.pdf> and U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau; "1935 Arkansas Agricultural Census- County Table 1," [1935- Arkansas-COUNTY TABLES-1516-Table-01.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1935/agricultural-census-county-tables-1935-arkansas-county-tables-1516-table-01.pdf).

²⁶ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 210.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 211.

Wildly fluctuating crop prices caused by the Great War brought untold harm to the economy of Lee County and cemented the economic order in the county for decades to come. From the end of the Civil War until the Great War, the price of cotton was so low that many farms operated at a loss.²⁸ The Great War raised prices from eight cents per pound to as high as thirty-seven cents per pound; this massive jump in prices increased wages and demand for labor, and it was during the tail end of this boom period, sharecroppers in nearby Phillips County attempted to organize in Elaine. The result of this attempted organization was the worst racial massacre in American history. The Elaine Massacre served as an example of what White planters could do to Delta croppers if they decided to organize. It is doubtless that Black farmers in Lee County took notice.

Compounding the repression of the Red Summer and the Elaine Massacre, in 1920 prices for cotton dropped precipitously, which led to rounds of evictions and increases in debt. The drop in prices was brought on by the end of the Great War and demobilization. The number of sharecroppers in Lee County dropped from 4895 in 1920 to 4165 in 1925, a drop of 15% in five years.²⁹ The number of landowning African American farmers dropped from 509 to 456 between 1925 and 1930, a decline of 11.5%.³⁰

The Mississippi River flood in 1927 made life worse for Lee County sharecroppers and Black freeholders. Most of the Delta was inundated, and thousands required assistance from the Red Cross to survive. Lee County was one of many areas in the delta that were flooded. Marianna hosted a refugee camp to house those dispossessed by the disaster. Around two dozen people are confirmed to have died from the flood in the area, but thousands were rendered homeless.³¹ The relief efforts that the Red Cross doled out to

²⁸Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 185-186.

²⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census; "1925, Thirteenth Census of United States Agriculture: Volume 1, First and Second series State Reports. Part 2 "Arkansas." Statistics for Counties." Table 4, [1925-Arkansas-FullPDF-Table-01.pdf](#).

³⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census; "1935, Fifteenth Census of United States Agriculture: Volume 1, First and Second series State Reports. Part 3 "Arkansas." Statistics for Counties." Table 1, [1935-Arkansas-COUNTY TABLES-1516-Table-01.pdf](#).

³¹ Daniel, *Deep 'n as It Come*, 121-126.

the victims of the flood, and how they were administered, created the blueprint that later New Deal organizations followed in the Delta during the Depression. Pete Daniel posits in *Breaking the Land* that agricultural extension agents and planters convinced Red Cross relief workers and federal agents to allow planters to administer relief payments during the flood.³² The 1927 flood was the first time that the federal government had spent significant time and effort on relief efforts. President Hoover considered it a major victory for the government and the system of relief served as precedent when the AAA and FERA crafted their relief programs during the Depression.³³ During the flood, the planter class controlled how relief was doled out, and the Red Cross largely accepted their intervention due to their unfamiliarity with the region. African American sharecroppers were initially hopeful that the flood “washed away” the accounts just as it had washed away the fields. However, in many Red Cross camps, refugees were forced to work for food and were not allowed to leave to go elsewhere for work, and if they refused to work, they would not be given any assistance.³⁴

The New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) increased the power of Lee County planters and made life worse for sharecroppers and tenants. Most New Deal agricultural programs were written by southern legislators.³⁵ Instead of being written to help all Americans, New Deal agricultural programs benefited large landholders and hurt sharecroppers, tenants, and wage laborers. The FERA, in particular, gave direct payments to planters, who were told to distribute these payments to their tenants as they saw fit. As such, almost no money made its way into the hands of tenants. The AAA made attempts to slow the eviction of tenants, but quotas placed on cotton, and the cash checks sent by the AAA encouraged planters to evict tenants and invest their subsidy

³² Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 65-68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

³⁴ Daniel, *Deep ’n as It Come*; Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 68.

³⁵ Jeannie Whayne, *A New Plantation South: Land Labor and Federal Favor in Twentieth Century Arkansas* (University of Virginia Press: Richmond, 1993), 149.

payments into mechanization.³⁶ The AAA gave planters the same amount of money whether they kept tenants on their land or not, encouraged mechanization through loans for tractors and other machinery, and generally encouraged efficiency over the livelihoods of individuals.

The actions of the AAA in Lee County contributed to unemployment and migration. In Lee County, thousands of sharecroppers were evicted, forced to move, or chose to move. In 1930 there were 3759 Black croppers, and in 1940 there were 2456.³⁷ A full 1/3rd of croppers were evicted or voluntarily migrated in those ten years in Lee County. In 1934, there were 477 eviction complaints from the state of Arkansas to AAA offices; of these, only eleven resulted in any action against planters.³⁸ Tenants who complained were often forced to give their reports to the very people they were complaining about.³⁹ There were attempts by the USDA and AAA to counter the abuses and to prevent the mass eviction of croppers, or at least mitigate the damage, through programs like the colony programs and expanding loan programs, but they never altered the subsidy and mechanization programs that encouraged the evictions in the first place.

The mechanization contributed to Marianna's abject poverty in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1930, there were twenty tractors in Lee County. This number doubled every year until corporate farms began buying out local farms in earnest in the late 1950s.⁴⁰ While the average number of tractors owned in the Delta, in general, jumped by 204% between 1930-1940, in Lee County, the number of tractors jumped by 1290%.⁴¹ The number of tenant farmers dropped just as precipitously. From 1930 to 1940, Lee County lost 1563 tenant farmers. The number of employed people in Lee County in 1940 was roughly 14,000,

³⁶Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 97.

³⁷ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census; "1935, Fifteenth Census of United States Agriculture: Volume 1, First and Second series State Reports, Part 3 "Arkansas," Statistics for Counties," Table 1. ; U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census; "1940, Sixteenth Census of United States Agriculture: Volume 1, First and Second series State Reports, Part 5 "Arkansas," Statistics for Counties," Table 7, [1940-Arkansas-1940-01-full.pdf](#).

³⁸ Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 98.

³⁹Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 96.

⁴⁰ Data and Methodology included in figure 2 in Appendix II "Number of Tractors".

⁴¹ Data and Methodology included in included in figure 2 in Appendix II "Number of Tractors".

which comes to a net loss of 11%, borne out by the county unemployment rate of 10% in 1940 and 9.5% emigration of the total population by 1950.⁴² Every five years from 1930 to 1970, roughly 1000 more tenant farmers were lost in the county, culminating in 1970 with a total of 992 compared to the 5509 in 1930.⁴³ This loss of 82% of tenant farmers over these forty years contributed to an exodus of 8000 people from the county over the same period.⁴⁴

Many planters in Lee County transitioned to other crops besides cotton after the Great Depression further reducing the need for farm labor. Despite the amount of farmed land in Lee County increasing from 247,799 acres in 1940 to 267,810 by 1970, the number of acres of land set aside for cotton decreased from 84,687 in 1935 to 47,552 by 1970, a drop of 56%.⁴⁵ Cotton was the plurality crop in Lee County for the first half of the twentieth century, but it was never more than 26% of the agricultural output.⁴⁶ While the amount of cotton grown in Lee County remained somewhat stable, if trending down, the amount of land set aside for other crops, besides soybeans, greatly decreased. The amount of land planted with corn, hay, and wheat dropped steadily. Corn dropped from 52,099 acres in 1940 to 3274 acres by 1965. Wheat decreased from 51,474 in 1940 to 7875 by 1965. Hay went from 25,900 in 1940 to 4047 by 1965. The land that was used to grow these grains was instead used to grow soybeans. Soybeans, increased from 16 acres in 1925 to

⁴² U.S. Department of Commerce; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "1950, Seventeenth Census of United States Agriculture: Volume 1, First and Second series State Reports, Part 5 "Arkansas," Chapter B, Statistics for Counties," [1950-Arkansas-Table_of_Contents-1802-Table-03.pdf](#); US Census Bureau; "Decennial 1950 Census, Number of Arkansas Inhabitants- Tables 12, 38, and 39."

⁴³ Data and Methodology included in figure 2 in Appendix II "Agricultural Jobs."

⁴⁴ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau; 1970 United States Census Data General Population Characteristics Arkansas, Chapter B p 53; https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1973/dec/population-volume-1.html#par_list_113.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. 1925. United States Census of Agriculture: Reports for States with Statistics for Counties and a Summary for the United States, Part II, The Southern States. Section I: Arkansas. County Table 1, 911-978, [1925-Arkansas-FullPDF-Table-01.pdf](#); U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1969, United States Census of Agriculture: Volume 1-Area Reports; Part 34, Arkansas. Section 1-Summary Data, Chapter 2: County Data for Selected Items, 267-285, [1969-Arkansas-1969-01-full.pdf](#).

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census; "1940, Sixteenth Census of United States Agriculture: Volume 1, First and Second series State Reports, Part 5 "Arkansas," Statistics for Counties," Table 7, [1940-Arkansas-1940-01-full.pdf](#); U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau; 1970 United States Census Data General Population Characteristics Arkansas, Chapter B p 53; https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1973/dec/population-volume-1.html#par_list_113.

110,695 acres by 1970.⁴⁷ Lee County, agriculturally diverse during the war years and before the Great Depression, transitioned to an economy that was totally based on soybeans and cotton by the mid-1960s. The transition from relative agricultural diversity to a primarily soy and cotton based economy greatly reduced the need for agricultural labor in Lee County.

The number of jobs lost in Lee County agriculture due to crop changes, migration, and mechanization is staggering. By 1949, mechanization, fertilizers, weed burners, and subsidy payments had reduced the need for agricultural labor by more than half since 1930. In 1930, Lee County had 4520 non-owner agricultural workers; by 1950, there were only 2127, a reduction of 53%.⁴⁸ During the war, the demand for farm labor increased the wages of those who stayed behind to work as croppers and farm laborers, but the post-war push for mechanization quickly made those laborers irrelevant. In Lee County, one cotton plantation, run by Thomas Gist, lowered the money he spent annually on farm laborers and croppers from \$5125 to \$2428 in 1949.⁴⁹ This massive decline in need for labor further altered the calculus for planters and their tenants, lowering wages for what laborers remained. The fall-off period for agricultural wage laborers in Lee County was 1950-1954, with a reduction in hired hands from 2883 to 1255 and farm labor costs lowered by about \$180,000 a year for the county.⁵⁰ After that point, less than a quarter of the jobs that existed before the great depression were left.

The White leadership encouraged the migration of African Americans from the Delta following the Great Depression and the Second World War. To force African Americans out, local and state governments slashed funding for programs that helped those out of work due to mechanization. Farm laborers were not

⁴⁷ Ibid., 53 and 267

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce; U.S. Bureau of the Census; "1950, Seventeenth Census of United States Agriculture: Volume 1, First and Second series State Reports, Part 5 "Arkansas," Chapter B, Statistics for Counties," [1950-Arkansas-Table_of_Contents-1802-Table-03.pdf](file:///D:/Agricultural%20Census%20Records/1950-Arkansas-Table_of_Contents-1802-Table-03.pdf).

⁴⁹ Wright, *Old South, New South*, 239.

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce; "1950 Arkansas Agricultural Census-Chapter B, County Table 3" file:///D:/Agricultural%20Census%20Records/1950-Arkansas-Table_of_Contents-1802-Table-03.pdf; U.S. Department of Commerce; "1954 Arkansas Agricultural Census Volume 1 Part 23. County Table 6," <file:///D:/Agricultural%20Census%20Records/1954-Arkansas-1954-01-full.pdf>.

eligible for unemployment benefits guaranteed to other workers by the 1935 Social Security Act.⁵¹ Instead, most relied on assistance programs that were poorly funded and had vague requirements and byzantine acceptance processes. These programs included: old age assistance, assistance for the blind, surplus food programs, and assistance for the permanently disabled.⁵² These programs were administered by the same men working to remove African American workers they had made obsolete. A mayor on the Mississippi side of the Delta explicitly told African American activists that he was working on kicking them out; he stated: “We’re going to see how tight we can make it- it’s going to be rough, rougher than you think.”⁵³ Since local government offices administered welfare programs, it was easy for local leaders to prevent funds from getting to those who needed them. If an unemployed or underemployed African American agricultural worker that relied on welfare joined a civil rights group or registered to vote, they could lose their assistance.

Lee County’s White leadership used the poll tax to severely limit African American voting. The Delta was controlled by elite Whites who ensured that only the “right” people had the ability to vote. The poll tax and the systems of disenfranchisement that went along with it ensured that the planter class stayed in power despite the Black majorities in places like Lee County. Lee County was a machine county, and its leaders were dedicated to keeping it that way.⁵⁴ For example, Lee County was the only county in Arkansas to give the majority of its votes to Strom Thurmond in 1948.⁵⁵ At the bottom were sharecroppers and tenants, whose votes were determined by planters who set up public ballot boxes and observed the voting

⁵³ De Jong, *You Can’t Eat Freedom*, 30-32, 35.

⁵⁴ Michael Pierce, “How to Win a Seat in the U.S. Senate: Carl Bailey to Bill Fulbright, October 20, 1943,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol 76, No. 4 (Winter 2017) 341-343; V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949; reprint. University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1977), 600.

⁵⁵ Griffin Stockley, *Hypogrif in Bubbaville* (Self-Published, 2020) 66.

process. The planters paid the poll taxes of their tenants, and if a tenant voted in a way the planter did not approve of, he was quickly fired.⁵⁶

There were numerous other methods that powerful Whites used to maintain power in the Delta. An illiterate voter was required to ask two polling judges to assist him with voting, and they were required to close the polling place while they helped the voter fill out his ballot. In practice, the policy made it an embarrassing proposition to attempt to vote if one was illiterate and allowed polling judges to ignore or refuse the request of those wishing to vote. Arkansas state politics was rife with fraud and graft; V.O. Key considered it the second most corrupt state regarding voting rights.⁵⁷ There were numerous ways that ballots could be lost or destroyed at the polling place: Key mentions ballot boxes with false bottoms, ones explicitly marked for African Americans to vote into so it could be disregarded, confusing multiple ballot box systems for each candidate, and even marked ballots-; finally, votes were simply miscounted to produce the required results.⁵⁸ Finally, there were wealthy and middle-class Whites, whose votes were always counted. Through the poll tax and the numerous other methods of disfranchisement, it was almost impossible for African Americans and poor Whites to challenge Democratic rule in the state up until the election reforms of the mid-1960s. Though an exact description of the techniques used to disfranchise voters in Lee County is not known, it is more than likely than not that those in power used some, if not all, of these techniques to prevent Blacks and poor Whites from voting. Voting for Blacks in Lee County, and the rest of the Delta, did not open up until the elimination of the poll tax in 1964.

Still, change came slowly. 1964-1968 represents a changeover in some county offices in many other parts of the state. In many counties there were nearly total regime changes between 1964 and 1968. However, in the Delta, only eight county offices had a changeover due to an actual election between 1964

⁵⁶ Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 602.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 443.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

and 1968. Lee County had no county office that changed hands due to an election from 1959 to 1973.⁵⁹ For example, a man named Courtney Langston, a father or son, held a position within the city government, first clerk and then sheriff, from 1927 until 1974. The same treasurer, Hugh Mixon, served from 1943 to 1973, and the same surveyor served from 1935 to 1979.⁶⁰ Though removing the poll tax was undoubtedly an improvement that drastically altered Arkansas state politics, it did not fundamentally change how Delta counties selected officers for at least a decade. While it did take time, the changes did produce results by the early 1970s.

