

# TO PRAISE OUR BRIDGES:

an autobiography  
Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer

"There are somethings I feel strong about . . . . . one is not to forget where I come from and the other is to praise the bridges that carried me over."



We'd make fifty and sixty bales and wouldn't clear enough money to live on in the winter months. My father kept sharecropping until one year on this plantation he cleared some money. It must have been quite a little bit because he bought some wagons and cultivators, plow tools and mules in the hope that he could rent the next year. We were doing pretty well. He even started to fix up the house real nice and had bought a car.

Then one night this white man went to our lot and went to the trough where the mules had to eat and stirred up a gallon of Paris Green into the mules food. It killed everything we had. When we got there, one mule was already dead. The other two mules and the cow had their stomachs all swelled up. It was too late to save them. That poisoning knocked us right back down flat. We never did get back up again. That white man did it just because we were getting somewhere. White people never like to see Negroes get a little success. All of this stuff is no secret in the state of Mississippi.



Just recently there was this white man going around selling watermelons off of his truck, you know. This white lady saw him comin' down the road and she stopped him. When she asked to look at his watermelons he started acting sort of funny, like he didn't want to show them to her. She kept on asking him and finally he told her that he couldn't sell her a watermelon because he had poisoned them and was going to sell them to colored people. Sixty watermelons! And he had poisoned all of them. Well, she went in the house and called the police and they arrested the man. Sure enough all of the watermelons had a deadly poison inside. So I'm telling people not to buy anything off these trucks and wagons that go 'round selling to colored people. Don't even buy from somebody you know. You can't trust these crackers down here.

Now a cracker like that is just too mean to live. I would have made him eat just a little bit out of each one of those watermelons. Not the whole melon, just a slice from all sixty. I'd a-killed him so dead every cracker in Mississippi would've known better than to try a low-down trick like that again.

People think that Negroes just take whatever the white man puts out and likes it. Well, I know different. I remember one time when I was a little girl. There was this man who lived on a plantation out from Drew. His name was Joe Pullum and he had worked on this man's plantation for quite a little while, but the man never would pay any money. So one day this white man wanted to send Mr. Pullum to the hill country to bring some families down to work on his plantation. Mr. Pullum said he would go and the man gave him a hundred and fifty dollars.



Mr. Pullum didn't go to the hills to get the people. He just figured that since the man had never paid him, he would use this money to fix up his house and do different things he needed to do. So after a while, the white man noticed that Mr. Pullum hadn't gone to get the people. He drove up to Mr. Pullum's house one day in his horse and buggy with another white man. He went up to the house carrying his gun with him and asked the Negro about it. Mr. Pullum told him what he'd done with the money and that he considered it his money 'cause the man had robbed him out of more than that anyway. The white man got mad and shot Mr. Pullum in the arm.

Mr. Pullum ducked in the house and got his Winchester and killed that white man dead. Well, the white man that was sitting out in the buggy saw this and he lit out for town, which was Drew. The Negro knew what this meant. As soon as that man got to town he'd be coming back with a lynch mob and they would hang him. So he got all the ammunition he had and went on out to Powers Bayou and hid in the hollow of a tree.

The lynch mob came. I ain't ever heard of no one white man going to get a Negro. They're the most cowardly people I ever heard of. The mob came to get Mr. Pullum but he was waiting for them and everytime a white man would peep out, he busted him. Before they finally got him, he'd killed thirteen and wounded twenty-six, and it was awhile in Mississippi before the whites tried something like that again.

The way they finally got him was to pour gasoline on the water of the bayou and set it afire. When it burned up to the hollowed-out stump, he crawled out. When they found him, he was unconscious

and was lying with his head on his gun. They dragged him by his heels on the back of a car and paraded about with that man for all the Negroes to see. They cut his ear off and for the longest time it was kept in a jar of alcohol in a showcase in a store window at Drew. I was about eight years old when that happened.

Well, after the white man killed off our mules, my parents never did get a chance to get up again. We went back to sharecropping, halving, its called. You split the cotton half and half with the plantation owner. But the seed, fertilizer, cost of hired hands, everything is paid out of the cropper's half. My parents tried so hard to do what they could to keep us in school, but school didn't last but four months out of the year and most of the time we didn't have clothes to wear. I dropped out of school and cut corn stalks to help the family.

My parents were getting up in age and weren't young when I was born. I used to watch my mother try and keep her family going after we didn't get enough money out of the cotton crop. To feed us during the winter months mama would go 'round from plantation to plantation and would ask the landowners if she could have the cotton that had been left, which was called scrappin' cotton. When they would tell her that we could have that cotton, we would walk for miles and miles and miles in the run of a week. We wouldn't have on shoes or

anything because we didn't have them. She would always tie our feet up with rags because the ground would be froze real hard. We would walk from field to field until we had scrapped a bale of cotton. Then she'd take that bale of cotton and sell it and that would give us some of the food that we would need.





