

HENRY MERCER

I was born in Jessup, Georgia, April 3, 1885. I went to school to the 6th grade. My daddy died when I was thirteen years old and I had to go to work to help my mother. I considered then that there was something wrong at that young age because I knew that I seen the white kids had something that I just couldn't have. I seen the oppression of all people, white and black. When I was around sixteen years old I joined the Marcus Garvey movement and quite naturally started to learn a lot about the revolutionary struggle.

But to go back a bit first. One thing I can tell you, when I got to be a young man, I was working one night at the ice plant and a hinky picked me up in a car and said, "I just got to kill me a nigger tonight." And I was scared to death. He put a pistol to my head and drove all around. And he came back, he brought me back and he said, "Well, you're a good nigger, go ahead and go to work. You ain't the one I'm looking for." That was in Georgia, Wayne County.

We used to go out and pick cotton. This was before I worked on the railroad, you know, to help along with the family because my dad wasn't making but a dollar and a quarter a day. There was four of us in the family to feed and he somehow or another managed to provide a place and pay for it. He worked in a freight house and I used to help pick cotton from the time I got out of school at two o'clock to into the evening. Cotton come in around the middle of August.

We had a basket ball game one evening on the hill. We been having our own people to move the people back from the line, and this honkey police come up and he went to pushing the girls back, pushing the women back, so he draws back to hit one of them and one of our fellows reached up and got the blackjack away from him. At that time we broke up the game and we went to the hills and we went to the houses and we all got our guns. That night we knocked out every light down in black town. And some of them was under the houses, and some of them was up on the hills, and some of them was on a low place there, and there was an iron bridge and some of them was on that. So we was ready for trouble that night, but it didn't happen. About 12 midnight, a Methodist preacher came down, flying a white flag, flying a white flag. Well, the leaders come out and recognized him and he said there wouldn't be nothing to it-- they'd squashed the thing. So we had a conference. We had a little trial the next morning and the whole thing was completely thrown out. That was a tight place. They was hard on blacks.

There was a time, if you was a black man, you couldn't come through there on the train, and if you did, they'd throw rocks at the train. I was working down at the depot one night, and we had a white fellow kill a black man on the train and nothing was done about it. Another time, there was a bunch of blacks working in a little town about five miles from Jessup and this white woman hollered rape, and they arrested the gang of the boys, drove 'em in and put 'em in jail. The train was coming at around 2:10 and I worked the train, but I noticed that it turned around and didn't come back. Well, I didn't get off work till about 4 o'clock and when they came back they was loaded with honkeys and they had every kind of gun that you wanted to see. Well the blacks all left there and I was scared because I had to stay on my job. So they went down to a little place across the river in a little thicket and they stayed there until that night, until 12 o'clock and they blowed their horns at 11 o'clock and they went to the jail but the sheriff kicked them out.

I never saw a lynching but I saw it after it happened. It's an ugly looking thing. What they do, they hang you up on the trunk of a tree and they'd cut your penis off and put it in your mouth. I went away from there. I stayed away 26 years and I went straight from Jessup to Philadelphia. All of us blacks used to keep guns.

I had a Winchester and a double barrel shot gun-- at least my daddy had one-- and I had a .38 pistol. I kept it on me all the time. I had to. We never did have no shoot-out, but one time. The time before I left, we had a shoot-out and I had to skip. Yeah, I had to skip. We got as far as Savannah, and then we left on a freight train. Some terrible things happened between the blacks and the whites there. There wasn't out one time they civilized that place and that was after I left-- they tell me mob deal came through there and they killed 151 crackers, and wounded a gang of them. They killed him later, but he sure killed a gang of them before they got him. It was a terrible place, a terrible place. You were always in fear of your life and I was glad when I got big enough to leave. I can remember back and its painful, it's painful to think about.

While I'm on it, a lot of us poor farmers had good livestock, horse and wagon, and had a crop, and then if you didn't leave, the whites would burn your house down. That way they took everything. A lot of poor fellows had to leave there by night with nothing but what they had on their back.

One thing I can say, that we were all for one and one for all-- we stuck together. That's what kind of kept it down. I don't know how many guys I shot, I don't know how

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many guys I wounded, but I know I got away from there.