While the Civil Rights Movement had undermined the legal underpinnings of Jim Crow and disfranchisement throughout most of the South by the mid-1960s, Lee County remained unchanged. The two prominent leaders in the Lee County African American community for the fifty years before the Boycott shied away from confrontation with White leaders. Ana Strong was the principal of the Robert S. Moton high school in Marianna from 1926 to 1957. The Moton School was considered one of Arkansas's finest African American schools. Strong regularly had African American leaders like Mary McCleod Bethune visit the school.⁶¹ Strong was far more than a mere school principal; she was also the president of the Arkansas Teachers Association, represented Arkansas teachers in meetings with congress several times, and was in regular contact with the Roosevelt administration.⁶² However, Strong did not want her students to stay in Lee County. She encouraged her students to leave and go up north to cities like Detroit and Chicago. In her mind, there was nothing of value in Lee County for African Americans, and that change would not come in the South. Lacey Kennedy led the Lee County Public Relations Council (LCPRC), the most significant local civil rights organization in the county. The NAACP did have a presence in Marianna,

⁵⁹ W.J. McCuen, *Historical Report of the Secretary of State 1986*, Little Rock (Office of the Secretary of the State of Arkansas, 1986), 504-705.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 702.

⁶¹ Neal, *Outspoken*, 33.

⁶² Calvin C. Smith, *Educating the Masses: The Unfolding History of Black School Administrators in Arkansas 1900-2000*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 42-44.

but it was overshadowed by the Lee County Public Relations Council. Kennedy owned a funeral home that and rented out homes to African American families. Kennedy worked to help African Americans in Lee County, and eventually held a seat on the Arkansas State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. However, Kennedy feared that if civil rights groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) or the Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee (SNCC) began operating in Lee County, they would start a violent conflict. As such, the Lee County Public Relations Council declined their assistance. Additionally, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and SNCC had Lee County on their radar, but did not send any representatives. SNCC was planning a voting drive in 1965, but got bogged down in Forrest City.⁶³ So, while Kennedy may have claimed that he and the Lee County Public Relations Council scared SNCC away, it is more likely that SNCC was merely busy elsewhere. Kennedy secured a few jobs for African Americans in the Marianna courthouse and at the Lee County Welfare office, but in general, he was largely ineffective in his attempts to help poor African Americans in Lee County.⁶⁴

Those who stayed and worked the few remaining agricultural jobs or transitioned to wage labor in manufacturing faced job insecurity, competition, and few employment opportunities. There were not enough industrial jobs available to replace the lost agricultural jobs. Marianna was better about having non-agricultural jobs than many other Delta towns, but openings for new positions were scant. In 1965, Lee County had 3199 African American workers: 1582 in agriculture, 594 tradespeople, 457 domestic service workers, and only 176 factory workers. In Marianna, three manufacturing plants hired African Americans. The first was Douglas and Lomason, the largest plant in Marianna during the 1960s and 1970s. The Marianna plant manufactured upholstery for General Motors cars. In 1967 the firm employed 475 hourly

⁶³ “55 Negro Majority Districts Lack Representation,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 7, 1969, 1; James Oscar Jones, interviewed by Joseph Mosnier, May 21, 2011. Civil Rights History Project, Library of Congress, accessed July 7, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669113/>.

⁶⁴ Schwartz, *In Service to America*, 240.

employees, 325 White and 150 African American, and twelve salaried employees, all White.⁶⁵ When describing their hiring practices, the plant manager stated: “We moved here from Detroit in 1960, strictly to do business and not to change the South. We worked strictly with the sentiments of the community and employed strictly White workers.” The company only began hiring African Americans in 1964 after the passage of the Civil Rights Act.⁶⁶ The second-largest was the Jack Winter Company, a manufacturer that made winter clothing. Of their 155 employees, only fourteen were African American, none in a clerical or supervisory position.⁶⁷ The final plant was Federal Compress and Warehouse Company, a cotton gin and packaging plant which employed eleven African Americans, none of them in a supervisory position. The local government generally did not offer employment to African Americans: In 1970, there was one African American police officer, one African American welfare clerk, two African American women working at the Farm Extension office, and one janitor working in the courthouse. Most local government jobs were patronage jobs, with the welfare clerk and janitor being hired through a local welfare program.⁶⁸ Without ready access to a large base of employment opportunities, those who worked at the few jobs outside of agriculture were expendable.

The powerful planter class through their control of jobs, local government, and education created a stratified political and economic system. This is not to say that there was no change or that the Civil Rights Movement did not meaningfully alter the lives of African Americans in the rural South, because it certainly did. The poll tax and de jure segregation were all a thing of the past. However, civil rights legislation was unable to shake up the economics and politics of the Delta. For most of its existence, the African American community in Lee County was reliant on agricultural jobs. The few industrial jobs that existed were not easy

⁶⁵ Arkansas State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, “Employment, Education, and Voting: A Report of An Open Meeting of the Arkansas State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in Forrest City, Arkansas,” November 1966, p. 49 in Folder 453, Box R6, Arkansas Civil Rights Committee Documents, Center for Arkansas History and Culture, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 24,28,29,42.

⁶⁸ Neal, *Outspoken*, 102.

to get and did not offer the possibility of a promotion. The abolition of the poll tax made it easier for African Americans to vote, on paper at least, but in practice, it was still challenging to vote or run for office. From 1876 to 1964, it was nearly inconceivable for any candidate to win any election in the Delta but the Democratic one. Jobs, something that African Americans could previously rely on due to the need for labor, became hard to come by as machines replaced agricultural workers. Many of the young people taught by leaders like Ana Strong left Lee County, joined civil rights organizations like SNCC, and some would eventually come back. Men like Olly Neal, Sterling King, and Rabon Cheeks received an education in Civil Right agitation from SNCC in Memphis and Chicago. When they did come back, they came with new tools provided by the Civil Rights Acts and a federal government genuinely sympathetic to the needs of the poor for perhaps the first time in its history.

Section III-The OEO, VISTA, and Lee County

In 1968 Winthrop Rockefeller allowed the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) to send volunteers to Lee County to help address the issues raised in the *Hunger U.S.A.* report. VISTA volunteers had been present in Arkansas since 1965, but what they encountered in Lee County was wholly different from their projects elsewhere in the state. The Lee County Cooperative Clinic represented everything that the White leaders feared about the changing world. To the Black community in Lee County, the clinic's eventual success was evidence that they could take and wield power for themselves. The grants, volunteers, and receptive ears provided by a sympathetic federal agency were all entirely new developments, and they came together to force the question of what the county would look like in the future. The Lee County Cooperative clinic made Lee County more hospitable to Black residents and encouraged them to stay and fight for economic equality.¹The attention from the outside shined a light on the political, economic, and educational conditions in Lee County and the Delta, and permanently changed the community.

The quagmire of systemic poverty, disfranchisement, and undercurrent of violence endemic to the South was integral to the creation of VISTA and the OEO, which were created to fight the roots of American poverty and inequality. Formed out of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiative, the OEO represented a new approach to alleviating poverty that sought to empower the impoverished to take control over their lives and communities and offer people a real chance at alleviating poverty. Before the OEO, most poor African Americans in Lee County, and the Delta in general, were eligible for government benefits that should have, in theory, provided them with enough food and money to feed their families and start pulling themselves up and out of poverty. In reality, these programs did the opposite, because these

¹ Neal, *Outspoken*, 105; Schwartz, *In Service to America*, 191.

assistance programs were wielded as weapons by local leaders. The top-down nature of these programs enabled abuse by local officials. It was easy to give out partial checks, deny legitimate claims, or create a confusing application process that ensured poor people would be denied basic benefits.² The only way to counter the abuse from local officials was to create a system that gave assistance directly to poor people from the federal government without the middlemen.

Before the creation of the OEO, the poverty relief programs run by the Federal Government were overseen by the United States Department of Agriculture. After the Depression ended, the USDA had two new responsibilities: feeding the poor and propping up American farms through subsidies and loans. These responsibilities often conflicted with the USDA's primary purpose, keeping American farming profitable, and the poor and the marginalized were caught in the middle. Because the primary purpose of the USDA was to help farmers stay profitable and not help the poor out of poverty, most programs were ineffective at best or outright harmful at worst.³

The primary stumbling block that prevented the USDA from effectively helping people out of poverty was how its programs were organized. The programs specifically designed to help the poor: the 1964 Food Stamps Act, the earlier Surplus Commodities Program, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, were all overseen by local governments. The local government set office hours for welfare offices, doled out the money and stamps, and could easily manipulate complaints and reports so that they never reached the federal level.⁴ These programs became another tool used by local leaders to either encourage people to leave the South or ensure that African Americans did not join civil rights organizations or back specific political candidates. Planters and local politicians often openly admitted that they were either

² De Jong, *You Can't Eat Freedom*, 30-32.

³ *Ibid.*, 20-21

⁴ Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 98.

refusing federal aid dollars or improperly doling them out to encourage African Americans to leave or keep them poor.⁵

The Johnson administration created the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1964 to counter this system. The OEO was one of eleven different programs formed as a part of Johnson's War on Poverty. While all of the Economic Opportunity Act sections were important, the most important for Lee County was VISTA. The OEO created VISTA in 1965 as a domestic equivalent to the Peace Corps intended to support impoverished communities in the United States, and Lee County became one of the first areas of opportunity. What made VISTA so effective, and controversial, were the Community Action Programs (CAPs). Local and state government officials had little input on OEO programs. The law required that a local nonprofit organization administer every CAP and that CAPs be "administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served."⁶ This was a radical departure from how USDA anti-poverty programs were run before the passage of the Great Society initiatives. Additionally, once approved by the governor and by the director of the OEO, grants were placed directly into the hands of the CAP and not to any state government or private entity.⁷ The Economic Opportunity Act allowed the United States government, for the first time, to place money directly into the hands of community created organizations, and it ensured that state and city governments could not take over the CAPs.

VISTA volunteers arrived in Lee County in 1969. In 1968, in the last months of his first term as governor, Winthrop Rockefeller requested that the OEO send in volunteers to Lee County. The 1968 report *Hunger U.S.A.* identified six Arkansas counties as "Hunger Counties," with Lee County the worst.

⁵ De Jong, *You Can't Eat Freedom*, 19-23.

⁶ U.S. Congress, *Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

The Lee County White establishment was angered at Rockefeller's action and disputed the report's findings and denied that their county had a poverty problem. Doctor Dwight Grey, the president of the Lee County Medical Association, called the entire report a lie and stated, "the sale of diet pills in Lee County is well above the national average" and "that Lee County's infant mortality rate is 15.5, below Arkansas' average of 15.9."⁸ T. H. Barker, the president of the Lee County Farm Bureau, one of the individuals responsible for distributing aid for the USDA, also denied any issues with hunger and poverty in Lee County. In a letter to the *Arkansas Gazette*, he wrote: "Lee County did not acquire poverty status until a bunch of bureaucrats decided that we should wear this label... if your figures are correct, check with the local revenue office to see how many of these people own automobiles, which is really a status symbol. Drive down the highways and roadways and count the television aerials and make up your own mind as to the real status of these people."⁹

Political leaders in Marianna had long welcomed federal welfare programs as long as they controlled them and the money that came with them. School board president Lon Mann, business owner and Councilman Jimason Daggett, and Judge Haskell Adams had worked with Lacey Kennedy on poverty issues since 1965. All four men communicated with Senator Fulbright to attract OEO and HUD grants to build low-cost housing, pave roads, build sewer infrastructure, and set up head start programs.¹⁰ In 1968, the Lee County Development Council, which contained Haskell Adams, Dwight Grey, Lon Mann, Hugh Mixon, Lacey Kennedy, and Mayor Dozier, boasted that over the past three years it had created a low-income farmer training program, built a cafeteria for the Black high school, built a new White high school, built 111 low-income homes, secured a \$1.4 million grant to build sewer infrastructure, built three miles of

⁸ "Gathings Is Taking Aim at Report on Hunger," *Arkansas Gazette*, May 26, 1968, 5.

⁹ "Marianna" *Arkansas Gazette*, November 30, 1969, 70.

¹⁰ J.W. Fulbright to Lacey Kennedy June 7, 1965, Box 19, Folder 5, J. William Fulbright Papers, Second Accession, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville; "Jimason Daggett to J. William Fulbright," February 6, 1967, *Ibid.*

paved highway roads, and had secured the construction of a new John Deere parts store. Their goals for 1970 were better school books, after-school programs, a new post office, playgrounds, and more industrial jobs.¹¹ These initiatives did not threaten the status quo or empower Black leaders so were readily supported by Lee County Whites. It was only when Whites were not in charge of the federal money that men like Hugh Mixon and John Oxner began to turn against federal aid programs.

Around the same time that VISTA entered Lee County and threatened the established order, the federal government also demanded integration of the local schools. The landmark *Brown v. Board* ended school segregation on paper but was vague about how communities were to go about ending the practice. In some parts of Arkansas, desegregation was simple, as few African Americans lived there. In East Arkansas, Delta communities used “freedom of choice” programs that, on paper, allowed African American and White students to decide where to attend school. The freedom of choice program was created in the early 1960s to stall integration. It forced African Americans to opt their children in to attend former White-only schools. The system was easily abusable by local White officials. Due to mistrust, threats, bureaucracy, fear, and unfamiliarity, the system effectively prevented large-scale integration. A 1966 meeting of the Arkansas State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights requested that a school official come from each of the nine majority African American counties in Arkansas and report on integration efforts. L. Whitten, the superintendent of Lee County’s school district, reported that only seventeen out of the 3500 African American students were enrolled in the former White schools.¹² Only one school official, Forrest City school superintendent William Irving, attended the meeting. He testified that he felt no need to do more to integrate the schools and that the Arkansas freedom of choice program

¹¹ “Lee County Development Council: Marianna Arkansas, March 27, 1968,” in Folder 5, Box 19. William Fulbright Papers, Second Accession.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

was enough to integrate schools.¹³ Irving's data from his district, the Forrest City Special School District, showed only token integration after implementing the freedom of choice program. There were 2890 White students and 3510 African American students in his district. Of the African American students, only seventy-seven attended the formerly White schools. No White students attended the still all-Black schools.

In 1966, the Arkansas Commission on Civil Rights conducted interviews with African American families in Lee County that chose to send their children to formerly all-White schools and found that only those who were financially secure and had stable jobs sent their children to White schools. Two families interviewed, the Davis and the Savage families, believed that their children received better educations at the White schools and encouraged other African American parents to send their children to the schools. However, the interviewer commented: "Both the Davises and the Savages are relatively nondependent on Whites for their livelihood. Mrs. Davis works for an electronics plant outside of the county that is an equal opportunity employer, and the Savages are buying their own farm. Both expressed the view that many of their friends were afraid to send their children to the White schools because of their dependence on Whites." The Savages were land-owning farmers, and had no outstanding mortgage on their land.¹⁴ Both families understood that the only way to provide their children with a quality education was to be economically independent.

Lee County only abandoned freedom of choice after the Supreme Court's 1968 *Green v. County School Board of New Kent* decision ruled that such systems were unconstitutional and went against the spirit of the 1954 *Brown* decision. For the first time, a large number of African American students began attending formerly White-only schools in towns like Marianna. Many communities reacted to the *Green* decision by building segregation academies. Lee County's segregation academy was named Lee Academy.