Then she would go from house to house and she would help kill hogs. They would give her the intestines and sometimes the feet and the head and things like that and that would help to keep us going. So many times for dinner we would have greens with no seasoning and flour gravy. My mother would mix flour with a little grease and try to make gravy out of it. Sometimes there'd be nothing but bread and onions.

My mother was a great woman. She went through a lot of suffering to bring the twenty of us up, but still she taught us to be decent and to respect ourselves, and that is one of the things that has kept me going.

In 1930 when she was out working, cleaning up the new ground (or we used to call it deadening) for a quarter, when something flew up and hit her in the eye. When she died she was totally blind because we weren't able to carry her to a good eye specialist. She was about 90 years old when she died with me in 1961.

My life has been almost like my mother's was, because I married a man who sharecropped. We didn't have it easy and the only way we could ever make it through the winter was because Pap had a little juke joint and we made liquor. That was the only way we made it. I married in 1944 and stayed on the plantation until 1962 when I went down to the courthouse in Indianola to register to vote. That happened because I went to a mass meeting one night.



Until then I'd never heard of no mass meeting and I didn't know that a Negro could register and vote. Bob Moses, Reggie Robinson, Jim Bevel and James Forman were some of the SNCC workers who ran that meeting. When they asked for those to raise their hands who'd go down to the courthouse the next day, I raised mine. Had it up high as I could get it. I guess if I'd had any sense I'd a-been a little scared, but what was the point of being scared. The only thing they could do to me was kill me and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember.

But I've found out some things since I've been trying to organize in Sunflower County. People ask me, "Mrs. Hamer, why haven't they tried to dynamite your house or tried to shoot you?" I'll tell you why. I keep a shotgun in every corner of my bedroom and the first cracker even look like he wants to throw some dynamite on my porch won't write his mama again. One night somebody come calling up, "We're coming by tonight." I told him, "Come on. I'll be waiting for you." Guess you know that cracker ain't showed up yet. White folks may act like theys crazy, but they ain't that crazy. Ain't no man going to bother you if he know you going kill him.

Well, there was eighteen of us who sent down to the courthouse that day and all of us were arrested. Police said the bus was painted the wrong color -- said it was too yellow. After I got bailed out I went back to the plantation where Pap and I had lived for eighteen years. My oldest girl met me and told me that Mr. Marlow, the plantation owner, was mad and raising sand. He had heard that I had tried to register. That night he called on us and said, "We're not going to have this in Mississippi and you will have to withdraw. I am looking for your answer, yea or nay?" I just looked. He said



"I will give you until tomorrow morning. And if you don't withdraw you will have to leave. If you do go withdraw, it's only how I feel, you might still have to leave." So I left that same night. Pap had to stay on till work on the plantation was through. Ten days later they fired into Mrs. Tucker's house where I was staying. They also shot two girls at Mr. Sissel's.

That was a rough winter. I hadn't had a chance to do any canning before I got kicked off, so didn't have hardly anything. I always can more than my family can use 'cause there's always people who don't have enough. That winter was bad, though. Pap couldn't get a job nowhere 'cause everybody knew he was my husband. We made it on through, though, and since then I just been trying to work and get our people organized.