Another thing we got rid of, we got rid of a lot of Uncle Toms too. Got rid of them. I know one fellow there, I was working on the job and he came to tell the boss everything he did to his wife, and everything, so we took him out that night and whapped his ass good. And he came back the next day and he was very quiet, he didn't do it no more. That's one thing I always did hate--a sneak and a stool pigeon. I never did like a stool pigeon nor a snitcher. I never was one myself, I wasn't an Uncle Tom myself and I HATE that, I hate that, just like I hate a defector, a counter-revolutionary. I hate an anti-socialist and all that. I tell you, I feel like going out and chewing them up when they do anything against the working class, against the poor people. Sometimes, I cry about it (his voice breaks) the hurting things, to think about it, 'til Jim Jones came and rescued me (sobbing). You don't know until you go through it. People say "I'm a socialist, I'm a socialist." But they don't know. (There were things that Mr. Mercer felt were too painful to discuss in his life, things he had witnessed) It takes more than you know to be a socialist. (sobbing) I got many a beating by the police (pulling himself together) I beat many of them too-- don't you think I didn't do that. I know many tricks about fighting in the revolution. In fact I went to revolutionary school for two years. I was designated to go to Moscow, but I didn't go.

I worked on the railroad. We were getting a dollar a day. I remember in 1910 the comet star, the star with the tail on it, Churches was full and everybody bordered the streets, most of the peoples was scared, they was afraid. The whites, they came out of the house and tell us of a sudden that they weren't no better than we was-- and let's all get down and pray together, 'cause when the comet star touched earth it was going to set it on fire. I remember that real good.

In 1914 World War I broke out and at that time Germany was an empire and they had many colonies in Africa. I was working on the railroad and I didn't have to go. I was running the road at that time and we were doing a lot of defense hauling and I was even a part of the Liberty Bond Train.

In 1929 I joined the Unemployment Movement in Philadelphia. We got to have jobs, everybody was unemployed and nobody was unemployed and nobody knew what to do. There were many days I was hungry, there was many days I didn't have food to eat. They was giving us soup, watery soup and we had to go to the station house to get it. During this time we were in line and some Communists came along and distributed leaflets and I take one of the leaflets and read it and it said, "meeting tonight" at a place they had in Philadelphia called 612 Brooklyn Street. And we went that night there, we had a discussion on strategy. We was going to organize the workers. So we had a meeting that night and decided to collect food for the workers which we did.

The Spring of 1930 it was, and sometime in the middle of May we had, we met there with a hunger march. We carried around 150 of us to Harrisburg, Penn. But we had to struggle to get there. We were denied entrance to many towns. We negotiated and went through and we went to Harrisburg and they wouldn't even give us a place to stay, they wouldn't rent a hall to us. We had a meeting the next day on the Capital Plaza. We had Communists come from west of Pennsylvania, miners and different unemployed workers. At that time we had 300,000 people unemployed in Philadelphia and the government was not giving one nickel of relief, not one cent of relief. So we went and pressured the State and they gave us some form of relief. All channels was exhausted and that was the onliest way we could get anything, by pressuring the State government.

The Democratic Convention came off somewhere about 1931. Roosevelt came out and in his speech he said "One third of the people are unemployed." After he was elected he went to Congress and called for billions of dollars for the first work program that we had. It lasted about 6 months because the politicians stole all the money. And then they had little local relief programs in the states to try to tide us over. Had us working for our relief. What we did wasn't useful work; we'd dig stumps, clean up golf courses and such as that. Then came WPA. They worked 10,000 people in Philadelphia, it was the biggest project that we had. We had some miserable conditions on the WPA job. We had, we decided we'd call a strike, and members were called out and singled out, the leaders were singled out as Communists and they were immediately transferred away from the project to other projects that was much tougher. I was one. They transferred me to a stone quarry. Well, that was pretty hard work-- I didn't have no experience about breaking stones. I worked there about 18 months, and during that time I was in an accident and we didn't get paid for that. Around 1939 I got a job at a naval yard but I never did sign the denial that I was a Communist because I was a Communist and I never did sign it.

