

Handout 2: Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: Oral History

Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: Black and White Unite?

Naomi Williams: During the Depression I had a crop of my own. And if I had a little leisure time to get off, I'd go over there to the boss's place and pick cotton. And that was for \$0.35 a hundred. I was a good cotton picker; and I picked 300 pounds in one day to get me a dollar and a nickel. I'd go out there in the early morning just so you could see a row of cotton. It was hard, but I made it. I tried to keep my own account at the commissary store. But now where the cheating came in was on this stuff you put on the cotton, fertilizer and all that kind of stuff, and in the seeds. When they sell the cotton, they wouldn't give me what the cotton was worth. They put it there and I had to pay it all. I was renting but I wasn't supposed to pay it all. But I had all that to pay. Yes, I owed them at that store everything. I gathered crops so much. And then when I'd get enough crop gathered, then I'd pay him. I had got all my groceries and that would leave me with nothing.

I usually made 40 and 45 bales, more sometimes, and I had enough money to run me through the winter, to buy new children's clothes for school and to buy groceries to last till the next time they start to furnish over in the spring. They didn't never give us nothing until the first of April. But I was wise. I'd buy enough of what I couldn't raise to last till April or May. I was raising hogs, had cows, and made my own garden and put up dry food, beans and peas and all that. I done worked myself to death....

H. L. Mitchell: I have always said that my family came down the agricultural ladder. My father was a tenant farmer who owned his team and farming tools. My grandfather owned his own farm and lived near Halls, Tennessee. He was also a Baptist preacher. From the time I was eight-years-old I worked for wages on the farm. I worked for \$0.50 per day upwards. I made my first sharecrop about 1919....

Clay East: The way I remember the union getting started—see, in the South we call 12 o'clock "dinner." When Norman Thomas [the leader of the Socialist Party] was there to speak we had dinner at my home, and during the meal Norman was the first one that planted that idea in our heads. He told me at that meeting, "What you need here is a union." In other words, the Socialist Party wasn't going to be any help to these tenant farmers. This was after we had taken him out and shown him the conditions in the country and all. And that is where the idea originated, when Thomas told us that. So, after he left, we talked the thing over. Mitchell was actually the big planner in this deal. There was Mitch and myself and two other guys, I think probably Ward Rogers and possibly Alvin Nunnally.

I can't remember just how many there was at the first meeting, but as I remember, it was about fifty-fifty, about half white and half black. We had to have an understanding among the union members, and you couldn't have much understanding if you had two separate unions. So we didn't have any complications to amount to anything about that. I got up and I was pretty hot by that time, and it was, as I said, getting up pretty late and I told them we'd come down here to decide what or whether we was going to have a union or not, and if we was going to have one, well, let's make up our mind and get some members in here. So I took in the first members. They started signing some cards, we had some cards and all there, and these guys joined up.

J. R. Butler: ...After I had gone back to my sawmill job I got a call from Mitchell, and he told me that they were ready to start building a union there. In fact, I think they had already had a meeting at which they sort of got together on some ideas. So I went back over again, and we worked out a constitution and started organizing. It wasn't long before we had an organizer or two in jail because the plantation element in that part of the country absolutely did not want them "niggers" organized, and they didn't hesitate to

say it in just those words. The whites were niggers, too. There was no difference, and some of 'em was beginning to see that there was no difference. Of course, there was still a lot of prejudice among white people in those days, but hard times makes peculiar bedfellows sometimes, and so some of them were beginning to get their eyes open and see that all of them were being used. So it was easy to get a start on organizing.

None of us who were really interested in getting the work started would agree to having a separate union or separate meetings or anything of that kind. A lot of the Negro people agreed with us because they knew that if they had a meeting with just black people there, they wouldn't have any protection whatever, but a few white people might have protective influence, so it was to their interest really to have all of it together.

