

U.S. JOURNAL: GEES BEND, ALA.

"THE BLACK WOMENS OF WILCOX COUNTY IS ABOUT TO DO SOMETHIN'"

"**T**IS with Fingers of love that I pause here to request the honor of your present at the groundbreaking of the sewing center," Mrs. Estelle Witherspoon, the manager of the Freedom Quilting Bee, wrote the organization's friends and business acquaintances last month. "It will take place March 8 1969 at 10 A.M. We are so grateful and Thankful to the Lord that he have answered our prayers and ables us to by a piece of land throught the help of our meny friends." Compared with most poor, uneducated Negro women living in the rural counties of the Alabama blackbelt—in fact, compared with just about anyone living in the rural counties of the Alabama blackbelt—the members of the Freedom Quilting Bee have a wide range of friends and business acquaintances. By the time the board of directors met on the Wednesday before the groundbreaking, several hundred invitations had been sent out—one of the quilting bee's advisers, a white Episcopal priest named Francis X. Walter, having had photo-offset copies of Mrs. Witherspoon's original made in Tuscaloosa. The board meeting was held in what the members call the quilt house—a two-room unpainted shack in Gees Bend that belongs to one of the members. In Gees Bend, a farming area in Wilcox County that is enclosed within an elongated loop in the Alabama River, Negroes have lived almost isolated from whites for years—first as squatters on the neglected plan-

tation their ancestors had developed as slaves, then as participants in a New Deal experiment in more or less coöperative farming, and then as small farmers or farm workers, and always as poor people. Although some of the eighty-five or so women active in the Freedom Quilting Bee live as far as sixty miles away, most of them live in Gees Bend. Many of them work in their own homes. Some work in the back of a dilapidated, sparsely stocked general store, where some of the local men spend part of the day sitting on upended soda cases around the stove, and where someone has scrawled "Freedom Is Near" next to the door. Some work at the quilt house. Some work at the Freedom Quilting Bee headquarters—another shack, several miles closer to Alberta, where a few white people live, but not close enough to be within reach of the telephone lines that end on the way from Alberta to Gees Bend.

A dozen board members, most of them heavyset women who appeared to be in their fifties or sixties, gathered in the larger room of the quilt house for the board meeting. The front window was broken—the missing panes had been replaced with a flattened pasteboard box that once held a turkey distributed by the Department of Agriculture surplus-food program—but a wood-burning stove kept the room warm. There were three men present: Father Walter, a serious, straightforward Alabamian in his thir-

ties, who was dressed non-clerically in a sports shirt and a tweed jacket; Ezra Cunningham, a Negro farmer who is a field representative for the Southern Coöperative Development Program; and Stanley Selengut, a New Yorker who was retained as the quilting bee's industrial-development consultant last year with money from a grant and continued as a volunteer after the money was gone. Selengut, who has a thick brush mustache and wears his sideburns somewhat longer than is customary in Wilcox County, had arrived that morning from New York. He had brought with him a revised plan for the new sewing center (the board of directors had asked for an extra bathroom with a bathtub, indoor bathrooms and bathtubs both being in demand around the Gees Bend area) and some color transparencies of pictures due to appear in *Life* this spring to advertise products of the Freedom Quilting Bee and the Poor People's Corporation of Mississippi as the first test offering of a new *Life* merchandising project called *Life's Treasures*. Before the meeting, Selengut passed around the transparencies and Mrs. Witherspoon passed around a magazine clipping that showed a picture of a quilted love seat in the summer house of Mrs. William Paley, a New York style setter who is regularly on the list of best-dressed women. In one of the major successes of Father Walter's early efforts to make Freedom Quilting Bee quilts fashionable, a Manhattan decorator named Mrs. Henry Parish II placed a large order for Mrs. Paley's summer house and for the nursery in the apartment of Mrs. Paley's daughter, another career dresser named Amanda Burden. Mrs. Callie Young, the quilting-bee president, held the *Life* transparencies up to the window, above the turkey box, where the light showed

an icy-looking blond model and a blond little girl standing in front of a Freedom Quilting Bee rickrack-pattern quilt and wearing the African dashiki-style minidresses now produced by the quilting bee. "Ain't that beautiful?" Mrs. Young said. "That's real pretty—that sure is."

The board meeting began with a hymn and a prayer. After Father Walter read through the program that he and Mrs. Carey of the entertainment committee had prepared for the groundbreaking, there was some discussion about who would introduce the special guests and who



"Well, what's eating you? I got your chair or something?"