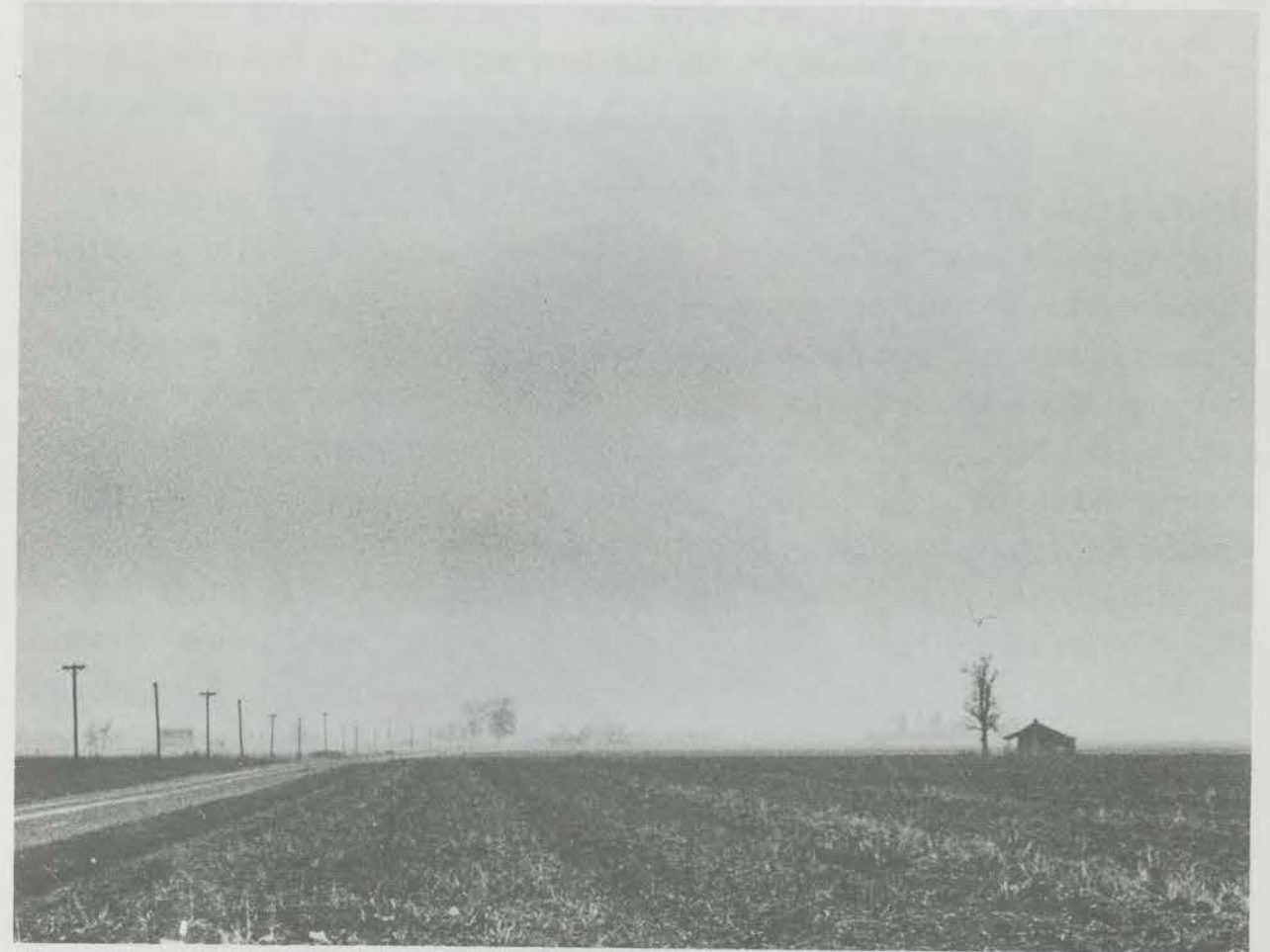


I reckon the most horrible experience I've had was in June of 1963. I was arrested along with several others in Winona, Mississippi. That's in Montgomery County, the county where I was born. I was carried to a cell and locked up with Euvestor Simpson. I began to hear the sound of licks, and I could hear people screaming. I don't know how long it lasted before I saw Annell Ponder pass the cell with both her hands up. Her eyes looked like blood, and her mouth was swollen. Her clothes was torn. It was horrifying.

After then, the State Highway patrolmen came and carried me out of the cell into another cell where there were two Negro prisoners. The patrolman gave the first Negro a long blackjack that was heavy. It was loaded with something and they had me to lay down on the bunk with my face down, and I was beat. I was beat by the first Negro till he gave out. Then the patrolman ordered the other man to take the blackjack and he began to beat. That's when I started screaming and working my feet 'cause I couldn't help it. The patrolman told the first Negro that had beat me to sit on my feet. I had to hug around the mattress to keep the sound from coming out. Finally they carried me back to my cell.

Over in the night I heard screaming. I said, "Oh Lord, somebody else is getting it too." It was later that we heard that Lawrence Guyot was there. He was a SNCC worker who'd come up from Greenwood when he heard that we'd been arrested. I got to see him. I could walk as far as the cell door and I asked them please leave that door open so I could get a breath of fresh air every once in a while. That's how I got to see Guyot. He looked in pretty bad shape. That was the first time I had seen him and not smiling. After I got out of jail, half dead, I found out that Medgar Evers had been shot down in his own yard.

If them crackers in Winona thought they'd discouraged me from fighting, I guess they found out different. I'm going to stay in Mississippi and if they shoot me down, I'll be buried here. I don't want equal rights with the white man; if I did, I'd be a thief and a murderer.



What I really feel is necessary is that the black people, in this country will have to upset this applecart. We can no longer ignore the fact that America is NOT the "...land of the free and the home of the brave." I used to question this for years -- what did our kids actually fight for? They would go in the service and go through all of that and come right out to be drowned in the river in Mississippi.



There is so much hypocrisy in America. The land of the free and the home of the brave is all on paper. It doesn't mean anything to us. The only way we can make this thing a reality in America is to do all we can to destroy this system and bring this thing out to the light that has been under the cover all these years. The scriptures have said, "The things that have been done in the dark will be known on the house tops."



I've worked on voter registration here ever since I went to that first mass meeting. In 1964 we registered 63,000 black people from Mississippi into the Freedom Democratic Party. We formed our own party because the whites wouldn't even let us register. We decided to challenge the white Mississippi Democratic Party at the National Convention. We followed all the laws that the white people themselves made. We tried to attend the precinct meetings and they

locked the doors on us or moved the meetings and that's against the laws they made for their own selves. So we were the ones that held the real precinct meetings. At all these meetings across the state we elected our representatives to go to the National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. But we learned the hard way that even though we had all the law and all the righteousness on our side -- that white man is not going to give up his power to us.