I was Chairman of the Propaganda Committee, and I had a tough time. If you was a Communist at that time you had a tough time. After that we had Joe McCarthy, in the 1950s. They called us subversives and I was arrested for that. But we had a good law department and I came clear of that. I was arrested again. I was picked up again, and

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They taken me in and arrested me, and interrogated me. They called certain names and I didn't know nobody. I wouldn't talk, and then this guy said he'd been around the neighborhood and I had a pretty good record and all that kind of bullshit, and they let me go.

I had other jobs and then I went to work for the Board of Education. During that time I was a Union Steward in the Union and we got along pretty good. We had some terrible working conditions, where they worked women part-time. We demanded they work them 8 hours. They claimed they couldn't work the women 8 hours, so we had a meeting and decided to call a strike. That was around 1968. During this time I was doing pretty nicely. I was Steward in the Union and we was having little skirmishes but no strikes. But it was at this time that we called this strike, and that's when I got it-- I got my eyes blinded from tear gas.

When I came out of the hospital I joined the Senior Citizen's Action Alliance. I worked in that from 1968 to 1973, and we done a lot of good. We had a nice organization then, we had some struggles. We had it so that the senior citizens in Philadelphia all had a free trolley ride. But we had to have a strong fight to do it. We called out all the senior citizens, everybody that was able to go: blind, people that was in wheelchairs, all was in the picket lines. We crowded the ballroom in the hotel. We had the mayor there, the governor, several legislators and Congressmen. We didn't go there pleading or begging neither, and we got a reduction in our electricity rates. I got to be traveling representative of the organization. We was very successful in getting in Georgia and Florida senior citizens not to pay property taxes. Same thing in Virginia. No sales tax for senior citizens, 25% reduction in drug prices, 10% reduction in clothing.

In the winter of 1973 I was sitting down on the corner one night, and I had WCT radio station on, and I heard this song and I heard this Peoples Temple Christian Church with Jim Jones as minister. I was impressed with the message. I called the station and asked for the address, and the man said "The best I can do for you is Redwood City." I was just sitting there, turning the dial around and I just happened to let it stay on that particular station. This other preacher came on, and I laughed at him, made fun of him, just had a lot of fun off him--I knew the guy personally, and so I knew what he was really doing. So after he went off, this song came on and Jim Jones. So I called the station like I said, and we took a bus to Redwood City and I called a taxi. The taxi driver took me around looking for the church. We went to the police station and I asked the desk sergeant about Peoples Temple. I called the secretary and they said they would come and get us, but I said, no, we will stay in a hotel and you can get us in the morning. When I got to the Temple I got up to speak. I said I'd never liked preachers all my life, that I'd been a revolutionary for 40 years and I never did like preachers, because they didn't want to do nothing but eat chicken and buy Cadillacs. The congregation went wild and cheered for a good while and I went back to sit down. Jim said to me, "You don't know how you thrilled my heart when you talked about the preachers." And I laughed. I seen some things I never seen before. I seen a dog up there with Jim, and a cat came up and sat on my lap. I said, "By goodness, there's some love going around here, even the animals are loving you."

I'll never go back to the U.S. again. Jonestown is the most beautiful place I've been. It's the onliest place you can relax, it's the onliest place you can be safe from robbery, rape, and I love it out here. I wouldn't go back to the States if I had the best room in the best hotel with a silk suit and a pocket full of money, eating beefsteaks every meal-- and that's just how I feel about it. And I hope someday my boys will come over; I hope someday my sister will come over. I'm glad for the care we have here for all of our comrades, for seniors, and all of us-- and I'll do everything I can to help the revolution.

I've been a Communist a good many years. I did a lot of study with the Daily Worker when I first got started, and I got the Moscow News, and I read every paper I could read, plus the underground paper. It convinced me further. To me, Russia was the only country that gave workers inspiration that they could rule themselves, and conduct their own business without the fatbellies.

I believe that everyone should be equal. That the wealth of the world should be distributed among the workers who produced it. The fatbellies didn't do nothing. You take the farmers-- they worked the ground, produced it, gathered the food, and carried it to the tables. So that son-of-a-bitch didn't do nothing, so I think we're entitled to all of it-- not him. That's being fulfilled here in Jonestown, and I'm glad I lived to see it.

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