¹³ "Employment, Education, and Voting: A Report of An Open Meeting of the Arkansas State Advisory Committee," 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

The school was founded the same year that the high schools in Marianna were fully desegregated, 1969. Teachers and school administrators had long been pillars of African American communities but Arkansas school districts fired thousands of African American teachers and administrators during this phase of school integration, 1968-1971.¹⁵ The first post-freedom of choice school year in Lee County coincided with the firing of five African American teachers and school administrators. These teachers protested that they were fired due to their involvement with civil rights groups but were denied reinstatement.¹⁶

The first VISTA volunteers arrived in Lee County in 1969, mostly unaware of the complex class and racial dynamics endemic to the Delta. They were tasked by VISTA, like all first wave volunteers, with determining the goals of the local Community Action Agency (CAA), forming the Neighborhood Action Committees (NAC), and getting the ball rolling so that the locals could set up a Community Action Program (CAP). The first two volunteers were Corrine Cass, a nurse, and Jan Wrede, a science teacher. They organized the first NACs in Lee County, with one in Marianna, Rondo, Brickeys, and Moro. Each NAC sent two representatives to form a board of directors in charge of the larger CAP.¹⁷

The goals of the Lee County organization centered on healthcare. Earlier that year, a local Black woman had died in childbirth of eclampsia because the local, privately owned, Lee County hospital refused to admit her. She was unable to pay off a nine-dollar medical bill from a previous visit and, as was the hospital's custom, was told to drive the hour and a half to Memphis to receive treatment there. Due to unpaved roads and a rainstorm that made them unpassable, she died before reaching the hospital. In response, the newly formed group voted to create a free clinic for their community.¹⁸ The two VISTA volunteers lobbied OEO officials in Washington to send a doctor to help set up the clinic, and Dr. Dan

¹⁵ Morgan, "Marianna: A Sociological Essay on an Eastern Arkansas Town," 26.

¹⁶ "Three Ex-Teachers Ask for Reinstatement," *Arkansas Democrat*, August 8, 1970, 2.

¹⁷ Neal, *Outspoken*, 68.

¹⁸ Neal, *Outspoken*, 72.

Blumenthal, the first doctor to volunteer for VISTA in the United States, arrived in Lee County in late 1969.¹⁹

While Blumenthal eventually became the face of the clinic, the leadership of the clinic was always the eight-person board of directors formed from the four NACs. The panel was called the Lee County Concerned Citizens (shortened to Concerned Citizens to avoid confusion). The name was chosen as a foil to the local White Citizens Council affiliate called the Lee County Concerned Citizens Council (shortened to Citizens Council). The board decided who was hired and fired, how money was spent, where the clinic was built, and whom it served. Initially, VISTA organizers planned a series of health clinics along the Mississippi River that would serve all of Eastern Arkansas, but the OEO rejected this plan for being too expensive. Only the Lee County clinic was ever built.²⁰ It was the third community health center built by VISTA in the United States, and became a model upon which other communities based their health centers. The Concerned Citizens initially received \$39,750 in early 1969 to set up the clinic and operate from January to July. At first, Jan Wrede served as the clinic administrator and shared the leadership role with a representative from the board. The board placed Olly Neal in charge in April 1969, and Wrede soon left. By the summer of 1969, the board had complete control over the clinic and its finances.²¹

Neal and the board used the clinic as a base to build a political movement to gain jobs, political power, and better healthcare for the people the clinic was made for. Olly Neal's philosophy towards civil rights activism differed from the peaceful, non-violent approach most commonly associated with the classical civil rights era. While leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Bayard Rustin had advocated for nonviolent, peaceful resistance, Neal believed that violent confrontation had its place in civil rights protests.

¹⁹ Schwartz, *In Service to America*, 128.

²⁰ Olly Neal interviewed by Linda McDowell, December 15, 2014, *The Civil Rights Movement in Arkansas: A Struggle for Freedom*, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System, accessed July 7, 2022, <https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15728coll5/id/2354/rec/1>; "A VISTA Volunteer's Christmas Story," *Arkansas Democrat*, December 21, 1969, 43.

²¹ Interview with Neal, December 15, 2014.

Neal and his associates were part of the rising movement in the late 60s that embraced self-defense and Black Power. Neal stated, “I agree with this concept created by Jesse Epps. Let the poor distribute the suffering. Why should I help you if you aren’t willing to help me? If we aren’t going to be a part of the community, if there aren’t going to be any black elected officials, no blacks working in the banks, and no shops with any black employees, then why should we participate? I have no regrets about shutting Marianna down and closing all them businesses. . . if you’re going to slap me across the face, I’m gonna slap you right back!”²² Olly Neal’s eye for an eye approach to civil rights agitation and his willingness to go toe to toe with the White establishment would normally be quickly quashed by the economic and political realities in a small Southern town like Marianna. However, because the existence of the Lee County clinic was guaranteed through grants from the OEO, and the local government did not have the authority to control those funds, he remained as director of the clinic. The White power structure in Lee County confronted a new type of activism with the return of Neal and the arrival of the Great Society Programs.

Born in Marianna in 1931, Neal grew up in Lee County and left to attend Lemoyne College in 1959. During the 1960s, except for a period in which he was drafted to serve in Vietnam in 1965, Neal was an aggressive civil rights agitator. He participated in the Memphis sit-ins in 1960 and 1961, joined SNCC by 1962, and founded a community action group dedicated to assisting pregnant and lactating mothers in 1968.²³ After fighting in Vietnam he went to Chicago and worked as a postal worker and chemist for several years until the death of his mother. When he returned to Marianna in 1969 to be with his elderly father after his mother’s death, a few members of the Concerned Citizens approached him and asked him to run for the position of clinic director. Neal had a file with the FBI, which only contained offenses for loitering and demonstrating for civil rights causes, and was considered to be a troublemaker by some

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

members of the Lee County NAC.²⁴ Neal often got into fights during his childhood in Marianna and mouthed off to his elders. It was only because one of the board members remembered how respectful and good of a man Neal's great-grandfather had been that he was placed in charge of the clinic by one vote.²⁵

Neal and the board modeled their new clinic on the Tufts-Delta Health Center (TDHC), located just eighty miles away in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. The TDHC was created by the OEO in 1965 and opened its clinic in 1967. Bolivar County, where Mound Bayou is located, was the second poorest county in the United States and nearly one hundred percent African American. The clinic provided low-cost healthcare to 14,000 impoverished people around the region. Crucially, what made the TDHC and other OEO programs so effective, is that the clinic acted as a foundation upon which the community could build. First and foremost, the clinic was economically independent of the local White power structure. This allowed political independence and ensured that local officials could not force the clinic to shut down or conform to their ideas. Second, the clinic employed people considered unemployable in the White-controlled job market. As the TDHC expanded, it offered more and more jobs to the community. Those that worked these jobs invested in themselves and their families, providing living counter examples to the narratives of lazy and unwilling African Americans painted by their former bosses. Clinic employees used their positions and the extra money to seek education and certification and opened small businesses.²⁶ By the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, the TDHC survived on its own through donations, other grants, and payments from patients. It used its considerable wealth and influence to force White-owned businesses to hire African Americans and help elect African American candidates to office through boycotts and direct negotiation. The TDHC demonstrated that through direct support, circumventing the structures of White supremacy, and

²⁴ Olly Neal, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Record, March 13, 1970, John McClellan Papers, Folder 15, Box 3742, John McClellan Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas.

²⁵ Neal, *Outspoken*, 80.

²⁶ De Jong, *You Can't Eat Freedom*, 67-69.

providing a foundation upon which to build the nation's poorest could pull themselves out of poverty and create a functioning community for themselves. One resident of Bolivar County said, "I was able to raise my children half decent, give them some of the things I never would have been able to give them, and I couldn't have done it without the TDHC, I'm thankful."²⁷ The LCCC and the TDHC were so close that Olly Neal married a pediatrician who worked at the TDHC, and often drove over to the clinic to ask her for advice.²⁸

To get the clinic built, the Lee County Concerned Citizens had to go toe to toe with the influential White leaders of Lee County, especially Lon Mann, Jamison Daggett, Haskell Adams, Hugh Mixon, Dan Felton, John Oxner, and Dwight Grey. Mann was president of the school board, a significant landowner and farmer, owner of a local cotton gin that employed several dozen people, and a long-time associate of the farm extension office in Marianna. Daggett ran a local law firm, was a cotton planter, and owned the local pharmacy. Felton headed the Farm Bureau in Lee County, owned the Federal Compress cotton gin, and was a local farmer.²⁹ Mixon owned a cotton gin and was county treasurer.³⁰ Adams was the county judge. Oxner was Marianna's mayor. Finally, Grey was one of only four medical doctors in Lee County and was the Lee County Medical Society president. Resistance came not only from these men, but also from members of their families. The Daggetts, Feltons, and Manns all had family members on the city council, the school board, or the county Citizens Council or worked in the offices of the sheriff, farm extension or Farm Bureau. Civil Rights laws could be ignored, segregation academies could be built, and elections could be stolen, but Lee County leaders could not stop the OEO and VISTA. Grey, in a letter to Senator McClellan, openly expressed his fears about VISTA, describing the organization as having "unlimited funds

²⁷ De Jong, *You Can't Eat Freedom*, 67.

²⁸ Neal, *Outspoken*, 76, 74, 149-150.

²⁹ Susan Daggett, "Marianna Arkansas: A Study of Small-Town Race Relations," 25-30.

³⁰ Hugh Mixon Jr. to Dale Bumpers, March 03, 1972, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 47, Folder 4, "Correspondence," Dale Bumpers Papers.

and had the ear of the federal courts.” Grey even feared that Senator John McClellan, an outspoken opponent of the clinic, was actually a secret supporter due to the senator’s lack of action.³¹

The VISTA volunteers that the White leadership assumed were pulling the strings were naïve college students that often did not understand the true motives of the Lee County leaders. VISTA volunteers, primarily recent college graduates from out of state, often did not comprehend why White leaders opposed them so vigorously. They had assumed it was mostly racism. Even long-term Delta activists who started as VISTA volunteers, like Earl Anthes, believed for years that racism was the main reason for the resistance they faced but later came to understand that economics was the main barrier.³² He stated, “we were conscious that we were violating social norms by taking people to the ‘wrong’ waiting rooms...But we didn’t realize what that violation really meant until much later.”³³ Racism was undoubtedly a factor, but they often did not comprehend that a significant reason for the stiff resistance was due to the economic control that powerful Whites held in Marianna. Racism was more than just a tool for social control, planters like Dan Felton and Lon Mann profited greatly from that control. Fighting segregation, working towards equitable access to medical care, and demanding better jobs and pay threatened not just the political power that these men held, but their wealth as well. The system that disenfranchised and impoverished African Americans made White planters wealthy, and this was the reason for the stiff resistance.

The leaders of the NACs were church officials, midwives, union members, and small farmers. None of them owned a business, had a position in local government, or were a member of a professional society. The only power they had to resist the significant resources of the White power structure came from

³¹ Dwight Gray to Senator John McClellan, June 30, 1970, in Folder 4, Box 3742, McClellan Papers.

³² Earl Anthes interviewed by Jajuan Johnson, November 18, 2008, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System, accessed July 7, 2022, <https://arstudies.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15728coll15/id/840/rec/1>.

³³ Ibid.

OEO grants, cooperation with VISTA, and community organizations. Without alternative access to jobs, education, and healthcare, African Americans had to stay within the confines created for them by those that controlled the county. Based on the success of the TDHC in Bolivar County, the Lee County Concerned Citizens realized that with the assistance of federal funds and VISTA volunteers, they could use a medical clinic to build a base upon which they could create a political force to create jobs and wrest control of their town. They combined local organization with national relief programs and volunteers to effectively resist the entrenched White leaders of Lee County.

The first round of the conflict between the county's White leadership and the Concerned Citizens involved the selection of a site for the clinic. The first proposed location was an abandoned railroad depot, part of the Missouri Pacific, that had sat empty for over a decade. MoPac offered the building for \$150 a month but lowered it to \$50 after the board informed the railroad that it could not pay that sum.³⁴ The building was a reasonable size and in a good location. The MoPac deal quietly fell through, and no real reason was given to the board as to why the lease was rejected after being tentatively approved. Olly Neal found out later that the rejection was because of interference from Lee County's White leadership. MoPac's legal affairs in eight Arkansas Delta counties were handled by Jamison Daggett. Daggett came from a long line of segregationists. Griff Stockley, in his memoirs, recalled that Daggett once remonstrated him for referring to an African American as a "Colored Lady" instead of a "Colored Woman," which would have been more appropriate.³⁵ Daggett learned from MoPac of the clinic board's efforts to lease the abandoned depot. Daggett instead convinced MoPac to rent the building to Lon Mann. Mann's cotton gin was located across the street from the abandoned railway depot and used the depot as a parking lot during harvest time.³⁶

³⁴ Neal, *Outspoken*, 75.

³⁵ Stockley, *Hypogrif in Bubbaville*, 97.

³⁶ Neal, *Outspoken*, 95.

Through their legal connections, economic power, and professional association, the White leaders won the first battle.

Unable to secure a location, Blumenthal and Corrine Cass operated out of the back of Blumenthal's car for several months. This changed when local civil rights leader Lacey Kennedy donated a house to the clinic. Kennedy, the longtime head of the Lee County Public Relations Council, was one of the wealthiest African Americans in Marianna.³⁷ The only reason that the clinic got off the ground at all was because of the economic independence of one of the most prominent members of the African American community. Direct money from the OEO, support from VISTA volunteers, and the donation of the building helped the African American community to build a community health center on its own. Without such a joint effort the clinic would not have been possible.

The clinic's first community health programs, modeled on techniques developed by the Tufts-Delta Health Center, sought to bring sanitation, clean water, and dietary changes to low-income families in Lee County. The program was relatively inexpensive and significantly increased health outcomes. Olly Neal recalled that it was very common for children to suffer from intestinal parasites because of water contaminated with feces. The simple act of building wells uphill from existing outhouses dramatically changed the lives of entire families.³⁸ The most common ailments that poor African Americans suffered from in Lee County were diet-related issues like heart disease, diabetes, and general malnutrition; parasites like roundworm, hookworm, and tapeworms; and intestinal diseases like cholera and dysentery.³⁹ The clinic held classes to help change people's diets in the area and gave out small amounts of money to help impoverished families purchase good quality food. They also built wells and outhouses for low-income families. These low-cost measures to improve the general health were paired with a "pay according to your

³⁷ Interview with Antony Hobbs, August 8, 2014.

³⁸ Interview with Olly Neal, December 15, 2014.

³⁹ Schwartz, *In Service to America*, 191.

need” medical clinic staffed by Dr. Blumenthal and two nurses. Just simple access to healthcare and better sanitation greatly improved outcomes for poor people in Lee County. What made the Lee County clinic’s early successes so remarkable was that despite a meager budget and few resources, the clinic could help quite a few people. Initially, the clinic only had a budget of \$39,000. Most of the medical supplies were drug samples meant for salespeople or expired medicine. The only vehicle available for house calls was Dr. Blumenthal’s car.⁴⁰ Yet volunteers and clinic staff improved health outcomes to the point that the Black community rallied around them. As opposition to the clinic got fiercer, the African American community became more willing to stand up as a group and defend it.

The opposition, though, found new ways to throw up roadblocks for the clinic. While able to address things like parasites, simple infections, and dietary issues, the clinic could not treat emergency cases or admit Black patients to the local hospital. The twenty-six bed Lee County Memorial Hospital required physicians to belong to the Lee County Medical Society if they wanted admitting privileges. In 1970 the society had four members: Dwight Grey, the president of the society whose office had segregated waiting rooms; Mac McLendon, who also had segregated waiting rooms; Floyd Dozier, who only saw White patients; and Elizabeth Fields, whose patients were primarily Black and, according to Olly Neal, had delivered more African American babies than anyone in the county.⁴¹ Of the four members of the society, only Fields favored allowing Blumenthal to join.⁴² Grey, who had earlier dismissed reports of poverty in Lee County, argued that Blumenthal had made a medical mistake and excluded him on those grounds. The error was non-fatal, and Blumenthal corrected it himself.⁴³ Blumenthal recalled, years later, that had Grey pulled him aside soon after he arrived and told him that “he had segregated waiting rooms because that’s

⁴⁰ Neal, *Outspoken*, 72-74.

⁴¹ Interview with Olly Neal, December 15, 2014.