We have to build our own power. We have to win every single political office we can, where we have a majority of black people. Some folks now are talking about sharing some of these offices with the whites who have been holding them down for the past hundred years. Just because this cracker is starting to show us a few teeth and talk nice doesn't mean he'll move over and let us have some of that power. Some of our people say, "Well let's start slow, this is new to us, we ain't qualified and all that." We know if we think about it that the way the white man qualified to be sheriff was if he talked the loudest about beating us up side our heads.

A lot of us know that when some of these deputies or constables go to give traffic tickets -- you got to help him spell because he's illiterate. If we ain't qualified for these jobs, then no one is.

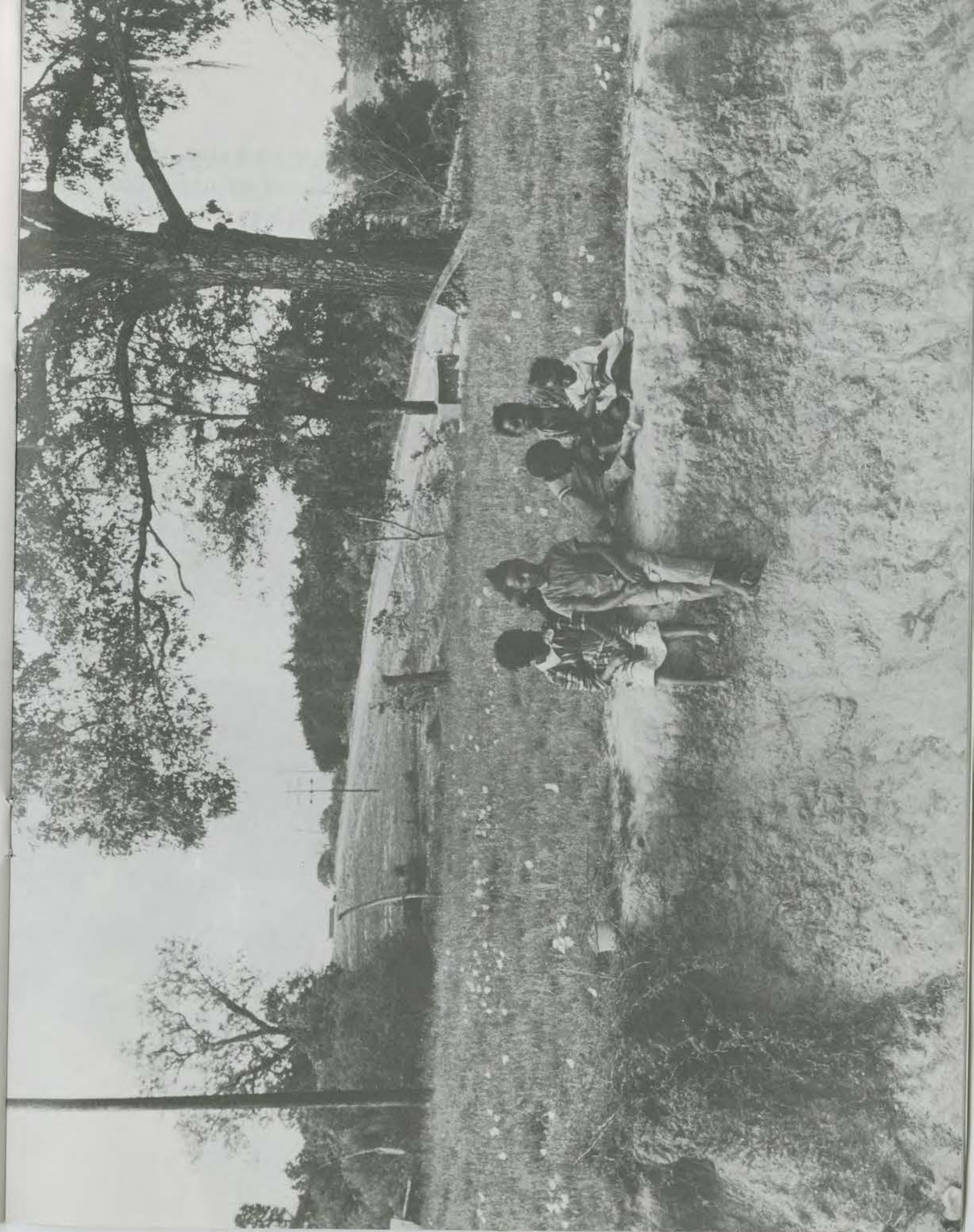
The question for black people is not, when is the white man going to give us our rights, or when is he going to give us good education for our children, or when is he going to give us jobs -- if the white man gives you anything -- just remember when he gets ready he will take it right back. We have to take for ourselves.