Of course we had opposition on every hand, the law enforcement officers and the plantation owners and a lot, even, of the white sharecroppers themselves were opposed to an organization that took in both races. But we overcame all of that to some extent and we were ready. As soon as we began to tell people what the situation was and what might be done about it, well, they could see that the white people were being treated just the same as the Negroes, they were in the same boat and they all had to pull together. That's about the best way that I know to express it.

George Stith: ...When we first started there was no integrated local. Even though white and black organized together, it was set up on the basis of race. It was a community thing. Naturally the communities were segregated. That's why we had segregated locals, because whites and blacks usually didn't live on the farm together. Let me tell you this. When I went to Louisiana in 1953 down in the sugarcane fields, we had the same situation there. Certain plantations were all black and certain plantations were all white. The first time I went to a place called Raceland to make a talk to a group of sugarcane workers, I was the first Negro, except the janitor, that had his foot in the American Legion Hall. The workers were all white, and I went in there that night, and they looked at me sort of funny and said, "Is this who gon' talk?"

Later when we had our district meeting to bring our locals from the whole sugarcane area together, you had the whites and the blacks. And when they sat down and talked and thought of the situation, they decided we were all in the same boat. So they said, "Well, when are y'all gonna meet, we want to come over. When we're gonna meet, we want y'all to come over." This was a thing that just happened. They couldn't see segregation.

Usually we held it in a church or a country schoolhouse. A lot of time they were held without authority, but we could always get in. But the whites had a problem. Where they belonged to a church, the higher-ups also belonged, and they couldn't get the church to have a meeting. So they had to come to a Negro place in order to have a meeting.

Mitchell: Evictions occurred continuously. We estimate something like a half a million or a million as a result of the cotton plow-up program. Dr. Calvin Hoover, who was doing a survey with Howard Odum, estimated a little higher—900,000 evicted as a result of the cotton plow-up in 1933 and the reduction the cotton program in 1934.

In the beginning, if a union family was evicted and the family wanted to, we'd put them back in the houses. This was done now and then. Usually the plantation owner didn't want them and most of them didn't want to stay. We did that continuously in 1935 because there just wasn't any place for them to go and many people had come back from the city. The relation between the farms and the cities wasn't as close as it is today.

In the beginning, we were trying to get a section of the law enforced providing that sharecroppers should not be evicted from the land because of the operation of the AAA [Agricultural Adjustment Administration] program. We were trying to get that enforced, but of course they didn't pay any attention to the law, any more than they do now when

poor people are concerned. We filed a lawsuit in the courts, and about the time the lawsuit was being thrown out, we sent a delegation to Washington to see the secretary of agriculture, Mr. Henry Wallace, the great liberal. As we always did, we had representation of both whites and blacks; there were two other whites besides me and two blacks [Reverend E. B.] McKinney [vice-president of the STFU] and another minister, Reverend N. W. Webb, a union organizer from Birdsong, Arkansas.

We got up early in the morning. Because of the interracial composition of our group, we drove day and night, as there was no place for us to stop and we didn't know what else to do.

Soon after nine o'clock we went back to the Department of Agriculture. We marched up the stairs, the guard had told us the secretary's office was 204. We went right into the secretary's office, and the receptionist asked who we were and we told her we were a delegation from the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and we wanted to see the secretary. She asked if we had an appointment. Of course we did not. I never heard of having to make an appointment to "see" anybody before. I hesitated and didn't know what to say. McKinney stepped up and said, Ma'am, we will just sit down here. If Mr. Wallace is busy, we'll just wait until he gets through and we can talk to him then." The receptionist didn't know what to do with a group of people who intended to sit in the office and wait for Mr. Wallace. About that time I remembered a letter I had, addressed to Paul Appleby, the undersecretary of agriculture, and I asked her if she would deliver the letter to Mr. Appleby. Paul Appleby came out and soon he got Henry Wallace out there to see us.

Wallace promised to send an investigator down to investigate the displacement of people under the AAA. We evidently put up a rather convincing story to him.