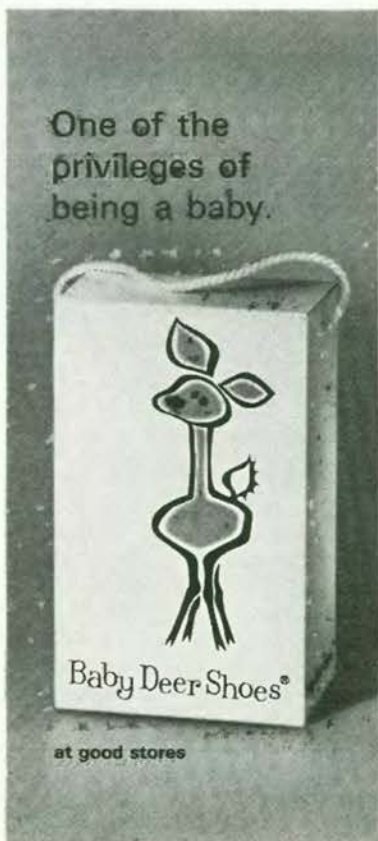


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would register visitors, and there was a shorter discussion about whether to dedicate the sewing center to Martin Luther King, Jr., at the groundbreaking or to dedicate it to Martin Luther King, Jr., after it was up. Then Mrs. Young said, "Now we comin' down to new business"—and it was the business everyone had been waiting for. The sewing center had been scheduled to be built on an acre of land along the county highway that runs from Alberta to Gees Bend—an acre the quilting-bee members had acquired only after a long period during which it had seemed that no white landowner would sell—but in the week before the board meeting a white farmer named Lee Rose indicated to Mrs. Witherspoon his willingness to sell the quilting bee a much larger piece of property that included a house, a well, and twenty-three acres of land. Mrs. Witherspoon related several conversations she had with Rose, introducing each of them with an exact rendition of how they had greeted each other—"He said 'Estelle?' I said 'Sir?'" (Mrs. Witherspoon has a local reputation as a mimic; she can imitate a couple of the whites in Alberta and a couple of the quilting-bee members, and she can reproduce both sides of the conversation the women had with the Wilcox County sheriff a few years ago when they went to the county courthouse to register for voting.) It sounded as if Rose's price went up with every conversation, until he was asking ten thousand dollars plus the acre the quilting bee already had. A couple of the board members shook their heads in wonderment at talk of that much money, but Father Walter reported that the American Friends Service Committee in Atlanta would be willing to make an interest-free loan if the board wanted to buy the land and thought that business was good enough to warrant it.

Business is getting better all the time. Father Walter first noticed some boldly designed quilts hanging on clotheslines at a place called Possum Bend in 1965; as director of the Selma Inter-Religious Project, which had been founded by clergymen who were on the Selma March, he was going through Wilcox County collecting depositions from Negroes who had been evicted because they registered to vote. Father Walter eventually organized the quilters into a co-op—marketing the quilts for fifteen dollars through his newsletter and some church mailings, and soliciting scraps from sympathetic

white liberals. About a year ago, he came across Selengut, who sent someone to Wilcox County to work on design and quality control, invested in good fabric to replace the scraps, and decided that quilting, a difficult and time-consuming process, should be treated as a kind of expensive art form for the most talented quilters while more profitable lines were developed for the bulk of the quilting bee's business. The Freedom Quilting Bee, which did twenty-two thousand dollars' worth of business last year, already has twenty thousand dollars' worth of orders this year. Its problem is not whether it can sell what it produces but whether it can possibly produce enough to fill the orders it has sold. Mrs. Witherspoon reported to the meeting that



a recent writeup in *Woman's Day* about the quilts had already resulted in more than a thousand letters; as the board members began smiling about that bonanza they were told that, considering large orders from *Life* and Bloomingdale's and the fact that making dashikis or throw pillows is so much more profitable than making quilts (Mrs. Witherspoon has conducted a time study), a lot of the inquiries would probably be sent along to a co-op in West Virginia.

Father Walter had been carefully neutral as he presented the alternatives the board had in considering whether to buy the farm, but after some talk about what might be done with twenty-three acres—a catfish farm or a pig-feeding program that could provide work for men in the community, a day-care center—he finally admitted, "I can almost taste that farm." The board members wanted to buy the farm as long as they didn't have to surrender their original acre, and someone put that in the form of a motion. Mrs. Young said, "All in favor say the word 'aye'—no, let me see you stand, that'll be better." All the board members stood.


There was a report from the cooking committee, name tags were handed out, and someone asked what the board members would wear for the groundbreaking. Ezra Cunningham, who had said little except during the discussion of potential agricultural projects, looked up and said, "I suggest they wear dashikis and miniskirts."

FATHER WALTER and Selengut were, as usual, houseguests of the Witherspoons during their stay in Wilcox County. After Mrs. Witherspoon

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began drawing a steady salary (two thousand dollars a year) as the quilting-bee manager, the family moved into a relatively solid house that has indoor plumbing. Their property includes a yard for pigs and chickens, a patch of garden for growing greens, and, across from the garden, a tiny unpainted house that serves as a home for Mrs. Witherspoon's mother, a diminutive woman who always wears a man's felt hat and is known to everyone in the area as Ma Willie. Ma Willie did Amanda Burden's nursery. Among leaders of the Southern cooperative movement, which has assisted the Freedom Quilting Bee, pride in its accomplishments is sometimes coupled with resentment about its dependence on whites—one way to envision a Negro co-op is as a kind of black kibbutz that provides an alternative to white capitalism—but Father Walter and Selengut continue to feel comfortable among the quilting-bee members, who tend to be strong believers in Martin Luther King's teachings about love. The cynicism occasionally expressed in the co-op movement about white businesses that help themselves while helping the poor—about how much a decorator like Mrs. Parish charges for a yard of quilted material, for instance, or about how *Life*, which might expect to incur the displeasure of its advertisers by any step toward mail-order merchandising, can protect itself from criticism by making the first test with merchandise produced by poor people's co-ops—is never heard among members of the Freedom Quilting Bee. They are interested mainly in adding a few hundred dollars to a family income that is likely to be less than a thousand dollars a year.