So many of our people, though, seem like they don't want to be anything but white. They're these middle-class Negroes, the ones that never had it as hard as the grass roots people in Mississippi. They'll sell their parents for a few dollars. Sometimes I get so disgusted I feel like getting my gun after some of these school teachers and chicken eatin' preachers. I know these Baptist ministers, 'cause my father was one. I'm not anti-church and I'm not anti-religious, but if you go down Highway 49 all the way into Jackson, going through Drew, Ruleville, Blaine, Indianola, Moorhead, all over, you'll see just how many churches are selling out to the white power structure.

The only thing we've had in Mississippi that we could really call our own is the church. Now, the ministers, to get a little money, are selling their church to the white folks so the CAP program can run Headstart. These white teachers and white niggers can't teach black children to be proud of themselves and to learn all about the true history of our race. All I learned about my race when I was growing up was Little Black Sambo who was a simple, ignorant boy. I guess that's all they ever wanted us to know about ourselves. We have gone through too much blood and grief in this movement to let our children be educated to still thinking black is inferior.

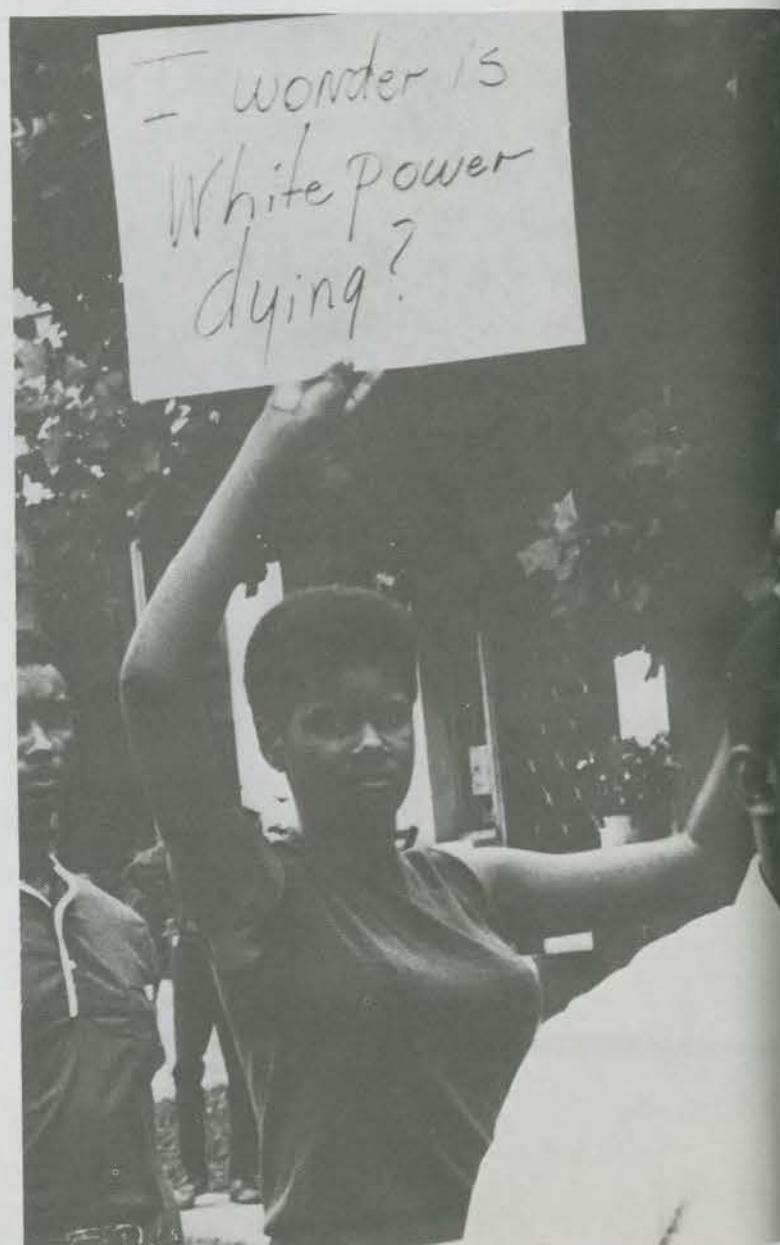
we are 91 percent of the poor here in Sunflower County and we are going to control 91 percent of all the poverty money that comes through here. They have stolen from us for too long. That's why these crackers got involved in the poverty program -- just another way to steal from black folks.





At the beginning of my young life I wanted to be white. The reason was that we worked every day, hard work, and we never did have food. The people that wasn't working, which was the white folks, they had food and they had clothes and everything. So I wanted to be white. I asked my mother one time why I wasn't white, so that we could have some food. She told me, "Don't ever ever say that again. Don't feel like that. We are not bad because we're black people." So when I hear the word now, Black Power, I think of how long people have used the word black. The white folks used it too, because they called us black this and a black that. But as soon as we identify ourselves as being black, they get scared.

It's nothing but fear that makes this white man scared, because he's had white power for the past three hundred years. I don't think nobody's simple enough to want black supremacy, but I think every man has a right to identify with their own people. Like they have St. Patrick's Day and all like that. Every race on earth, they have a day except us. I think its time for people to know that we have to identify with our own selves.

