

States of the Union

WAITING FOR THE JUSTICE MAN

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



AARON HENRY

MOST OF THE crusading whites pulled out of this area six or seven years ago, vanishing without fanfare into the amenable fastnesses of Scarsdale, Highland Park and San Mateo. They had wrought a second Reconstruction, flawed but authen-

tic, and like their precursors of 1876, they contrived a second retreat to the North. Yet, after they were gone, something remained—the law, the sacred voting guarantees fashioned in Washington and carried down the mountain to Mississippi.

The blacks of Jonestown—a muddy village in Coahoma County, near the Arkansas line—were among those left on their own. They have been circling Jericho, with the law as their trumpet. And on May 8, Democratic Primary Day in Mississippi, a small section of the wall came tumbling down.

H. J. Wing, a merchant of some substance, was running to succeed himself as Mayor of Jonestown against James Shanks, a 58-year-old black schoolteacher and member of the town board. Technically, Wing was neither black nor white—he was Chinese (thousands of Chinese had been imported to the Cotton Belt at the turn-of-the-century for cheap plantation labor). But as at least one black Jonestowner has observed, “Around here, if you’re not nigger-black, you’re white.”

So for those who like to keep

their politics simple, the primary was merely blacks against whites: As the polls opened on the second Tuesday of last month only the most fervent white-Wingers could have doubted the outcome. Everyone else knew the facts of Jonestown life: (1) two-thirds of the town’s 2,600 citizens were black; (2) thanks to indefatigable canvassings by the NAACP and the black-based branch of the Democratic party, Coahoma County blacks had been registering in force; and (3) a surprising number of white voters in Jonestown were throwing guarded compliments in Shanks’ direction.

Shanks’ victory, they thought, might not be half bad. After all, lots of elected officials around the state were black—10 of them in Coahoma County—and the state flag was still waving. True, Shanks was an NAACP man, but quite a few whites, too, had been joining the NAACP of late. Besides, Shanks had been talking about getting money from the Feds for a drainage system, something to siphon off the stinking water that stagnated on the streets and bred mosquitoes. In short, it was 1973 in Mississippi,

eight full years after the passage of the national Civil Rights Act, and not many Jonestowners were feeling nostalgic about "the good old days."

The polls at City Hall closed at 6 P.M., and by 6:20 the news was all over town: Wing had upset Shanks, 206 to 104.

Suddenly 500 angry blacks were milling in and around City Hall. They occupied the building; they redirected street traffic. The area became off-limits to whites. "Nobody's gonna tinker with the voting machine," said a spokesman for the blacks. "We're staying here until the Justice Man comes."

But all of the officials from the U.S. Justice Department were busy monitoring other elections in other towns, and as the waiting went on the crowd began to turn into a mob. Pistols and shotguns appeared. Some of the men wandered across the street to the gas station to buy kerosene, which was poured into bottles that were then stuffed with rags. People started passing along a new slogan: "If Shanks ain't gonna be mayor, there ain't gonna be no Jonestown."

At 1:30 A.M. somebody with a telephone finally reached Aaron Henry in Clarksdale, 20 miles north of Jonestown. Henry was both the president of the Mississippi NAACP and chairman of the state Democratic party. "We got trouble here in Jonestown," he was told. "You better come down."

"When I got there," Henry recalls, "it looked like Wounded Knee, Mississippi. People were cussing and threatening. I did what I could to quiet them. I got on a soapbox and talked against violence. It was the real Martin Luther King approach."

Henry kept telling the crowd that someone from the Justice Department was on his way—he'd be there any minute. "I told them that all night," he says. "We still respect the Justice Department, you see. But it wasn't until seven the next

morning that I got hold of somebody in Washington. I urged him to send a man down here to straighten this thing out."

Two Federal agents from Memphis who arrived in Jonestown at 9:30 were the first white men allowed to enter City Hall since the election "results" had been announced the previous evening. What they found when they opened the voting machine solved at least one half of the puzzle. The candidates' names on the front of the machine—the part read by voters—listed Wing first, Shanks second. But the names on the back of the machine, where the votes were recorded, were reversed—Shanks first, Wing second. Therefore, each



Shanks vote had been recorded as a Wing vote, and vice versa. The actual election totals were: Shanks 206, Wing 104.

THE OTHER HALF of the puzzle—was it an honest typographical error or insolent fraud—may never be solved. White election officials were instantly apologetic. "It was just a printer's mistake," explained William Buck Rogers, the circuit clerk and the highest election official in the county. "There's nothing more to this." Rogers invited Henry to inspect the voting records back to 1968, the year the county switched to voting machines. A biracial commission is now looking into the matter.

"I don't think any of the top

people did this thing," Henry says. "Men like Rogers have been honest with us right along. We don't agree on a lot of things, but at least we can cuss each other."

Henry is also willing to give the black printer of the ballots, Richard Webster, the benefit of the doubt; they were born on the same plantation. But he wonders why the ballot on the "spare" machine that was not used bore the identical error. "Look here, Dick Webster," Henry said to the printer after the crowd had been dispersed, "do you mean to tell me we sent you to a white school and you don't know your ABCs?"

In any case, James Shanks was officially declared the winner of the

May 8 primary, and since no Republican ran against him in the June 5 election, Shanks is now the Mayor of Jonestown, Mississippi. He has his work cut out for him. About four-fifths of the residents are out of work; they get support either from welfare or from Social Security. There aren't many tax dollars for Shanks to spend.

"We got the voting law," Shanks says, "but we haven't got the money. This town is going to need a lot of help."

The new Mayor is not bitter about the election shenanigans; he can forgive and forget. "Maybe it did seem sort of peculiar," he remarks, "but it's finished now. We blacks try to work together with the whites; we don't want to take over."