⁴² “4 Member Medical Society Blocks VISTA Doctor,” *Arkansas Gazette*, November 16, 1969, 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

what the colored folks wanted, and then he winked.”⁴⁴ McLendon was more obvious in his disdain towards the Lee County Clinic. He stated that he voted against Blumenthal joining the society because the VISTA physician encouraged African Americans to agitate for more rights.⁴⁵ Despite voting against Blumenthal, Dozier said in testimony over the phone before a United States House Judiciary Subcommittee, that he never saw Blumenthal’s application and, when pressed if he had voted against it, hung up.⁴⁶ A 1969 CBS documentary that was eventually published in book form, *Don’t Get Sick in America*, quoted a Lee County “male doctor in his mid-40s wearing a Wallace for president campaign button” as saying the local Black population “only spend money on whiskey and cigarettes.”⁴⁷ This could only have been Dozier, the lone male doctor in Lee County under eighty years old. Without admitting privileges, the clinic’s emergency patients had to be driven to Memphis or Little Rock to receive treatment. The clinic board filed a lawsuit against the Lee County Medical Society in May 1970, challenging the decision, but it was not resolved until 1974. By that time, Dr. Blumenthal had been replaced two times over. VISTA doctors received admitting privileges before the end of the lawsuit in 1972, but did not have a vote on how Lee County handled health issues until 1974.

By the end of 1969, the Concerned Citizens and Olly Neal set their eyes on local politics. African Americans made up 61% county population in 1970, but no elected officials in Lee County were African American.⁴⁸ Additionally, the board discovered that the county judge appointed the members to the hospital board. If a sympathetic county judge could be elected, Dr. Blumenthal could gain admitting privileges at the memorial hospital. The Lee County Concerned Citizens ran African American candidates for the justice of the peace, county judge, and treasurer in 1970. Fannie Lou Hamer, the famed civil rights leader, came to

⁴⁴ Schwartz, *In Service to America*, 197.

⁴⁵ “A Test at Marianna,” *Arkansas Gazette* November 19, 1969, 6.

⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, “Competition in the Health Services Market” House Judiciary Subcommittee of Antitrust, Commercial, and Administrative Law. Ninety-Third Congress, Second Session. May 17, 1974, 516, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=tGiOuzVAXPkC&pg=GBS.PA586&hl=en>.

⁴⁷ Daniel Shorr, *Don’t Get Sick in America* (Nashville TN: Aurora Publishers, 1970), 34.

⁴⁸ Neal, *Outspoken*, 86; “Lee County Election Practices Reported,” *Many Voices*, November 11, 1970, 1.

Marianna in 1970, just before the election. Addressing a crowd of potential voters, Hamer declared: “It is time for a change, the coming election is the first opportunity for political change in Arkansas in the last 400 years.”⁴⁹ With the Democratic Party firmly in the hands of White conservatives, each Concerned Citizen candidate ran as a Republican, and the Republican Party offices in Little Rock sent an official named John Sisk to help with the election. Sisk was to act as the primary organizer for the campaign and was supposed to appoint strong election judges and clerks from the Black community to ensure no voter intimidation or fraud, but Sisk was uninterested in working with African Americans and instead selected poll watchers randomly. The Concerned Citizens hired Robert Morehead, an African American lawyer, to ensure that the city followed state election law, but he was ignored by the local police and Mayor Oxner. Sherriff Langston posted White deputies at majority African American polling places to intimidate them, forced African American voters to wait outside of polling places in the rain, did not allow any nonvoter within one hundred feet of a polling place, and arrested any poll watcher who attempted to monitor the vote. Morehead was not given access to the official count and was unable to account for the location of the ballot boxes for two hours. Despite an 85% turnout in a county that was 61% Black, only one African American office-seeker won, justice of the peace candidate Piston Brady. Morehead and Neal found out later from an informant inside the Lee County Citizen’s Council that their candidates for treasurer and county judge had won, but the county officials stuffed the ballot boxes with fake absentee ballots.⁵⁰ The Concerned Citizens could not afford to have Morehead challenge the election results in state court and had to accept the results. Piston Brady, the only African American candidate to “win,” was anonymously threatened and nearly lost his farm due to problems with the bank that only came up after he took office as justice of the peace.⁵¹ The night after

⁴⁹ “Hamer Speaks to Voters,” *Many Voices*, November 11, 1970, 8.

⁵⁰ Neal, *Outspoken*, 95.

⁵¹ “Hamer Speaks to Voters,” *Many Voices*, November 11, 1970; Neal, *Outspoken*, 90; “Lee County Election Should be Thrown Out,” *Many Voices*, November 11, 1970, 3.

the stolen election, several dozen armed African Americans went to the Lee County courthouse and were only barely talked down from violence by a local preacher.⁵²

The arrival of VISTA and effective integration fundamentally altered how African Americans in Lee County understood their position in society. The bottom-up approach to poverty assistance that the OEO adopted circumvented local politics and allowed organization without fear of hunger or unemployment, while the federal government simultaneously desegregated schools. After decades of neglect, the attention from the federal government and the promise of funding inspired Lee County African Americans to make a stand for their new health clinic. The OEO grants provided the dollars necessary for the Lee County Concerned Citizens to create a foundation upon which further economic and political structures could be built. Like their neighbors in Mound Bayou, the Lee County Clinic was poised to be an institution from which jobs, education, and representation could spring. However, local White resistance, election fraud, and the waning influence of the OEO following Nixon's victory in 1968 inflamed tensions between the Lee County clinic and the local power structure in Lee County to the point of conflict—the 1971 boycott. Despite many setbacks, the clinic was able to survive. Their successes infuriated powerful Whites and intensified their resistance to VISTA and the clinic. The boycott that came in 1971 was that conflict, and its mixed legacy of violence and economic damage divided Lee County for decades.

⁵² Interview with Antony Hobbs, August 8, 2014.

Section IV-The Boycott

Tillman's arrest ignited a mountain of tinder that had been building for years. The episode infuriated the Lee County Concerned Citizens, the clinic board, and, perhaps most importantly, Olly Neal's younger brother Prentiss. Prentiss Neal demanded that Black folks boycott White-owned businesses, and the Concerned Citizens agreed. Using the organizational skills learned from forming the clinic and running a slate in the 1970 election, the Concerned Citizens quickly came together around the idea. On June 11, three days after Tillman's arrest, the Lee County Concerned Citizens sent city hall a list of forty-one demands. These demands had to be met, or the county's entire African American population would boycott the White-owned businesses in Marianna. Thirty of the demands concerned employment, including calls to rehire fired school employees, place prominent African Americans in government offices, and hire Blacks at many private businesses. Other demands included integrating the local national guard, public housing, the volunteer fire department, and the school board. The last few asked for respect, an end to police harassment, and inclusion in county meetings. When city hall did not respond to the demands, the Marianna boycott began.¹

For the entire history of Lee County, African Americans had mounted challenges to elite White control. Most of these attempts quietly failed, but the 1971 boycott was different. By 1970, it was no longer a simple task to disregard Black voters and ignore federal school integration mandates. However, despite the evident gains, Lee County Blacks were unable to take power by themselves. While weaker than it had been, the White elite still ruled in Marianna. It was only when VISTA volunteers and federal money came trickling in that African Americans found allies and began to put significant pressure on Marianna's White leadership. The direct dollars from the Office of Economic Opportunity changed the entire game. For the

¹ "Marianna Blacks in 8-day Boycott, Ask Chamber of Commerce for Talks," *Arkansas Gazette*, June 19, 1971, 3.

first time, money was placed directly into the hands of activists and poor people instead of flowing through the hands of mayors, city councilmen, and governors. This influx of cash and willing helpers allowed activists to protest and organize without the fear of co-optation or running out of money. Without the OEO, VISTA, and the sympathetic assistance of a willing federal government, the Marianna Boycott may not have even happened, let alone have been as effective. Without the White elite beginning to feel their world coming to an end, they might have ignored the \$2.00 pizza and an insulted policeman. The boycott's success may be in question, but that it was ever able to happen at all is evidence of the efficacy of the OEO and VISTA.

The boycott began dramatically but lost steam rather quickly. The first month, picketers marched in front of the Marianna courthouse with signs that read: "ATTENTION! BROTHERS AND SISTERS! STAY OUT OF THE DOWNTOWN STORES BEGINNING AT 8:00 AM, FRIDAY, JUNE 11, 1971." This was accompanied by leaflets: "HELP YOURSELVES, KEEP YOUR MONEY IN YOUR POCKET, NO SHOPPING; WHITE PEOPLE HAVE MONEY IN THEIR VEINS, BLEED EM, NO SHOPPING; I'M BLACK AND I'M PROUD, HOW ABOUT YOU? NO SHOPPING!"² Despite the dramatic start, little fanfare accompanied the boycott by the middle of July. Only Rabon Cheeks and Prentiss Neal continued to picket downtown.³ It was still possible at this stage that everything would blow over and that the lack of publicity, and total silence from the city government and businesses, would kill the boycott.

County Judge Haskell Adams energized the boycott when he unexpectedly attacked protesters with his truck. On July 14, 1971, Adams, one of the primary opponents of the clinic, drove from the street onto the sidewalk and narrowly missed running over Cheeks and Prentiss Neal.⁴ Neal and Cheeks went to

² Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, 195.

³ Neal, *Outspoken*, 105.

⁴ "County Judge Faces 2 Counts at Marianna," *Arkansas Gazette*, July 18, 1971, 1.

Sheriff Courtney Langston, who refused to take action, insisting that the incident had not occurred. Inexplicably, while Langston was attempting to get the two picketers out of his office, Adams entered the building waving a pistol. He pointed it in Prentiss Neal's face and said: "you niggers get out of here. I run the courthouse. I will kill the whole pack of you sons of bitches." Langston, who had also opposed the clinic and had participated in election fraud in 1970, restrained and arrested Adams before he could shoot Prentiss Neal.⁵ The incident broadly displayed the fear and resentment that White elites in Marianna had towards the protestors and presaged the violence that was to come.

Haskell Adams' attack on Prentiss Neal angered the Black community, and Lee County Whites packed the Marianna courthouse on the day of Adams' arraignment, only four days after the attack. Adams admitted he had almost run down Cheeks and Neal, but claimed that his brakes had malfunctioned.⁶ Adams argued during the hearing that because he was the leader of the Lee County Civil Defense and an auxiliary policeman, he had a right to carry a gun. He also testified that Rabon Cheeks threatened him three times over the phone. Municipal judge James Van Dover convened a grand jury. After three and a half hours of testimony from multiple witnesses, the grand jury charged Adams with misdemeanor assault and carrying a prohibited weapon.⁷ According to Prentiss Neal, armed Whites stood at the courthouse and refused to allow any Blacks to enter during the hearing. Neal remarked: "They stuffed the courtroom with whites. They wouldn't let any blacks in...then I could see the handles. They had pistols!"⁸ There was no trial. Adams plead no contest and received a \$95 fine. That the county judge admitted to threatening to kill a peaceful protestor and received nothing but a small fine incensed an already angry Black community. That Tillman was required to post a \$2500 bond on charges of refusing to pay for a \$2 pizza, but the county judge

⁵ "Lee County Election Practices Reported," *Many Voices*, November 11, 1970, 1.

⁶ "County Judge Is Accused." *Arkansas Democrat*, July 18, 1971, 8.

⁷ Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, 196; "County Judge Faces 2 Counts at Marianna," *Arkansas Gazette*, July 18, 1971, 1; Neal, *Outspoken*, 106; "Judge" *Arkansas Gazette*, July 19, 1971, 2.

⁸ "Lee County Judge Fined in Assault: Adams Pleads No Contest to Charges," *Arkansas Democrat*, August 5, 1971, 2.

received a small fine for assault and brandishing a firearm showed just how entrenched and powerful the White leadership was in Marianna and hardened the African American boycotters. At this point, the protests turned violent.

The boycotters and their supporters put up a united front in public but were divided into several unofficial factions that worked separately and had different philosophies for winning the boycott. The first group was the clinic board and the NACs set up by VISTA and the OEO. Those associated with these groups were not allowed, by federal law, to participate in any political action.⁹ While the Lee County White Citizen's Council and the local government portrayed the clinic's Olly Neal as the boycott leader and its mastermind, this was not the case on paper. He was certainly involved, and assuredly took part in some of the actions, but because of the precarious position of the clinic, he kept a low profile. The second group was the Lee County Concerned Citizens. This group was formally in charge of the boycott and created all the brochures and fliers. It avoided being associated with the violence that permeated Lee County during the boycott and, instead, encouraged community action, peaceful protest, and cooperation with the government of Lee County. The third group was the VISTA volunteers working as health advocates throughout the Delta. They were also not allowed to participate in the boycott or any local civil rights organizing, but several resigned from VISTA to do so. Many of these VISTA veterans worked for the West Memphis civil rights newspaper *Many Voices*, which chronicled abuses and protests throughout the Delta. Finally, the more radical boycotters formed a clandestine group that called themselves, interchangeably, the "Toe-Breakers" and the "Back Breakers." This group carried out violent acts. It coerced reluctant African Americans into joining in the boycott and retaliated against violent acts committed by the Citizen's Council.¹⁰

⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *To Mobilize the Financial Resources of the Nation to Combat Poverty in the United States (Economic Opportunity Act of 1964)*, Public Law 452, 88th Congress, Introduced August 20, 1964,520.

¹⁰ Antony Hobbs, interview by Linda McDowell, August, 8, 2014

The actions of the Toe-Breakers remain controversial in Marianna. The violence from the Toe-Breakers encouraged an eye for an eye mentality that aggravated already high tensions. In retaliation for the slap on the wrist that Adams received for threatening to kill Cheeks and Prentiss Neal, the Toe Breakers burned down three White-owned businesses, a strip mall containing three small shops.¹¹ This started a cycle of retaliation that lasted throughout most of the boycott. The Lee County Concerned Citizens acted as though the group didn't exist. Mamie Nelson, the head of the local NAACP and member of the Lee County clinic board, stated, "I have never heard of any Blacks intimidating any Blacks, and that talk of it is nothing more than an attempt to discredit the boycott."¹² However, the group certainly did exist, and there were incidents of intimidation. Antony Hobbs, a school teacher and organizer during the boycott, was one of the few people willing to talk about the mechanics of violent coercion. Hobbs gave the example of a prominent African American farmer who the White elites convinced to run for office in 1972. The Concerned Citizens had already selected a candidate for the position and feared the new candidate would split the Black vote. Members of the Concerned Citizens approached the man several times and asked him to drop out of the race, and the man responded that he had every right to enter the election. The Toe Breakers then came to his house at night, shot up into the roof of his house, and then firebombed the house. The next day he withdrew from the race.¹³ Despite the atmosphere of fear and violence the Toe Breakers created, their actions ensured that there was the appearance of a united front against the White establishment in Marianna when one did not exist.

¹¹ "Fire Damages Three Stores at Marianna; Arson Blamed," *Arkansas Gazette*, July 28, 1971, 7.

¹² "The Siege at Marianna: Whites Trying to Stand Ground Despite Boycott," *Arkansas Democrat*, August 8, 1971, 2.

¹³ Interview with Antony Hobbs, August, 8, 2014.

The Marianna city government responded to the arson following Adams' \$95 fine by instituting a three-day city curfew, August 1, 1971 to August 3, 1971, that lasted from 8:30 pm to 5:30 am.¹⁴ Governor Bumpers sent in the state police, and it was the first of several curfews set in Marianna.