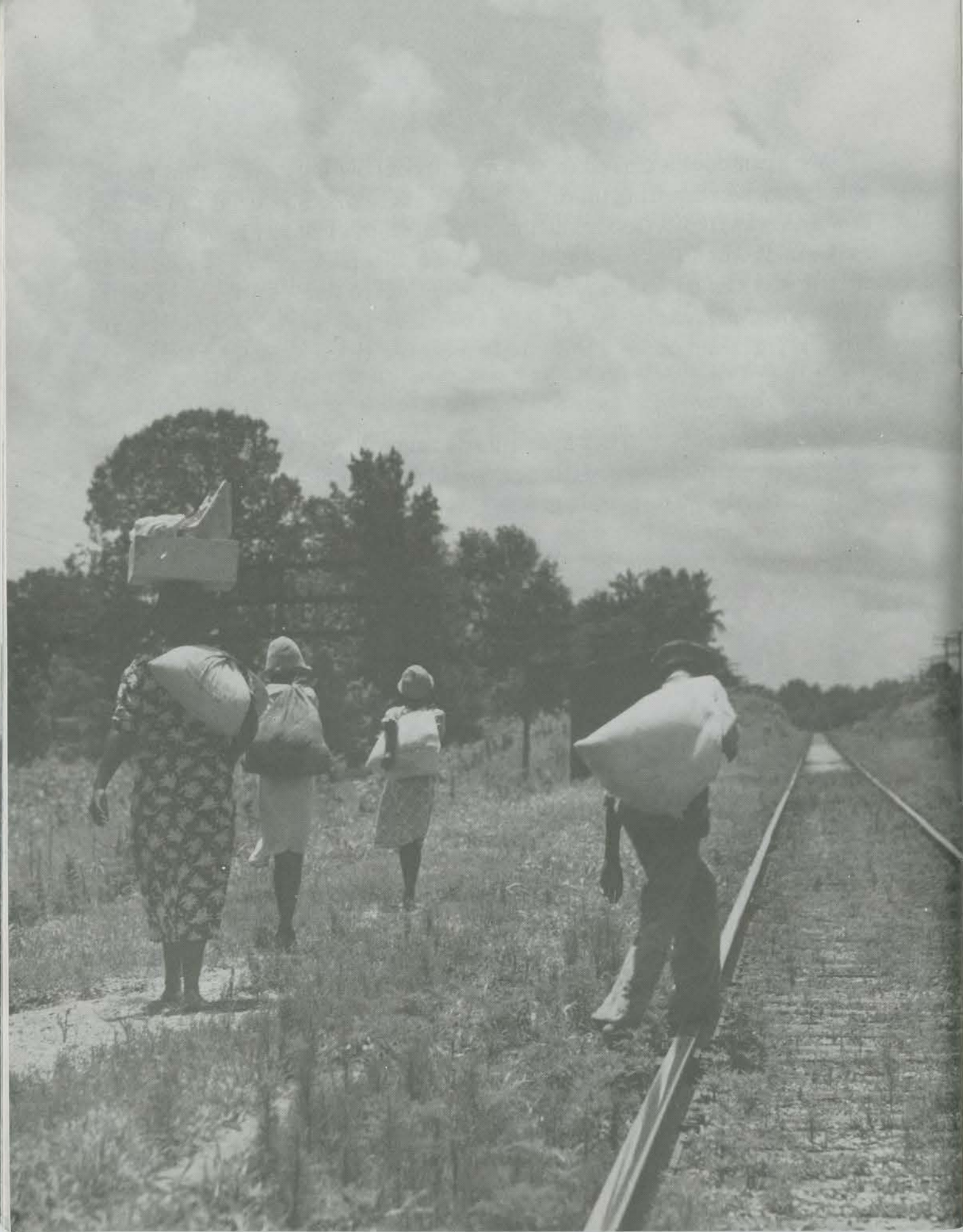


My grandmother used to talk a lot about how they separated them when they were selling them. She was a slave and she used to tell us how she was first a Gober and then a Bramlett. I didn't know what to make of it when I was a child, but since I've been grown I realized that it was the name that the white people give her. So I never will know what my name really was, because the white people took it from my grandmother when she came over from Africa.

And "Negro". That's another name they give to us. That's why I appreciate the word "black" -- black America, because Negro is the name the white people give us just like they give us these other artificial names. You were sold to Mr. Jones and you were called Jones. Sold to somebody else and your name was changed again. What we got to be ashamed of to be called black.

I went to Africa in 1964 and I learned that I sure didn't have anything to be ashamed of from being black. Being from the South we never was taught much about our African heritage. The way everybody talked to us, everybody in Africa was savages and really stupid people. But I've seen more savage white folks here in America than I seen in Africa. I saw black men flying the airplanes, driving buses, sitting behind the big desks in the bank and just doing everything that I was used to seeing white people do. I saw, for the first time in my life a black stewardess walking through the plane and that was quite an inspiration for me.