On the evening of the board meeting, Father Walter and Selengut remained behind after dinner while Mr. and Mrs. Witherspoon, armed with a five-hundred-dollar check, went to see if Rose would accept a down payment to sell for ten thousand. (Mr. Witherspoon, a small, energetic, humorous man in his sixties, is unable to do farm work because of a hip injury and often helps out with quilting-bee business affairs.) Rose instantly accepted the offer. The following day, after Father Walter had driven to Alberta to phone the quilting bee's lawyer and the American Friends Service Committee, the Witherspoons and the Roses drove to the county courthouse to sign over the deed. That evening, Mrs. Witherspoon, unable to find an envelope around the house, wrapped a check for nine thousand five hundred dollars in

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a paper Christmas-party napkin, and her husband, after a few jokes about how much more money that was than Rose had ever held in his hand before, went with her to deliver the check.

IT rained during most of Thursday and part of Friday. Father Walter, Witherspoon, and Selengut interviewed contractors; Witherspoon presided over the butchering of two hogs and the clearing of the section of Rose's cornfield that had been selected as the new site; Selengut staked out the building; and many members of the quilting bee stopped sewing and started cooking. On Saturday, it was clear. At ten o'clock, two hundred or so people—about half of them whites from the university community in Tuscaloosa or from Atlanta or from New York—gathered a few hundred yards up the road from the new property. Father Walter had put on not only his clerical collar but an imposing liturgical hat and an elaborately brocaded cope. The board members wore hats and their Sunday coats—cloth coats with fur collars—but under their coats they wore dashiki-style dresses, a foot or so longer than miniskirts. The choral group from Tuskegee and the flute-and-drum trio from Memphis that were scheduled to perform had both encountered transportation difficulties, but there was a song from an Atlanta folk singer in West African dress and a hymn from the entire group. Then, led by a color guard carrying a cross flanked by an American flag and an Alabama flag, everyone marched down the county highway toward the building site, singing "I'm Going to Do What the Spirit Say Do." In Rose's muddy cornfield, Father Walter blessed the site and dedicated it to the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. The board followed Father Walter and the color guard around the strings Selengut had placed to indicate where the building would be, and each of the board members turned over a shovelful of earth—all of them with the quick, efficient motion of people who are familiar with shovels. Lee Rose and his wife watched from the driveway. Rose told a visitor that he and his wife had been wanting to move closer to their children and had been happy to help out the colored folks by selling them the land. "We got a lot of good niggers around here and a lot of sorry ones," he said. "I guess it's that way everywhere with both races."

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Bend, there were several speeches, including one by Mrs. Young, the quilting-bee president, who said of the occasion, "It makes me feel like the black womens of Wilcox County is about to do somethin'." The special guests were introduced—representatives from the Federation of Southern Coöperatives, the manager of a co-op that was furnishing concrete bricks for the building, executives of a couple of foundations that are helping to pay for the building, a designer from Bloomingdale's who had color-styled some quilts and designed a line of throw pillows for the Bloomingdale's order, a man from Life's Treasures, a New York textile importer named Preston Schwarz, who had extended the Freedom Quilting Bee credit on the African dashiki panels he imports from a factory in Holland. Afterward, at the local school, everyone lined up for dinner—fried chicken, barbecued pork, collard greens, black-eyed peas, sweet-potato pie—and looked at a display of quilts and pillows and sunbonnets and pot holders and dashikis made by the Freedom Quilting Bee. Visitors were also encouraged to stop by the quilting bee's current headquarters—a rickety, unpainted, two-room shack that the Witherspoons used to live in. In one room, Mrs. Witherspoon and the assistant manager somehow handle the office work, hemmed in by a cutting table and bolts of fabric and finished quilts. In another room, of about the same size—a room in which all four walls and the ceiling are covered with faded flowered wallpaper—there is space for a small table and a quilting frame, around which a half-dozen members of the quilting bee usually work. The quilt on the frame was in the traditional Grandmother's Choice pattern of alternating squares of material. The squares were of black velvet, green velvet, and a Paisley print from Liberty of London. It will retail at Bloomingdale's for a hundred and forty dollars. —CALVIN TRILLIN

PHOENIX (AP)—The size of tomatoes was the issue in a temporary restraining order issued by U.S. District Court Judge Walter E. Craig.

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