Lee County's White leaders responded to the violence in kind by targeting local Blacks and those they saw as sympathetic. On August 7, 1971, a mob of White men carrying baseball bats attacked Prentiss Neal. *Arkansas Democrat* reporter Bill Husted was interviewing Neal about a bounty placed on his head by the Ku Klux Klan, when the two were attacked.¹⁵ Husted recalled, "I ended up on the ground because someone pushed me, and I remember they were kicking with their cowboy boots, which is no fun. I was, gosh, twenty-three, maybe—trying to be brave, but I was scared to death."¹⁶ The crowd attacked a lawyer named Al J. Daniel, who was in town to represent Prentiss Neal, and then attacked Husted and Neal. After the crowd finished beating Husted, they dragged a reporter named Robert Ike and photographer Steve Keesee out of the *Marianna Courier Index* newspaper office and robbed them, while the Marianna police looked on and did nothing. Keesee stated,

"I started looking outside and it reminded me of Hitchcock's, 'The Birds,' the one scene where the one woman turns around and maybe two or three big black birds are behind her. I turned around, and there were about twenty people outside. After awhile, it would be about forty people. After awhile, it would be fifty people... so Bill Husted called the police department, which was a block away. It was on the same town square. He said, 'Hey, we are a couple of reporters and we think our lives are in danger here.' They hung up on him."

¹⁷ The band threatened to hang them, stole Keesee's camera, and then blamed the reporters and the press for the boycott.¹⁸ The mob told the reporters that the boycott would not have occurred without their

¹⁴ "Curfew Set at Marianna, 4 Arrested," *Arkansas Gazette*, August 1, 1971, 14.

¹⁵ "Whites in Marianna will Patrol Streets to 'Stop Harassment,'" *Arkansas Gazette*, August 7, 1971, 1.

¹⁶ Bill Husted, Interviewed by Steele Hays, January 28, 2008, *Arkansas Democrat* Project, Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://pryorcenter.uark.edu/project.php?thisProject=1>.

¹⁷ Steve Keesee, interviewed by Michael Haddigan, February 2, 2001, *Arkansas Gazette* Project, Pryor Center of Arkansas Oral and Visual History, accessed July 7, 2022, <https://pryorcenter.uark.edu/project.php?thisProject=2>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

meddling and told the reporters to stop covering events in Marianna. After the event, the *Arkansas Gazette* and *Arkansas Democrat* only increased their coverage of Marianna, and Governor Dale Bumpers began meeting with the Marianna city government and the Lee County White Citizens Council to end the boycott. Bumpers sent in state troopers to calm the situation and prevent violence.¹⁹ With the arrival of the state troopers, direct involvement from the governor, and a second curfew, that lasted another three days, the violence died down.²⁰ The boycott lingered on through the rest of 1971, and by the end of the year, several White-owned businesses were closed down.

The White leadership was more unified than the boycotters and, like the boycotters, primarily saw the conflict as a fight over jobs, political power, and the future of the county. Their political and economic positions gave them an air of legitimacy and allowed them to blame any violence from their side on outside agitators. They had powerful allies like Senator John McClellan and the national White Citizens Council organ, *The Citizen*, which covered the boycott several times.²¹ *The Citizen* stated, "To acquiesce to the conditions stipulated by the black boycotters would mean that the white citizens of Marianna had turned over their businesses to the agitators. It would also mean that local politics would not be decided by the will of the electorate, but would only suit the boycotter's needs."²² The White leaders believed that the boycott was solely due to outside agitation and that African Americans in Lee County had been happy until VISTA came to town. When the boycott came in 1971, it was a shock to most Whites. Lon Mann, the most sympathetic to African Americans out of the prominent Whites in Lee County, could not understand the reason for the boycott or the violent response from the Citizens Council. Mann blamed the entire situation on outsiders on both sides. He blamed the boycott on VISTA and returning troublemakers like Olly Neal

¹⁹ "Bumpers Says Efforts Failed," *Arkansas Gazette*, August 7, 1971, 1.

²⁰ "Order and Justice at Marianna," *Arkansas Gazette*, August 7, 1971, 4.

²¹ "Citizens Counter Black Boycott," *The Citizen*, December, 1971, 4-14; "Black Boycott Beaten Back," *The Citizen*, February, 1972, 17.

²² "Citizens Counter Black Boycott," 7.

and the violence against the boycotters on outside Whites. He stated in a 1971 letter to Dale Bumpers:

“Anything coming from anyone in Marianna at the present time, either black or white, [ought to be] taken with a large grain of salt because most ‘outsiders’ naturally think that hot tempers have over-ruled logic.”²³

The Lee County Medical Society released a statement to Bumpers and Senator McClellan that blamed all the violence on VISTA and outsiders like Neal, insisted that the best way to improve the medical problems of Lee County was to attract young doctors, and concluded that the boycott would do nothing but hurt the chances of Lee County pulling itself out of poverty, contradicting earlier statements that denied that poverty existed in the county at all.²⁴ It is difficult to tell if they genuinely believed these things, or were putting up a front, but it is conceivable that those in power in Lee County genuinely thought that they were doing what was best for African Americans. They had paternalistically worked to improve the economy of the County for many years. They seemingly could not understand that the token handful of jobs, low-income homes, and head start programs were not enough to address poverty and inequality in Lee County.

In December of 1971, the Citizens Council, the mayor’s office, and local business leaders offered a proposal to end the boycott. It addressed a handful of the issues raised by the Concerned Citizens, but not all. In return for ending the boycott and providing Whites one-third of the seats on the clinic board, the leaders promised “1. A second Black person must be added to the school board, 2. Judge Adams will not oppose the clinic grant, 3. Two new Black policemen must be hired, 4. Each bank, the water and power companies, and the city planning board must hire a Black person, 5. The formation of a Black and White committee to discuss any further issues, 6. The National Guard and volunteer fire department must allow Blacks to join, 7. Expand the rolls of the City Council to allow two Black aldermen.” The Concerned Citizens refused the offer because they thought they had the upper hand and would only relent when all their demands were

²³ Lon Mann to Dale Bumpers, October 12, 1971, Dale Bumpers Papers, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 47, Folder 1, Center for Arkansas History and Culture, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

²⁴ Dwight Grey, Mack McLendon, Elizabeth Fields, and Floyd Dozier to Dale Bumpers, February 7, 1972, *ibid.*

met.²⁵ There were no provisions for the removal of any abusive police officers, reinstatement of fired school employees, and no direct effort to encourage the smaller businesses to hire Black employees. A spokesperson stated, “In our negotiations, we went through the grievances and list of demands. However, nothing was accomplished, but perhaps they [the Marianna government] were more sincere in dealing with the problems of the black community.”²⁶

The protest spread to the public schools a few weeks after the Concerned Citizens rejected the offer from Marianna city hall. A group of ten African American students, emulating their parents’ civil rights protests, approached Lee High School principal Robert Blankenship with fourteen demands and threatened to boycott the school if they were not met. The demands included removing two abusive teachers, having a long planned assembly honoring Martin Luther King Jr., improving lunches, changing several school rules, desegregating the student government and band, and respect.²⁷ The students cited several examples of their mistreatment during Lee High School’s second year of integration. One teacher sprayed disinfectant on a chair every time an African American student left the room, another came to school drunk and yelled slurs at the students, a counselor put one of the best African American students, future Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater, in special education classes, and the school administration insisted on a segregated student government.²⁸ The school even segregated the band and prom court. Despite the problems with the administration, the protesters noted that there were few problems between Black and White students. One Black student who took part in the school protest recalled,

“We thought it was just ridiculous cause we knew the black kids were just as smart as the white kids...they wanted a black homecoming queen and a white homecoming queen, and we thought it was utterly ridiculous. The year before, the black and white got along like sisters and brothers at TA Futrall [the white junior high school], so why would a new building make any difference? Most of us in the band, white and

²⁵ Neal, *Outspoken*, 117-118; “Concerned Citizens and Human Rel. Council Hold Meeting,” *Many Voices*, January 1, 1972, 1.

²⁶ “Marianna Negotiation Accomplishes Little,” *Many Voices*, December 15, 1971, 1.

²⁷ “Marianna Schools Should Weigh Meaning of Black Majority,” *Many Voices*, February 9, 1972, 2.

²⁸ Neal, *Outspoken*, 119-121.

black, still have a band together today! We were still getting along before everything happened, it would have been fine if the adults just would have let children be children.”²⁹

The demands turned into action when administrators cancelled a school assembly celebrating the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on January 13, 1972. The boycott raised tensions in the schools, and the White administration was on edge. The assembly, planned months in advance, was canceled at the last minute by principal Bob Blankenship, who argued that if he allowed it, he would also have to allow the White students to celebrate the birthday of Robert E. Lee.³⁰ When the group of ten Black students, calling themselves the Young Southern Christian Leadership Council (no connection to the larger civil rights organization) tried to meet with Blankenship, he kicked them out of his office. The students refused to go back to class and, instead, sat down in the hallway. They refused to go back to class until they were heard. A deputy sheriff, sent after Blankenship called the police, informed the students that it was a misdemeanor to disrupt class. Several hundred students, hearing the commotion, joined the original ten and gathered together just outside the school. The deputy left and then called in the sheriff, fire department, civil defense corps, and state police.³¹

When the students refused orders to disperse, Sheriff Langston turned firehoses on the students in thirty-five-degree weather.³² The fears and anger of Lee County Whites exploded onto the backs of protesting children. A student named Mack Smith wrote Dale Bumpers that “Principal Blankenship held one of my brothers down while an officer beat him with a nightstick.”³³ During this chaotic moment, one of the deputies fired a gun in the air, and most students scattered. They were chased by the civil defense corps, state police, and local deputies. A contributing factor to the excessive force of the Marianna police in

²⁹ B.R. Simmons, interviewed by Shanekwa Taylor, March 14, 2007, Box 1 Folder 1, 1972 Boycott of the Marianna School District Transcripts, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

³⁰ Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, 174.

³¹ Neal, *Outspoken*, 131.

³² “Marianna Blacks Protest at School; 22 are Arrested,” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 14, 1972, 33.

³³ Mack Smith Jr. to Dale Bumpers, January 19, 1972, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 47, Folder 4, “Correspondence,” Dale Bumpers Papers.

dispersing the students was that Langston had deputized several members of the Citizens Council to assist in breaking up the “riot.”³⁴ Judge Adams told the *New York Times* that “we had no choice but to use fire hoses, it was too windy for tear gas.”³⁵ Several students were beaten, one severely enough to be taken to a hospital in Little Rock, and around 150 students were arrested. Fifty of those students were later found guilty of school disruption, a misdemeanor, and were fined and given suspended sentences on the condition that they returned to school.³⁶ Parents were outraged and pulled 3000 Black students, of the roughly 5000 total students in Lee County, out of school.

After the incident at the high school, the cycles of shootings, beatings, and arson resumed. School board president Lon Mann was nearly hit in a drive-by shooting, the Concerned Citizens office was burned, and the entire downtown African American business district was firebombed.³⁷ While no one was ever convicted, Neal and the Concerned Citizens believed that the Citizens Council was behind the bombing.³⁸ Governor Bumpers instituted a third curfew on February 13, 1972, due to the near-continuous violence. The apogee came in April when word got out that a hitman was in town to kill Olly Neal. The hitman, whom Neal does not name in any of his interviews, was a Marianna native who was to be paid \$2500 by the White Citizens Council for killing both of the Neal brothers.³⁹ The United Auto Workers local sent a group of armed union men, led by Black union representative Mack Cleveland, to the hitman’s home, beat him, and told him to leave town or die. The hitman was gone the next day.⁴⁰ Olly Neal had an armed guard around his house for several months afterward and carried a shotgun with him at the clinic. The violence became so ubiquitous that even the pediatrician at the Lee County clinic, Dr. Irwin Redlener, carried a pistol while

³⁴ Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, 175-180.

³⁵ “Widespread Racial Violence Persists in Eastern Arkansas Farming Area,” *New York Times*, January 20, 1972, 1.

³⁶ “Black Boycott, after ‘Ruining’ Downtown Marianna, Apparently Backfiring,” *Arkansas Gazette*, June 18, 1972, 8.

³⁷ “Marianna: A City of Tension and Confrontation,” *Arkansas Gazette*, February 13, 1972,4; “7 Buildings, Including Office of Blacks, Burn at Marianna,” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 25, 1972, 1.

³⁸ Neal, *Outspoken*, 131-133.

³⁹ Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, 171.

⁴⁰ Neal, *Outspoken*, 109.

seeing patients.⁴¹ The Citizens Council had bombs and Klansmen ready to kill most of the prominent African Americans in Marianna, but, according to former Lee County Citizens Council member Harold Meins, “we decided to wait until the niggers drew blood.”⁴² No one was killed or seriously injured during the protests despite all the shootings, arson, beatings, and near hit and runs. The potential for lethal violence was constant, but never materialized.

Amidst the ongoing violence, the clinic picked up additional community support. Due to OEO requirements, the clinic remained apolitical and continued to receive federal funding and support. The official separation between the Concerned Citizens and the clinic, forced by OEO guidelines, ensured that the clinic itself remained clean. African American churches redoubled their efforts to support the clinic by hosting donation drives.⁴³ Perhaps more importantly, the local UAW got further involved with the clinic the longer the boycott went on. It sent letters to Bumpers and Fulbright, donated money and a camper trailer, and encouraged White union members to visit the clinic.⁴⁴ Because of UAW patronage, the number of Whites visiting the clinic went from nearly 0% of patients to 10%.⁴⁵ During the boycott, the only White member of the Concerned Citizens was a UAW representative named Maurice Harmon.⁴⁶ In a letter to Fulbright on May 15, 1970, the UAW Local 1550 president Billy Ray Harris stated that: “We of UAW Local 1550 do not feel that a small minority of high-income people have the right to deny the people of the county these badly needed medical services. Please help our community secure a much-needed grant to secure the existence of the Lee County Cooperative Clinic.”⁴⁷ Fulbright, unwilling to give any concrete support, responded that he, and the federal government, were unable to help due to “our military excursions

⁴¹ Ibid., 125.

⁴² Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, 175.

⁴³ Neal, *Outspoken*, 89.

⁴⁴ Billy Ray Harris to J.W. Fulbright, May 18, 1970, in Folder 5, Box 19, Fulbright Papers, Second Accession; “Lee County Clinic on the Move,” *Many Voices*, June 30-July 13, 1972, 10; William Lemmer to Dale Bumpers, April 2, 1972, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 47, Folder 4.

⁴⁵ Interview with Antony Hobbs, August 8, 2014.

⁴⁶ Neal, *Outspoken*, 78.

⁴⁷ Harris to Fulbright.

abroad,” and only if the war in Vietnam ended would he be willing to devote time and energy to help the people of Marianna.⁴⁸ Despite Fulbright’s unwillingness to assist, the local UAW continued to lobby and provide as much assistance to the clinic as possible. The union also donated a camper trailer as a mobile clinic to serve patients who had difficulty reaching Marianna.⁴⁹

Using the last of the federal money, the clinic hired several more nurses, a dietician, and a dentist to complement the pediatrician and general practitioner already at the clinic.⁵⁰ Despite the boycott and the attempts by the powerful in Lee County to destroy it, the Lee County Cooperative Clinic grew in influence and effectiveness. Because the clinic was financially and politically independent, the board did not have to fear co-optation or destruction as long as federal funds remained.

The White leaders of Lee County worked to convince Dale Bumpers to either deny funding to the clinic or to somehow secure them a position on the board. They were unable to break the will of the boycotters, especially after the firehose attack on their children, and attempted to go around the clinic board and take control of the clinic through other means. The Lee County Medical Society, Mayor Oxner, and the Lee County Chamber of Commerce tried to force the clinic board to put an equal number of Whites on the board as Blacks. A committee headed by Lon Mann, Hugh Mixon, and a group calling themselves “The Good White Citizens of Lee County” made a second offer that required a full 2/3rds of the clinic board to be replaced by local Whites.⁵¹

To help bring the Concerned Citizens and the White leaders together, Bumpers formed a biracial committee in February of 1972 to develop a compromise solution. This committee comprised four Whites and four Blacks from the Arkansas Department of Education, the Arkansas State Police, the Arkansas Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, and the Little Rock NAACP. It, along with two

⁴⁸ J.W. Fulbright to Maurice Harmon,” July 15, 1970, in Box 19, Folder 5, Fulbright Papers, Second Accession.