Stith: ... They tried to separate people by class, and they tried to do it by race. Whichever was best to use, they used it. It worked on a lot of people, and some people it just didn't work on. For instance, the agent on the plantation where I lived wanted to join the union because he knew the problem, but he was afraid to. And he says to me, "Now George, look, I know you. Anything y'all need that I can give you, just tell me. Information or anything else, I'd get it."...

At that time we had a family membership. Where there was a widow involved, she was the head of the family, so she took out a legal membership. But where there was a man and his involved, she was a member too. She had a voice when it come down to talking or voting on.

Women were very active and made a lot of the decisions. Women decided to do things that men felt like they couldn't do. We had several locals around Cotton Plant and I believe in one of the locals all the officers were women. This was because men were afraid. Owners never bothered women. They never beat up any women. Oh yes, I think they did in Mississippi and maybe one place in Arkansas. Bust usually they would pick on the men. They was a little bit slow about bothering women.

Yes, we had some women, and especially there was one that could make just about as good a speech as any of the men could. Henrietta McGee was her name. She went with us on trips to New York and Washington and made speeches before groups and was a big help in getting contributions, because she got right down to earth with the things that she had to say....

Mitchell: There was a kind of unofficial bargaining. They wouldn't recognize the union as such, but they'd watch to see what the union was going to demand, particularly after that cotton picking experience of 1935. We'd call a wage conference every year, maybe twice a year, with several representatives from each local union, and they would decide what we were going to ask for. Often, we'd make a survey of our members and

have a ballot to see what they thought the union should ask. We'd do this before the wage conference. Then we'd tabulate all of the returns and say, here's what the members think that we can get. The conference would determine we can get a dollar per hundred this time, and we would announce that the union was demanding a dollar per hundred pounds for picking the cotton. We'd invite all plantation owners to meet with us to work out a contract and an agreement, but of course they never did. This had the same general effect as a wage contract. It was kind of the old IWW idea. If you didn't have a contract, then you take action on the job. If the boss didn't pay the union rate, the people quit work and went somewhere else—where the union scale was paid....

Stith: The problem was that blacks in the agriculture field didn't have leaders with enough education to do what was necessary. That's number one. And number two, a black man wasn't recognized enough to get into places where he needed to go, even if he had enough education. Even at that time, government organizations didn't look at a black man too much. So a black person as president could not have been too successful in getting a lot of outside help. It was the major role of the union to bring in outside support, money, etc. It had to be. It was the only way we could survive. We had no funds. The members didn't have enough money to pay dues to the organization for it to operate. We had to have outside help. A black man was discussed sometimes as being president. And I was discussed at one time. But we decided, that if a black man got to be president it might divide us. So we decided, well at least we'll put him in second spot, make him vice-president.

This is the way most blacks wanted it. There were some few who felt like they were able to lead. When one was found, and he felt thataway, we always found somewhere to put him in a leadership position. I didn't feel like I was a leader. I just wanted to help get things better. But they felt like I was, and they put me into it....

Unfortunately, most of the people coming along now don't know anything about the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. All the things that the union fought for, that the people on the farms have been able to get, like social security and minimum wage, they just see that the government just give them that. And when you tell them this is something that we fought for for years, that we went to Congress hoboing our way or going in trucks or busses or cars, they don't believe it.

Butler: Most of the unions have gotten to where they're not rank and file anyway. Even the industrial unions are controlled by officials that are elected once every two years or once every four years or sometimes maybe not that often. Back in the earlier days, when people thought about joining the union, it was something like joining a church, getting together to work together for the things they wanted. It was never a mass movement, you know, but it was big enough and so much out of the ordinary that it drew the attention of the world, and so in that way I think we did a lot of good. There were probably things that we could have done if we had known more about what to do, but we were just novices, we just had to play it by ear as we went, and that was all we could do.

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Handout 3: “Why I Quit the Klan”—An Interview with C. P. Ellis

C.P. Ellis was born in 1927 and was 53-years-old at the time of this interview with Studs Terkel. At one time he was president (Exalted Cyclops) of the Durham chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, and lived in Durham, North Carolina.