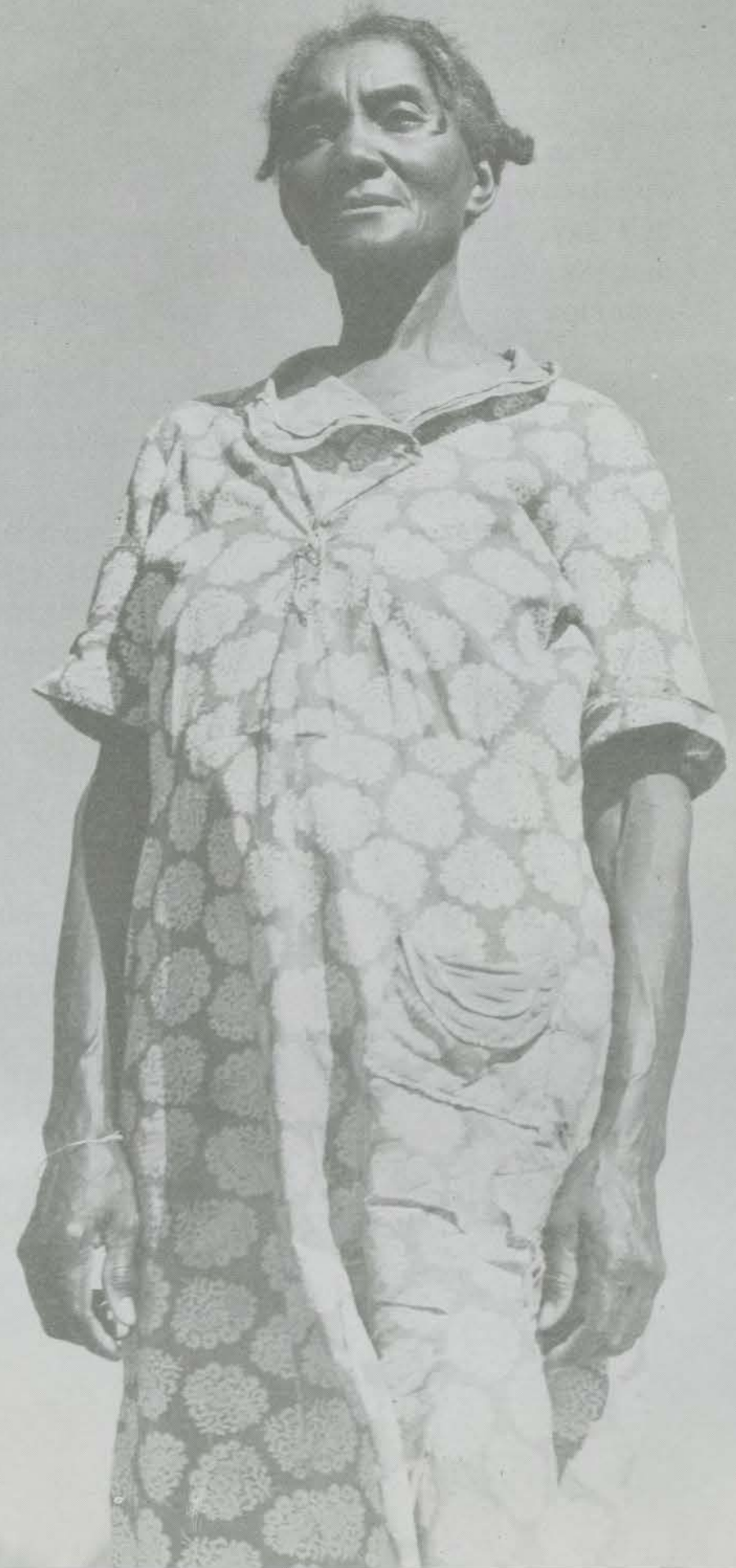
I wasn't in Guinea more than a couple of hours before President Toure came to see us. And I just compared my feelings. I've tried so hard so many times to see the president in this country and I wasn't given that chance. But the president over there cared enough to visit us. He invited us to his palace and that was the first time I'd ever had a chance to go in a palace. I just thought it was great to see African people so kind. It was so vice-versa what I'd heard that I couldn't hardly believe it.

One thing I looked at so much was the African women. They were so graceful and so poised. I thought about my mother and my grandmother, two people in particular and how they would carry things. It was so similar to my own family because it's very seldom that anybody see me without something tied on my head. Most of the African people wear their heads tied up. My mother would do the same thing. She could put something on her head, like could have two pails in her hand and a pail on her head and could go for miles and wouldn't drop them. I saw the same thing in Africa; tall women that were just like my grandmother. It got to me. I cried over there. If I'm living here, I just might have some people there. I probably got relatives right now in Africa, but we'll never know each other because we've been so separated that I'll never know them and they'll never know me.



