

Flood Refugees Are Held as Slaves in Mississippi Camp

Men Who Escaped Death in Government Controlled Area Describe Viciousness of Southern Whites Ruling Workers

By IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

Last week's issue of the Defender had a letter from one of the men, in Greenville, Miss., which claimed to tell of the conditions in the camps which are still being maintained only for our people in Greenville and Natchez and several other places. Naturally the question arose in the minds of thinking people: "Why are Colored camps?" "Why are hundreds of thousands of our people herded in camps, instead of being provided for in houses, where they and their families can be helped as are the white refugees, and live together as families should do?" "Why must Colored people only be forced to work on the levees for \$1 per day at the point of a gun before they can get rations?" "And why can't the Race, who are 90 per cent of the actual flood sufferers, share in that \$14,000,000 relief fund which the country sent freely to the flooded district?"

All these are pertinent questions which every one of the 12,000,000 people of our Race in this country should be asking themselves and using their brains to find answers for. Then, after they get the answers they should get busy in an effort to have the whole country know the facts and use their power to have these conditions changed.

Only Race Can Act

Nobody else is going to do anything about it if we don't. So far the Defender is the only journal which is making any protest that I can see. Already some of our people have told Secretary Hoover and others who can correct these evils, that everything is all right; that Mrs. Barnett is a radical and that nobody pays any attention to her, as she is seeking notoriety. Even the "Colored committees' reports do not confirm the statements you mention," says Secretary Hoover, and the people of our race in Pine Bluff, Ark., are giving Mr. Hoover a loving cup in appreciation of his "good work" for them, while their own people are being treated like slaves.

I have had letters, phone calls and personal commendation for the things I have tried to tell in this column. But when I ask these persons if they have passed resolutions asking investigations of these camps and recommending better protection for our Race in their clubs, churches, lodges and fraternal societies and sent them to President Coolidge, Secretary Hoover, the National Red Cross, Senator Charles S. Deneen, Congressman Madden, they invariably say no. They do not seem to realize that it is their job to back up what the Defender and I have said about these intolerable conditions. The only way to bring public opinion to action is for those whose race is suffering to cry aloud, and keep on crying aloud until something is done. It will require the combined influence of all our people in the North, East and West, where our votes count, to put a stop to the slavery that is going on right now in the government camps in Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana. All the Defender and I can do is to tell the Race about these conditions. It is up to you who have the power of organizations to keep on with resolutions and demands until those helpless people of our Race down there are no longer held in captivity in the government camps, to be driven back to the plantations when the water goes down and delivered into the virtual slavery of the peonage system of the South.

The South needs, and is asking help in this, her time of trouble. It is the psychological moment for us to demand that the South do justice to our people before she receives help from the nation.

Escaped Refugees' Stories

Meanwhile John Jones (that is not his name), 23 years old, came to my door last Friday evening. He was in his shirt sleeves and had a cotton blanket rolled up under his arm. He had just escaped from the government camp in Louisiana. He was born and reared in that state and when the high water came about 300 of them were taken to the camp.

All the men were put in one long tent and the women and children in another. He was there 15 days and was not permitted to associate with his wife and children in all that time. They had to lie on the floor with a

piece of canvas only under them and no covering. Of course they slept in their clothes and had no change. He said: "The first thing they do is to line you up and give you a 'shot,' then they give you something to eat and tell you to lie down for a day. The 'shots' make you sick and sometimes are fatal. I saw one man drop dead as soon as he had received the injection. He was about 40 years old. Over 25 people died in our camp from these 'shots'."

"The next morning the gong rang at 5:30 o'clock and we got a breakfast of salty bacon, one egg, bread and some brownish water they called coffee with no sugar. Then the boss man arrived and told us that we were to go to work on the levee and would be given \$1 a day and board. He has a gun and you know its useless to argue or refuse to go, so you say all right and take the shovel and go.

"At noontime they gave us navy beans, bread and more of the stuff they called coffee with no sugar. Then back to work until night, when we get potatoes, corn beef hash and more of that same so-called coffee.

"It was chilly without any cover so I asked for a blanket, but they wouldn't give me one. Then I said I would pay for one out of my wages and got it. I have it here. It is all I got for my 15 days' work.

Refused Pay, Shot

"I was there 17 days and was worked like this every day and all day, except the two Sundays. Then I went to the boss man and told him I wanted to get my wages as I was going to leave. He said: 'Don't you go away, nigger. If you do I'll shoot you.' He had his gun pointed at me, so I said nothing, but went away. The next day I asked him again for my money. He said, 'Wait till I go down to the commissary and see how much time you have coming.' When he came back he said, 'We don't pay till the first of the month. Nigger, don't you leave here; if you do I will shoot you.' I told him he might as well go ahead and shoot, because I was certainly going to leave there. He then pulled his gun out and shot me through the fleshy part of the leg. I fell and my wife ran out of the women's tent and tied her handkerchief around my leg to stop blood. Another fellow helped me into the tent and laid me down."

"Didn't the other men say or do anything about it?" I asked.

"Not a thing," he said. "There were only three white men to the 300 Colored men, but they had guns and used them on anyone who dared to do anything. That night they beat four men because they refused to work hard all day and part of the night also.

How He Escaped

"While I was lying there I wrote a note to my wife and told her I was going away, but for her to stay there until I sent for her. A friend took it over to her and she waved to let me know she had it. About 11 o'clock that night, when all were asleep, I rolled off the floor under the tent flap and hobbled away. My wound was a clean flesh wound, but my leg was very sore. (I saw the scars where the bullet went in and where it came out, in the fleshy part of the lower thigh.) I walked all night and next day till I reached Arkansas City. I rested four hours, then rode in a wagon for 20 miles. A truck carried me to Helena, Ark. Money for a ticket was given me and I rode to Memphis, Tenn. From there I rode on the Dixie highway to St. Louis in a man's car. From there I came to Springfield and stayed over night. I was brought from there to the Illinois Free Employment office on 35th St., in this city by a kind hearted white man in his car, arriving at 10 o'clock this morning. I waited there until 4 o'clock for work, which did not come, then went out on the street begging for something to eat and a place to sleep. A lady sent me to you, and here I am."

This was at 8 o'clock last Thursday night. Since then I have fed another escaped refugee from the Pine Bluff, Ark., camp. His story will be told in the next issue.

Have you readers here in the North no duty to perform for these, our suffering people?