All my life, I had work, never a day without work, worked all the overtime I could get and still could not survive financially. I began to see there's something wrong with this country. I worked my butt off and just never seemed to break even. I had some real great ideas about this nation. They say to abide by the law, go to church, do right and live for the Lord, and everything'll work out. But it didn't work out. It just kept getting worse and worse...

Tryin to come out of that hole, I just couldn't do it. I really began to get bitter. I didn't know who to blame. I tried to find somebody. Hatin America is hard to do because you can't see it to hate it. You gotta have somethin to look at to hate. The natural person for me to hate would be Black people, because my father before me was a member of the Klan...

So I began to admire the Klan... To be part of somethin. ... The first night I went with the fellas . . . I was led into a large meeting room, and this was the time of my life! It was thrilling. Here's a guy who's worked all his life and struggled all his life to be something, and here's the moment to be something. I will never forget it. Four robed Klansmen led me into the hall. The lights were dim and the only thing you could see was an illuminated cross... After I had taken my oath, there was loud applause goin through-out the buildin, musta been at least 400 people. For this one little ol person. It was a thrilling moment for C. P. Ellis...

The majority of [the Klansmen] are low-income Whites, people who really don't have a part in something. They have been shut out as well as Blacks. Some are not very well educated either. Just like myself. We had a lot of support from doctors and lawyers and police officers.

Maybe they've had bitter experiences in this life and they had to hate somebody. So the natural person to hate would be the Black person. He's beginnin to come up, he's beginnin to . . . start votin and run for political office. Here are White people who are supposed to be superior to them, and we're shut out... Shut out. Deep down inside, we want to be part of this great society. Nobody listens, so we join these groups...

We would go to the city council meetings and the Blacks would be there and we'd be there. It was a confrontation every time... We began to make some inroads with the city councilmen and county commissioners. They began to call us friend. Call us at night on the telephone: “C. P., glad you came to that meeting last night.” They didn't want integration either, but they did it secretly, in order to get elected. They couldn't stand up openly and say it, but they were glad somebody was sayin it. We visited some of the city leaders in their homes and talked to em privately. It wasn't long before councilmen would call me up: “The Blacks are comin up tonight and makin outrageous demands. How about some of you people showin up and have a little balance?”...

We'd load up our cars and we'd fill up half the council chambers, and the Blacks the other half. During these times, I carried weapons to the meetings, outside my belt. We'd go there armed. We would wind up just hollerin and fussin at each other. What happened? As a result of our fightin one another, the city council still had their way. They didn't want to give up control to the Blacks nor the Klan. They were usin us.

I began to realize this later down the road. One day I was walkin downtown and a certain city council member saw me comin. I expected him to shake my hand because he was talkin to me at night on the telephone. I had been in his home and visited with him. He crossed the street [to avoid me]... I began to think, somethin's wrong here. Most of em are merchants or maybe an attorney, an insurance agent, people like that. As long as they kept low-income Whites and low-income Blacks fightin, they're gonna maintain control. I began to get that feelin after I was ignored in public. I thought: . . . you're not gonna use me any more. That's when I began to do some real serious thinkin.

The same thing is happening in this country today. People are being used by those in control, those who have all the wealth. I'm not espousing communism. We got the greatest system of government in the world. But those who have it simply don't want those who don't have it to have any part of it. Black and White. When it comes to money, the green, the other colors make no difference.

I spent a lot of sleepless nights. I still didn't like Blacks. I didn't want to associate with them. Blacks, Jews, or Catholics. My father said: "Don't have anything to do with em." I didn't until I met a Black person and talked with him, eyeball to eyeball, and met a Jewish person and talked to him, eyeball to eyeball. I found they're people just like me. They cried, they cussed, they prayed, they had desires. Just like myself. Thank God, I got to the point where I can look past labels. But at that time, my mind was closed.

