

Tent Cities in Fayette and Haywood

Essential Question: What led to the creation of tent cities in Fayette and Haywood counties?

The story of Tennessee's Tent Cities began on May 23, 1940. Burton Dodson was an African American man living in Fayette County. He got into fight with a white man over and African American women that both men were interested in. The sheriff, W.H. Cooke, came to Dodson's house with his deputies and a group of deputized white men and demanded that Dodson surrender. Dodson refused and the group opened fire. Dodson fired back and during the fight, Deputy Olin Burrow was killed. Dodson escaped, but in 1958 Dodson was found in St. Louis and returned to Fayette County to stand trial for murder.

Dodson was defended by J.F. Estes, an African American attorney from Memphis. When Estes asked why an all-white jury had been chosen, he was told that no African Americans were registered as voters in Fayette County. Dodson was found guilty and sentenced to 20 years in prison which was later reduced to 10 years. Dodson's trial spurred John McFerran and Harpman Jameson to begin a voter registration drive in the African American community.

McFerran and Jameson were World War II veterans and had little trouble when they registered to vote. However, when they tried to vote in the Democratic primary in August 1959, they were told that it was an all-white primary and were not allowed to vote. However, McFerran and Jameson did not give up. First, they contacted Estes and began a voter registration drive. Next, they traveled to Washington D.C. and met with an official from the Justice Department. On November 16, 1959, the federal government filed a lawsuit against the Fayette County Democratic Party under the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

White officials tried to stop voter registration by resigning, but the federal government appointed new officials and registration continued. African Americans stood in long lines for hours while being taunted and spat upon in order to register. African-Americans were also banned from shopping in local stores, and refused crop loans at the bank. Gas companies also refused to sell oil and gas until a boycott organized by the NAACP broke the embargo in August, 1960.

In November, hundreds of African-Americans voted and for the first time since Reconstruction Fayette County voted Republican. In retaliation, African American sharecroppers were evicted from their homes. Shepard Towles a local land owner allowed the displaced people to set up tents on his land. The tents were donated by a white merchant who has never been named. As the Tent Cities gained national attention the people living there received aid from the NAACP, American Friends Committee and eventually surplus food from the federal

government. People in the tent cities had to deal with violence as well as the cold weather. Earlie Williams was shot while sleeping in his tent. A later incident of gunfire caused the residents of Tent City to move to a secret location for safety.

On June 26, 1962, the federal district court in Memphis issued a decree that ended all pending lawsuits and ordered that the white defendants not take any other actions to interfere with voting rights. In 1963, African American families began to move into low interest homes. After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, voter registration continued. The Tent Cities, like sit-ins, boycotts and marches brought national attention to the inequalities that African Americans faced in the South. Ultimately, the sacrifices of the men, women and children who lived in the Tent Cities helped to bring an end to the Jim Crow South.

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Draw what you think the tent cities would've looked like.

Why did the tent cities exist? Things to keep in mind: Who lived there and why?