⁴⁹ “Lee County Clinic on the Move,” *Many Voices*, June 30-July 13, 1972, 10.

⁵⁰ “Lee County Clinic Welcomes New Staff Arrival,” *Many Voices*, July 14-July 30, 1972, 1.

⁵¹ Hugh Mixon Jr. to Dale Bumpers, March 7, 1972, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 47, Folder 4, Bumpers Papers.

other committees, one sent by the Arkansas State Police and one by the NAACP, gave suggestions to the Concerned Citizens and the Marianna government for solving the issue but were ignored by both sides.⁵² The primary suggestion, which was unacceptable to the Concerned Citizens, was to add a number of prominent Whites to the clinic board.⁵³ The Concerned Citizens responded to these committees with a letter to Dale Bumpers that stated that: “if every political organization in Lee County gave 58% of its seats to Lee County African Americans, we will accept their offer.” They emphasized, that Blacks were the majority of people in the county, unrepresented, and not giving up their organization.⁵⁴ After the response from the Concerned Citizens, Bumpers began negotiating with clinic board members one on one instead of through various committees.⁵⁵

The final question of whether or not the clinic would stay in Marianna, be co-opted, or destroyed, was answered in April of 1972 when Governor Bumpers approved their grant to build a new clinic. The grant was the vindication that the Concerned Citizens desperately needed. The board and Olly Neal requested \$1.2 million from the OEO for a new clinic and expenses to operate it for a year. The OEO quickly approved the grant, but the project required the approval of the Arkansas governor. Bumpers had received telegrams, letters, and petitions from both sides of the conflict since he took office. Bumpers was unlucky enough to be saddled with the Marianna boycott during the first year of his first term. He was in near constant communication with Lee County fixtures like Dan Felton and Lon Mann. Bumpers received over 500 pieces of communication from both sides concerning the clinic. Due to the very public nature of the Marianna conflict, prominent political figures and entertainers urged Bumpers to approve the grant. Al Green, Jesse Jackson, Joan Baez, and Fannie Lou Hamer all voiced their support for the clinic throughout

⁵² “Blue Ribbon Committee?” *Marianna Courier Index*, March 16, 1972, 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁴ “Lee County Concerned Citizens to the Governor’s Task Force,” February 19, 1972, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 47, Folder 1, Bumpers Papers.

⁵⁵ Neal, *Outspoken*, 143.

the boycott.⁵⁶ Green stated, “our goal is basically to guarantee the existence of the clinic.”⁵⁷ Green had been born in Lee County and felt a connection to the people living in Marianna. He held a concert in Forrest City in 1972, with all of the proceeds going to the clinic. Joan Baez, like Al Green, held a concert in Memphis that donated all its proceeds to the Lee County Clinic and wrote several letters to Dale Bumpers. Baez stated “the folks who file into the Lee County Cooperative Clinic have about nothing. They have been running this little clinic with nothing more than willpower, determination, love, good personnel, and a few grants that have run out. . . I’m sure you understand the depth of the situation and will sign the grant.”⁵⁸ In his letter to Bumpers about the clinic, Jackson remarked, “It is incumbent upon you that all measures are taken to solve this problem as quickly as possible. The Lee County Cooperative Clinic is a major step in this direction [solving the nation’s health crisis], not only for members of its service area but for all citizens in Arkansas.”⁵⁹ Bumpers understood that African Americans in Lee County were living in abject poverty, he knew that segregation and discrimination were rife in the Delta, he realized that a community health center was desperately needed in Marianna, he knew that the Citizens Council was just as responsible for the violence in Lee County as the boycotters were, and was appalled at the attack on the protesting students in January.⁶⁰

Bumpers was also in constant communication with John McClellan, the U.S. Senate appropriations committee chair. While Bumpers received letters and petitions from both sides of the conflict, McClellan received communication from almost exclusively those who opposed the clinic. While privately he was somewhat sympathetic towards the clinic and eventually gave Bumpers his support for approving the clinic,

⁵⁶ Joan Baez to Dale Bumpers, March 29, 1972, *ibid.*; “*Many Voices*, November 11, 1970; “Entertainment Firm Vows Aid to Lee County Clinic,” *Arkansas Gazette*, February 16, 1972, 5.

⁵⁷ “Entertainment Firm Vows Aid to Lee County Clinic,” *Arkansas Gazette*, February 16, 1972, 5.

⁵⁸ Baez to Bumpers.

⁵⁹ Jesse Jackson to Dale Bumpers, April 1, 1972, Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 47, Folder 4, Bumpers Papers.

⁶⁰ Dale Bumpers to Linda Kenee McCall, February 15, 1972, *ibid.*

he publicly opposed the clinic.⁶¹ In private correspondence to the head of the Concerned Citizens, McClellan said,

“Because of my concern and interest in helping each of our communities in the State of Arkansas which is desirous of developing better healthcare services...I have contacted Federal officials to urge that a concerted effort be made to develop proper liaison and communications between all parties in hope that an agreement can be reached to assure an adequate program of health care services for Lee County.”⁶²

McClellan sent three separate investigators to find problems with the clinic’s books, evidence of cooperation between the “toe breakers” and the clinic board, and investigate rumors that the Lee County clinic refused to treat White patients. The investigations all found nothing.⁶³

After meeting with Olly Neal and the clinic board on March 19, 1972, Bumpers gave conditional approval for the grant. Bumpers required that an advisory committee be created made up of representatives of the State Comprehensive Health Planning Board, Arkansas Regional Medical Program, Arkansas Health Systems Foundation, the State Health Department, and the Eastern Arkansas Planning and Development District.⁶⁴ Crucially, Bumpers did not give the advisory committee any power over the clinic board. This effectively destroyed the opposition to the clinic. Jamison Daggett filed a lawsuit, claiming local officials were not consulted on the grant, to delay the payment of the grant until the clinic was insolvent, and the expenditure was an “unconstitutional waste of funds.”⁶⁵ This final effort to destroy the Lee County clinic with legal red tape also failed, and the clinic began construction of the new building in 1973.

After the approval of the grant, the boycott went on for another few months, ending in July of 1972 with very little fanfare. The Concerned Citizens gave out a press release stating its reasons for ending the boycott: “1. There has been some progress made for black people in this community; 2. That there has been

⁶¹ John McClellan, Press Release March 23, 1972, *ibid*; “McClellan Opposes Grant to Lee Clinic,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 12, 1972.

⁶² John McClellan to Mamie Nelson, May 5, 1970, Folder 5, Box 3742.

⁶³ Neal, *Outspoken*, 141-143.

⁶⁴ Neal, *Outspoken*, 146.

⁶⁵ “Funds Limited for Lee Clinic,” *Arkansas Gazette*, April 1, 1972, 1.

a definite change in the attitudes of whites as related to blacks; 3. That the strength of the black people of Lee County should be obvious by now; 4. That it should be unnecessary to crush our city; 5. That black people shall participate in the economic rebuilding of our fair city as the owners and operators of businesses.” Rabon Cheeks, the co-architect of the boycott, told the *Arkansas Democrat* that the new goal of the Concerned Citizens was “Campaign ‘72.”⁶⁶

There was very little success at the polls that year, despite a serious effort from the Concerned Citizens. African Americans won a justice of the peace position, but lost the three important offices, (school board president, county judge, and sheriff) by over 1000 votes each.⁶⁷ Unlike in the 1970 election, the Concerned Citizens were prepared and contested the election results. After a recount and investigation by the county election commission, the results did not change.⁶⁸ Olly Neal, who ran for a state senate seat that year and lost, blamed the election on low turnout. The Concerned Citizens assumed that they did not have to campaign and that people would vote for them no matter what. However, after the stolen election in 1970, the coercive measures of the boycott, and the year of violence, most people just wanted to move on.⁶⁹

The results of the boycott were mixed, but in the long run was unsuccessful. There were some improvements made on the ground for African Americans. The bank, the welfare office, city hall, and a few of the remaining White-owned businesses started to employ a few African Americans.⁷⁰ Opposition to the clinic evaporated after it received its \$1.2 million grant and built a brand-new facility, a serious win for the Concerned Citizens.

⁶⁶ “Marianna Black Group ends Boycott,” *Arkansas Democrat*, July 26, 1972, 1; “Marianna Boycott is Ended,” *Blacks Cite Progress*,” *Arkansas Gazette*, July 27, 1972, 1.

⁶⁷ “Black Candidates are Defeated Badly in Lee County Voting,” *Arkansas Gazette*, November 9, 1972, 16.

⁶⁸ “Votes Recounted in Lee County in Ballot Mix-Up; Outcome Unchanged,” *Arkansas Gazette*, November 22, 1972, 14.

⁶⁹ Neal, *Outspoken*, 155

⁷⁰ Interview with Neal, December 15, 2014.

When it came to abusive police and elected officials, Lon Mann, Haskell Adams, Courtney Langston, and Hugh Mixon were all replaced by 1975.⁷¹ Instead of being replaced through election or activism, they were replaced by the Lee County Election Commission. Amendments 55 and 56 to the Arkansas constitution, passed in 1974 and 1975, reformed the structure of county governments. The laws limited the power of the county judge, lowered the number of quorum court seats, and generally made the election of county officers more democratic.⁷² Lee County's Election Commission reduced the number of quorum court members from fifteen to nine. The commission also had to redistrict Lee County to allow for single district quorum court elections, another aspect of Amendment 56.⁷³ The result was that nearly all of the powerful White leaders in Lee County were quietly replaced by the commission and the 1975 election. With the massive loss in power, most of the officials that faced the boycott simply did not run in 1974. Since then, Lee County's sheriff's office, the mayor's chair, and state legislator's seat have all been filled at one time or another by an African American, something unheard of before 1972.⁷⁴

When the OEO money ran out in 1973 due to the Nixon administration's budget cuts, the ambitions of the Concerned Citizens and the Lee County clinic narrowed, becoming focused solely on public health. The new facility saw an increase in Whites visiting the clinic, from one in ten before the boycott to three in ten after the new building.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, African Americans alone could not rebuild the city after the boycott, and outside businesses were reluctant to build factories and warehouses in a town known for arson and shootings. The Douglas and Lomason plant temporarily closed down during the boycott, and, when it reopened, it reduced the number of employees from 475 to 175.⁷⁶ The median income for a family in Lee

⁷¹ McCuen, *Historical Report of the Secretary of State 1986*, 702.

⁷² "Meetings are Public Record," *Arkansas Democrat*, October 12, 1974, 8; "Plan for Lee Filed by Election Panel," *Arkansas Gazette*, October 8, 1975, 5.

⁷³ "Revenue Turnback of 7 Pct. Receives Support of Faubus," *Arkansas Gazette*, April 17, 1974, 5.

⁷⁴ Interview with Olly Neal, December 15, 2014.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁶ "Plant in Marianna to Re-open in a Week," *Arkansas Democrat*, September 16, 1971, 1.

County in 1970, adjusted for inflation, was \$31,247, while in 1980, it was \$25,742.⁷⁷ Lee County went from the third poorest county in Arkansas in 1970, by median family income, to the poorest county by 1980.⁷⁸ Unemployment jumped from 10% to 14% from 1970 to 1980, from the fifth-worst to the worst in the state.⁷⁹ When one judges the boycott on all metrics except economics, it seems that the boycott was relatively successful. However, the rest of the gains are largely irrelevant without access to jobs. The Civil Rights Movement gave African Americans the right to vote, ended de jure segregation, and made open discrimination illegal, but they did not give access to jobs or reparations. Without jobs how can Blacks enjoy their newly won freedoms?

With the end of most Great Society programs by 1980, Lee County could not recover from the boycott economically. By 1973 the OEO was on its last legs, and there were no more grants for the Lee County clinic after 1972. The clinic itself remained funded for that year, but the federal government was no longer dedicated to bottom-up poverty relief after the election of Richard Nixon. Even when the OEO and the Great Society were new programs, they were constantly under attack by conservatives. In 1967, before the clinic was even considered, the Green Amendment to the Economic Opportunity Act, allowed city governments to designate themselves as the agency in charge of the local CAP, and effectively shut down the Community Action Agency (CAA) run by the community. This was done through a local community vote, however, 95% of CAAs were able to leverage enough votes to stay in power.⁸⁰ That same year the Quie Amendment required participation from local businesses in CAAs. The two amendments effectively removed control of newly created CAAs from the hands of the poor people that were supposed to control

⁷⁷ US Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 1970 Volume 1: Census of Population: Characteristics of the Population, Part 5, Arkansas. https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1970/population-volume-1/1970a_ar-01.pdf. 150-161; "1980 Median Income and 1980 Employment Status," Arkansas Economic Development Institute, <https://arstatedatacenter.youraedi.com/past-census-data/>.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 702,

⁷⁹ Ibid. 703,

⁸⁰ Roger Davidson, "The War on Poverty: Experiment in Federalism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 385, (September 1969): 8

them. The first amendment required one-third participation from local government, and the second one-third from local businesses. The two together enabled local governments and businesses to take over many CAAs. The Vietnam War, and America's commitment to defense spending over poverty relief, pulled billions of dollars away from War on Poverty programs and into the Department of Defense.⁸¹ The Nixon administration heavily slashed funding for the OEO and attempted to destroy the agency in 1973. While Nixon could not entirely eliminate the organization, congress placed severe limitations on funding and forced local oversight on all-new community action programs.⁸² By 1974, there was no money, and no volunteers, to rebuild Marianna. In 1981, Reagan signed the OEO out of existence.

When the federal government gave up on the War on Poverty in the mid 1970's the focus towards poverty relief shifted. There was no longer any will or funds to help the embattled Black citizens of Lee County. Despite the promises made by Johnson and the various administrators of Great Society programs like the OEO and VISTA that the government was genuinely committed to helping them out of poverty, Lee County received no help from the OEO after 1973.⁸³

⁸¹ Greta De Jong, "Sick and Sinister": Intersections of Violence and the Struggle for Economic Justice in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Race, Labor, and Violence in the Delta: Essays to Mark the Centennial of the Elaine Massacre*, edited by Michael Pierce and Calvin White Jr, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press) 152-160.

⁸² Roger Davidson, "The War on Poverty: Experiment in Federalism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, (Vol. 385, Sep 1969) 8.

⁸³ Interview with Neal, December 15, 2014.

Section V-Conclusion

Despite the lackluster results of the 1972 election, the clinic grew stronger and quickly became a permanent fixture. The Lee County clinic still operates out of the building that Olly Neal and the first board built in 1973.¹ The clinic, once incredibly divisive, has become an institution. The Phillips County Chamber of Commerce and Marianna Chamber of Commerce both endorse the clinic and have links to its website on their web pages.² In 2021, during the Christmas celebrations in Marianna, the clinic sponsored a free horse and carriage ride for local children and held a free COVID vaccination clinic during the Marianna Christmas parade.³ Health outcomes have greatly improved in Lee County, mainly due to the Lee County clinic. The impetus for the clinic's creation was the death of a mother in childbirth due to a lack of adequate healthcare, and Lee County now has the lowest infant mortality rate in Arkansas.⁴ African Americans mostly staff the clinic, and the director of the clinic is Kellee Farris, whose father was hired by Olly Neal to work as a dentist in 1971.⁵ The clinic employs several dozen people and still offers workshops and educational programs to help those in poverty. It is undeniable that the Lee County clinic has been successful in nearly all of its stated goals.

The clinic's success notwithstanding, Lee County remains extremely poor. The county has continued to lose population every year since 1940. The jobs just simply aren't there. In 2014 Lee County was named by the *New York Times* as one of the top ten most challenging places to live in the United States, and in 2013 an investigation from the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* revealed that only one out of sixteen

¹ Interview with Olly Neal, December 15, 2014.