I remember one Monday night Klan meeting. I said something was wrong. Our city fathers were using us. And I didn't like to be used. The reactions of the others was not too pleasant: "Let's just keep fightin them niggers."

I'd go home at night and I'd have to wrestle with myself. I'd look at a Black person walkin down the street, and the guy'd have ragged shoes or his clothes would be worn. That began to do something to me inside. I went through this for about six months. I felt I just had to get out of the Klan. But I wouldn't get out...

[Ellis was invited, as a Klansman, to join a committee of people from all walks of life to make recommendations on how to solve racial problems in the school system. He very reluctantly accepted. After a few stormy meetings, he was elected co-chair of the committee, along with Ann Atwater, a Black woman who for years had been leading local efforts for civil rights.]

A Klansman and a militant Black woman, co-chairmen of the school committee. It was impossible. How could I work with her? But it was in our hands. We had to make it a success. This gave me another sense of belongin, a sense of pride. This helped the inferiority feeling I had. A man who has stood up publicly and said he despised Black people, all of a sudden he was willin to work with em. Here's a chance for a low-income White man to be somethin. In spite of all my hatred for Blacks and Jews and liberals, I accepted the job. Her and I began to reluctantly work together. She had as many problems workin with me as I had workin with her.

One night, I called her: "Ann, you and I should have a lot of differences and we got em now. But there's somethin laid out here before us, and if it's gonna be a success, you and I are gonna have to make it one. Can we lay aside some of these feelins?" She said: "I'm willing if you are." I said: "Let's do it."

My old friends would call me at night: "C. P., what the hell is wrong with you? You're sellin out the White race." This begin to make me have guilt feeling Am I doin right? Am I doin wrong? Here I am all of a sudden makin an about-face and tryin to deal with my feelins, my heart. My mind was beginnin to open up. I was beginnin to see what was right and what was wrong. I don't want the kids to fight forever...

One day, Ann and I went back to the school and we sat down. We began to talk and just reflect... I begin to see, here we are, two people from the far ends of the fence, havin

identical problems, except hers bein Black and me bein White... The amazing thing about it, her and I, up to that point, has cussed each other, bawled each other, we hated each other. Up to that point, we didn't know each other. We didn't know we had things in common...

The whole world was openin up, and I was learning new truths that I had never learned before. I was beginning to look at a Black person, shake hands with him, and see him as a human bein. I hadn't got rid of all this stuff. I've still got a little bit of it. But somethin was happenin to me...

I come to work one morning and some guys says: "We need a union." At this time I wasn't pro-union. My daddy was antilabor too. We're not gettin paid much, we're havin to work seven days in a row. We're all starvin to death... I didn't know nothin about organizin unions, but I knew how to organize people, stir people up. That's how I got to be business agent for the union.

When I began to organize, I began to see far deeper. I begin to see people again bein used. Blacks against Whites... There are two things management wants to keep: all the money and all the say-so. They don't want none of these poorworkin folks to have none of that. I begin to see management fightin me with everythin they had. Hire antiunion law firms, badmouth unions. The people were makin \$1.95 an hour, barely able to get through weekends...

It makes you feel good to go into a plant and ... see Black people and White people join hands and defeat the racist issues [union-busters] use against people...

I tell people there's a tremendous possibility in this country to stop wars, the battles, the struggles, the fights between people. People say: "That's an impossible dream. You sound like Martin Luther King." An ex-Klansman who sounds like Martin Luther King. I don't think it's an impossible dream. It's happened in my life. It's happened in other people's lives in America...

When the news came over the radio that Martin Luther King was assassinated, I got on the telephone and begin to call other Klansmen... We just had a real party... Really rejoicin cause the son of a bitch was dead. Our troubles are over with. They say the older you get, the harder it is for you to change. That's not necessarily true. Since I changed, I've set down and listened to tapes of Martin Luther King. I listen to it and tears come to my eyes cause I know what he's sayin now. I know what's happenin.

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