I felt a closeness in Africa. I couldn't speak the French language and a lot of them couldn't speak English, but the comparison between my family and them was unbelievable. Two peoples that far apart and have so many things the same way.

A lot of the things they do over there I've done as a child. Little common things, like they boil peanuts with salt when they're real green. We used to do that so much when I was a child. It just looked like my life coming over again to me. Like some of the songs. I couldn't translate their language, but it was the tune of some old songs I used to hear my grandmother sing. It was just so close to my family that I cried.



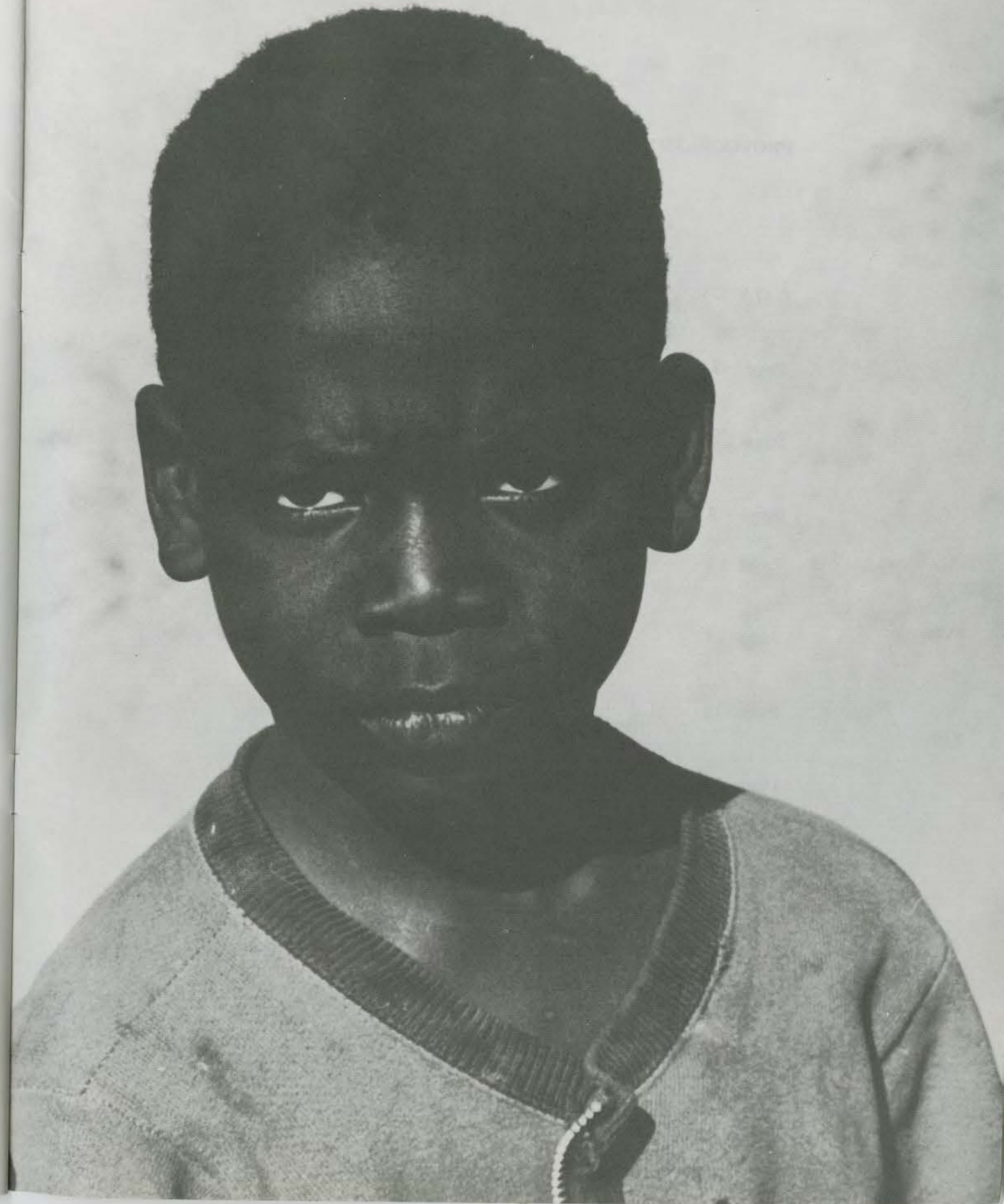


I was treated much better in Africa than I was treated in America. I often get letters that say, "Go back to Africa." Now I have just as much if not more right to stay in America as whoever wrote those letters.

The black people have contributed more to America than any other race; our mothers and fathers were bought and sold here for a price; we built this country on our bent back and made it rich by the sweat of our brow; our kids have fought and died for what was called, "Democracy".

So when they say, "Go back to Africa," I say, "When you send the Polish back to Poland, the Italians back to Italy, the Irish back to Ireland and you get on that Mayflower from whence you came and give the Indians their land back."

It is our right to stay here and we stay and fight for what belongs to us.





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