² "Phillips County Chamber of Commerce- positive-press," Phillips County Chamber of Commerce, Accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.phillipscountychamber.org/>.

³ "Marianna Regional Chamber of Commerce," Accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/mariannaregionalchamber/>.

⁴ "Health: Infant Mortality," Arkansas Community Foundation, last updated 2018, Accessed January 22, 2022, <https://www.aspirearkansas.org/health/infant-mortality>.

⁵ "CEO's Message," Lee County Cooperative Clinic, Accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.lccc.us.com/ceo-message>.

adults over twenty-five in Lee County has a college degree. As with Detroit, and most other sites of civil rights strife, White flight has seriously affected Lee County. From 1970 to 2010, Lee County lost over 50% of its White population.⁶ Lee County has gone from the county with the third lowest median wage and fifth most unemployed, to the worst in the state.⁷ Large businesses, already averse to spending money in the Delta, are even more unwilling to set up shop in a town known for racial unrest. The way that Arkansas handles appropriations has not helped either; due to the successes of large projects in other parts of the state, particularly in Northwest Arkansas, the state senate is unwilling to commit anything less than a million dollars to local projects. According to VISTA volunteer Earl Anthes, the big-dollar projects backed by Walmart lobbyists have discouraged low-dollar initiatives from the state government.⁸ The publicity and prestige that the Walmart projects like Crystal Bridges, WoVen, and the Northwest Arkansas Giving Program provide have made the state government less willing to provide funding for small-scale projects, which do not provide the political clout that the large projects bring. Due to the failure of state governments to intervene, lack of interest from private businesses, being known for civil rights unrest, and White flight, an institution like the OEO is needed more than ever.

Without access to jobs, many in the Delta either left or turned to crime to make ends meet; the most famous example from Lee County are the Chambers brothers, who did both. On December 19, 1988, a significant drug dealer in Detroit named Billy Joe Chambers and his three brothers Otis, Willie, and Larry were sentenced to a cumulative 199 years in prison. They were born and raised in Marianna, Arkansas. The

⁶ US Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 1970 Volume 1: Census of Population: Characteristics of the Population, Part 5, Arkansas. https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1970/population-volume-1/1970a_ar-01.pdf. 150-161; “1980 Median Income and 1980 Employment Status,” Arkansas Economic Development Institute, <https://arstatedatacenter.youraedi.com/past-census-data/>; “Population by Race and County,” Arkansas Economic Development Institute, <https://arstatedatacenter.youraedi.com/past-census-data/>.

⁷ US Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 1970 Volume 1: Census of Population: Characteristics of the Population, Part 5, Arkansas. https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1970/population-volume-1/1970a_ar-01.pdf. 150-161; “1980 Median Income and 1980 Employment Status,” Arkansas Economic Development Institute, <https://arstatedatacenter.youraedi.com/past-census-data/>.

⁸ Nov 18 2008, Interview with Earl Anthes, November 18, 2008.

oldest, Larry, was twelve years old at the boycott's end.⁹ They moved to Detroit in the early 1980s because there was no opportunity for them in the Delta. They quickly found that the situation in Detroit wasn't that much better. A federal government unwilling to further intervene in alleviating poverty in the Delta unwittingly created a much larger problem. Without access to jobs, medical care, and housing, what else is there for people to do but turn to crime? The Chambers brothers made millions of dollars selling crack cocaine on the streets of Detroit. Instead of spending money on VISTA volunteers or community health centers, the Reagan and Bush administrations pushed money into prisons, the defense industry, and police forces.¹⁰ The fruits of that decision have been mass incarceration, violence, death, and addiction.

The Great Society showed remarkable success in attacking poverty during its short existence, and its demise was a blow that crushed the hopes of many who believed in their initiatives. Those that opposed the Concerned Citizens in Marianna in the early 1970s were correct that without the OEO and VISTA, the boycott would not have happened. The economic independence that grants from the OEO offered made African Americans no longer subservient to the closed economic system that had forced them to remain in poverty since the 1870s. However, it was not so that the arrival of VISTA volunteers created racial strife and violence. The painful truth is that racial strife was always bubbling beneath the surface, and the violence only came when those in power decided that violence was the only way to stay in control when faced with organized poor people. Modern civil rights organizations like Black Lives Matter are calling for the same sort of programs that the Concerned Citizens were asking for in 1971: quality healthcare, jobs, an end to police brutality, and respect. The blueprint for tackling poverty in America exists; over a thousand OEO-created CAPs still provide healthcare, housing, and jobs to tens of thousands of Americans in poverty-stricken areas, despite the Great Society being destroyed in 1981. With the Great Society programs, the

⁹ Adler, *Land of Opportunity*, xxvi, 310-314.

¹⁰ De Jong, "Sick and Sinister," 160-162.

federal government made a commitment to the American people that there would be a war to end poverty. The Marianna Boycott shows that, with help, even the poorest Americans are able to rise.

In the end, the Marianna boycott represents what can happen when you give people at the bottom a foundation to build on. It showed that for pennies, poor people could organize, pull each other out of poverty, and can stand up for themselves. It flies in the face of those that say that poor people are lazy, unable to handle money, or are criminals. Most importantly, the Marianna Boycott shows that if they put in the effort and are willing to give it a chance, America can effectively fight poverty and illness. The OEO is needed now more than ever; if anything, inequality and poverty have become more of an issue than it was in 1970. The OEO was constantly targeted as a waste of federal money, a source of graft and corruption, and it fostered violence in local communities. It can be argued that the part of the OEO that made it particularly effective, its direct community outreach and requirement that all projects be run by those that needed them was eliminated before the clinic was built. During research, no one directly involved with the Marianna Boycott was willing to speak about it. Five churches, ten people who took part in the boycott, five who were students during the walkout, and three VISTA volunteers were all unwilling or unable, to speak about the event. In his autobiography, Griff Stockley, a native of Lee County and a historian, described how the boycott was an embarrassment to Lee County and was not spoken of out of shame.¹¹ The people who took part in the boycott have nothing to be ashamed of. Quincy Tillman put it best when she said: "If they want to go out of business, let them; I ain't got no business to go out of."¹² The boycotters weren't the ones who chose not to hire African Americans or discouraged industries from settling in Marianna. Those who controlled the county's economy made the boycott violent and ran their stores out of business. The White leaders of Lee County chose to destroy their town rather than lose control. The reluctance to speak about the boycott, and other incidents like it, obfuscate how effective the OEO was in attacking White supremacy and

¹¹ Stockley, *Hypogrif in Bubbaville*. 98.

¹² "Black Boycott, after 'Ruining' Downtown Marianna, Apparently Backfiring," *Arkansas Gazette*, June 18, 1972.

poverty at its very base. Despite the violence in Lee County, the Lee County clinic proved that if communities were allowed to help themselves, they could succeed.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Data, Graphs, and Methodology

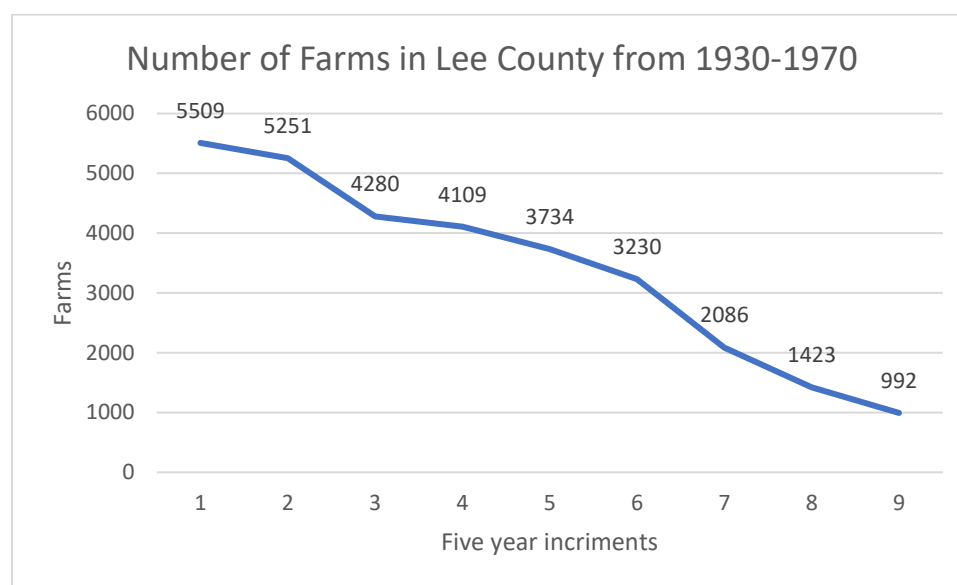
Figure 1-Lee County Agricultural Data 1930-1970

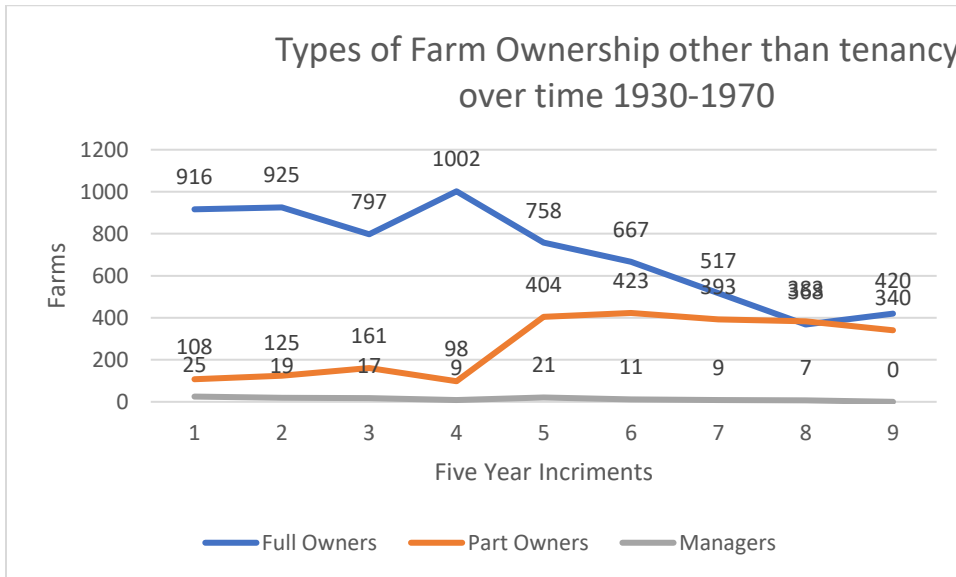
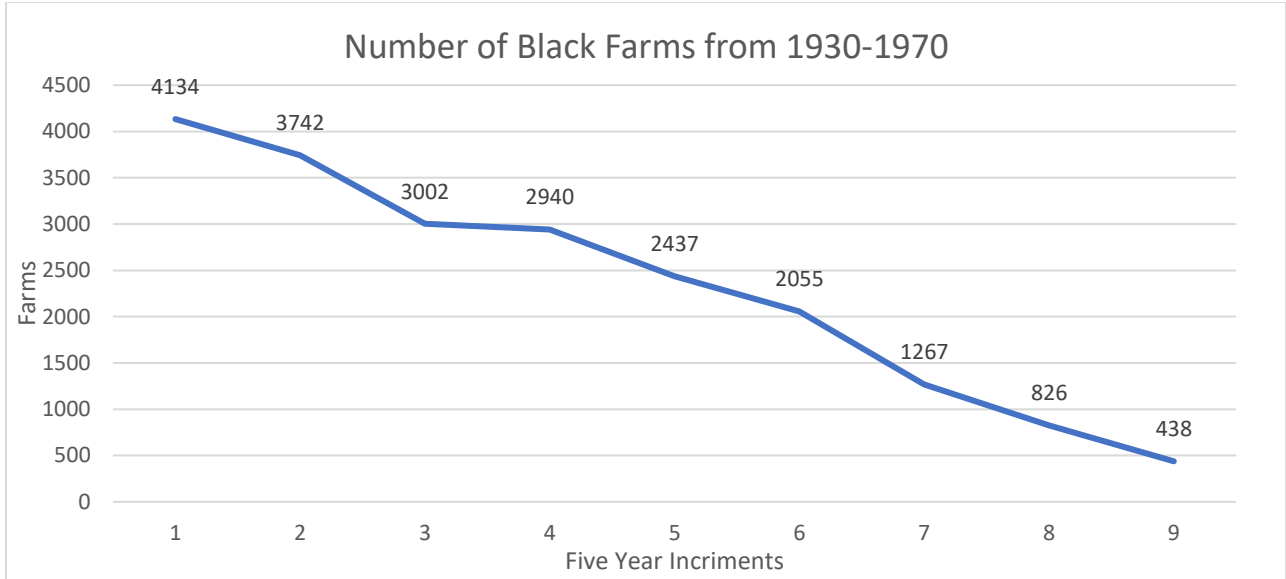
Year	1930	1935	1940	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970
Number of Farms	1423	992	5509	5251	4280	4109	3734	3230	2086
White Operators	597	554	1435	1509	1276	1169	1297	1175	819
Black Operators 826		438	4134	3742	3002	2940	2437	2055	1267
Full Owners	420	916	925	797	1002	758	667	517	368
Part Owners	340	108	125	161	98	404	423	393	383
Managers	0	25	19	17	9	21	11	9	7
Tenants 232		4520	4182	3505	3000	2551	2127	1167	665
Land Area 361600	396800	396800	284640	396800	284640	396900	396900	396900	396900
Percentage Farmed	71.2	73.1	66.5	66.8	62.5	66.5	64.3	68.2	68.7
Average Size of Farm	198.5	292.5	40.03	48.09	57.9	64.2	80.9	83.7	140.25
All Land in Farms 269966	282524	283449	290185	270427	224432	272618	256917	247909	247909
White Operator Acreage 153107	215123	165973	233886	193174	250363	194121	103310	140908	140908
Black Operator Acreage 57495	48638	39822	121122	116039	94892		97993	90275	76309
Acreage run by full owners	50452	49862	60608	61695	77149	76251	135920	84272	66956
Acreage run by part owners	131326	152153	167627	9174	14708	26528	18589	77507	105270
Acreage run by managers	16439	12870	0	16263	7554	10913	5790	20448	13025
Acreage run by tenants 74401	67639	61950	137300	154266	135203	103667	101222	87386	87386

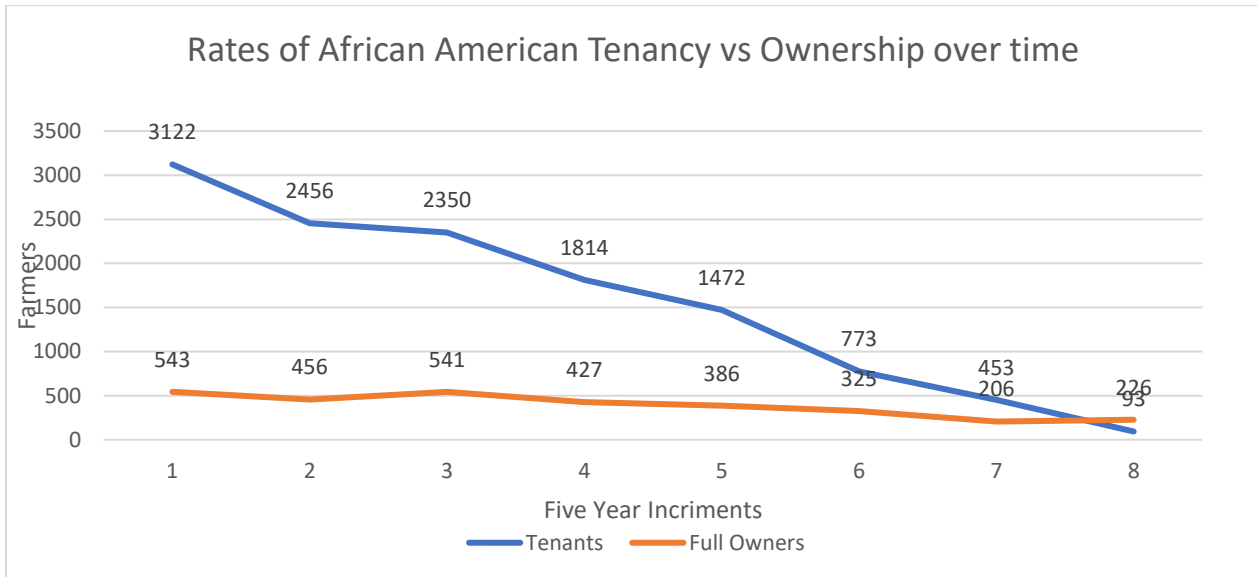
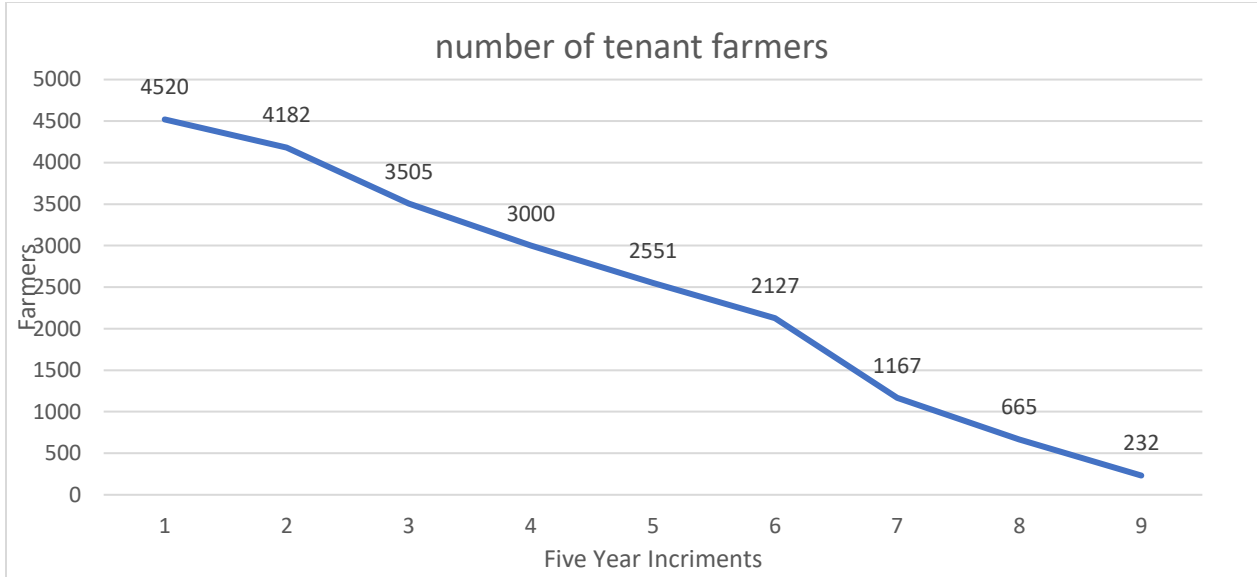
Value of Farms	9948648	6648768	7931848	11313384	19504125	24798155			
41454293	57242187	93149385							
Average value of a farm	1785	1268	1833	2753	4968	6803	17452	54092	94032
Average value per acre	44.33	25.88	31.66	42.86	68.81	91.7	152.06	202.61	321
Number of Black tenants	3759	3122	2456	2350	1814	1472	773	453	93
number of Black owners	560	543	456	541	427	386	325	206	226
Number of Automobiles on farms	144	170	465	455	1002	1191	1060	946	
Number of Tractors on farms	20	133	258	492	1187	2386	2171	2113	1913
Number of Trucks on farms	38	127	215	569	721	1667	1485	1336	

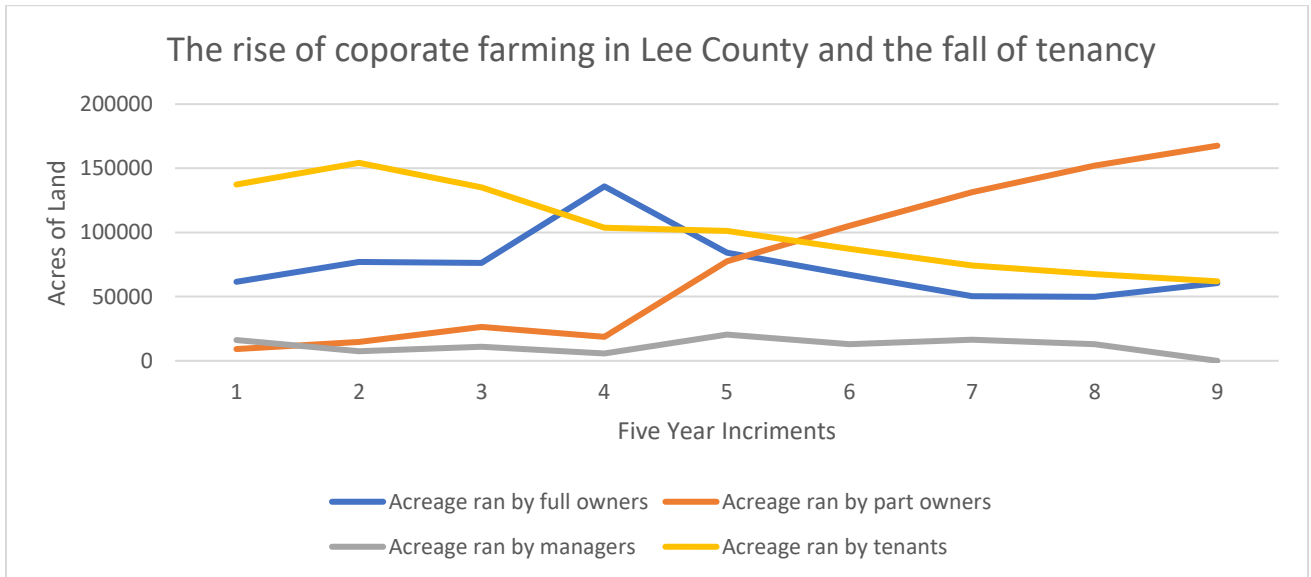
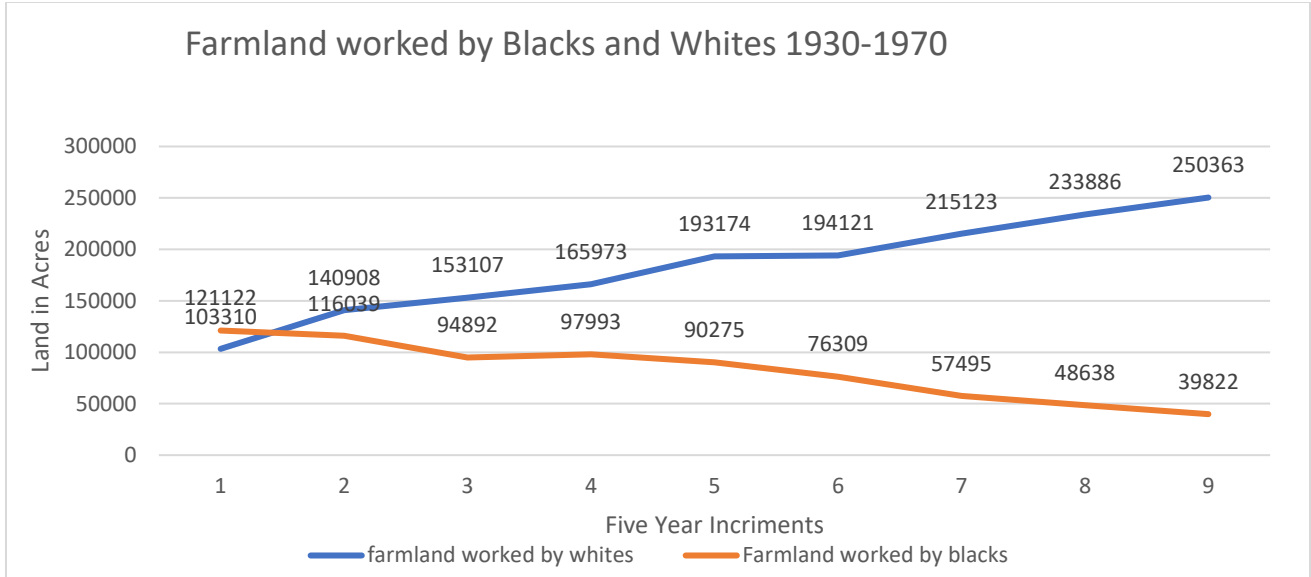
This Data set was gathered from the Department of Commerce's US Census of Agriculture. The Census is done every five years, and contains county level agricultural statistics. Through this data several trends can be extrapolated.

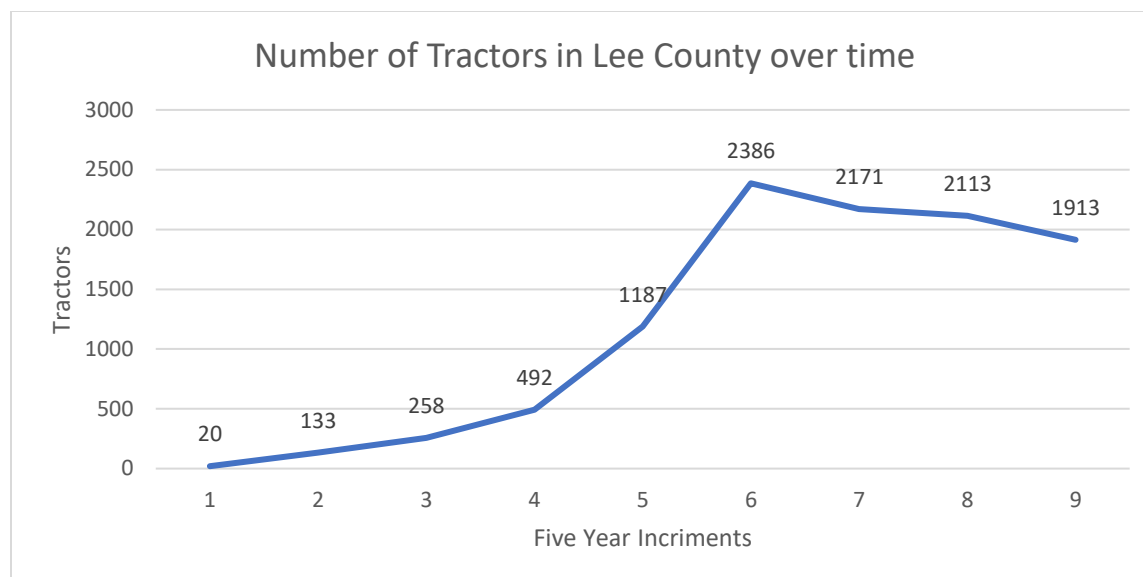
Figure 2-Graphs











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Figure 3. Using the Lee County Agricultural Data gathered from the various Agricultural Censuses and data from the 1950 Arkansas state Census I calculated out the percentage of African American farm holders. The number of reported African American Full farm owners in 1930 was 560, due to the self-reporting nature of the Agricultural Census and conflicting data within the 1950 Arkansas State Census, which gives data from 1930-1950, I rounded the number up to 600. The number of reported farms and farmers in Lee County hovers between 80-95% of known farmers in the larger decennial Census. The 1950 State Census gives a larger number of African American Agricultural workers than are present in the Agricultural Census, so I simply rounded up to the nearest whole digit. The numbers should be accurate within 5%. The Agricultural Census Data puts the number of worked acres in Lee County at roughly 28,000 (282524) and the average farm size in 1930 at (40.6) 40 acres. Multiplying 600×40 we reach a number of 24,000 acres of owned land. The number of African Americans living in Lee County in 1930 is roughly 16000, 60% of the total number of people in Lee County were African American according to the 1950 State Census. The average size of a rural family in Arkansas according to the census was roughly 4 (4.1). Multiplying 600×4 we get 2400 people, when divided by the 16000 African Americans in Lee County we get 15%. So roughly one in six African Americans in Lee County in 1930 owned some farm land.

Appendix II-Larger Source Documents

Figure 1. 41 Demands of the Marianna Boycotters

1. Assignment to Public Housing made without regard to race
2. Miss Quency Tillman appointed co-coordinator of Title I
3. James Coleman be appointed to director of Athletics at Lee High School
4. School Board Advisory Council be disbanded and replaced by a board approved by both the local NAACP and LCCC
5. Farmers and Merchants Bank employ a Black resident of Lee County as a full time Teller
6. First National Bank employ a Black resident of Lee County as a full time Teller
7. Judge Haskell Adams appoint three Black Lee County residents to the Lee County Welfare office
8. Daggett Drugstore employ a Black Resident of Lee County at Full Time
9. Harrington's Drugstore employ a Black Resident of Lee County at Full Time
10. Johnson's Store hire a Black Resident of Lee County Full Time
11. Reed's Big Star Store hire a Black Resident of Lee County Full Time
12. Clay's Store Hire a Black Resident of Lee County Full Time
13. Flower's Specialty Store Hire a Black Resident of Lee County Full Time

14. National Fabric Center Hire a Black Resident of Lee County Full Time
15. Superintendent of Schools hire a Black Secretary at Full Time
16. City of Marianna Allow six Black residents of Lee County to serve as Volunteer Firemen
17. City of Marianna hire six Black residents as police officers
18. Judge Adams hire a Black secretary full time
19. Williams Store hire a Black Resident of Lee County Full Time
20. Marianna Housing Authority hire a Black Resident of Lee County Full Time
21. Marianna Water Dept hire a Black Resident Full Time
22. Arkansas Power and Light Hire a Lee County Black Resident Full Time
23. Arkansas Louisiana Gas Company Hire a Lee County Black Resident Full Time
24. Southwestern Bell Telephone Company Hire a Lee County Black Resident Full Time
25. County Tax Assessors office hire a Black resident as a clerk
26. A Black Resident hired as a county clerk
27. A Black Resident hired to the circuit clerk's office
28. A Black Resident hired to the state revenue office
29. The Marianna Chamber of Commerce show real evidence of attracting industry to Lee County
30. The Marianna Chamber of Commerce stop telling out of state employers how much to pay Black employees
31. Bill Jones be fired from the Marianna Police Department
32. J.V. Caughley be fired from the Marianna Police Department
33. Black Residents be allowed to join the Lee County National Guard
34. All Black Employees fired because of the boycott be rehired
35. Harassment against Black residents be stopped
36. Liberty Super Market Hire a Black Resident
37. Billy Gerrard and Fred Rutledge be removed from the Marianna School Board
38. County Sherriff Langston hire two Black deputies
39. Andrew Williams be hired as head of the Lee County Schools Maintenance office
40. Any public meeting be advertised a week in advance in the *Courier-Index*

41. Selective buying will not stop during negotiations

Source- "Strife Imperils All of Marianna" *Arkansas Gazette*. Sept, 12 1971. 18

Figure 3. Demands of School Boycotters

1. Removal of Mrs. Burke, the chair of the English department
2. Stop lowering grades due to tardies
3. Improve quality of lunchroom food
4. Longer lunchtimes
5. Have an assembly for Martin Luther King's birthday
6. School should not be run like a military college
7. High school students should not be treated like young children
8. Mr. Blankenship removed as principal
9. School should not be dominated by white rules
10. Appoint a Black drum majorette
11. Appoint a Black band director
12. Better information from school councilors about student loans
13. Civil rights

Source: Neal, Olly. *Outspoken*. 128