

Transcript for Billie Fleming

Billie Fleming: People don't know the suffering and the intimidation that some of these people received. There was Hammit Pearson, Levi Pearson, Joseph Lemons, Bill Regan, John Edwards McDonald, Henry McDonald ... uh... a group of black farmers that had small farms.

When this year and the grain was ready to be harvested, the white citizens councils had been formed and all of the white farmers got together and decided they would not gather any grain for the known members of the NAACP. In the meantime, the grain was actually beginning to rot in the fields and they couldn't get it harvested.

But I was invited to come to New York to speak for Walter Ruther's United Automobile Workers Convention. In my speech, I told the story of these men having grain in the field, rotting and couldn't get it harvested. After my speech, Walter Ruther and his brother, Vic, came over and said "Mr. Fleming, is there any grain left to be harvested."

I said, "Yes, it's about 50% in the field."

He said, "If we were to give you a combine, you think it would help?"

I told him that it would.

Walter Ruther told me that United Automobile Workers had Minneapolis ____ Company organized and they felt they could get a combine from Minneapolis ____ at wholesale cost and that they would proceed to get a combine delivered to us here in Clarendon County.

When I came back to Manning that Monday... uh... Vic Ruther called and said Billie, "I've got some bad news for you."

He said, "This thing is even worse than you spoke of in your speech."

He said, "We went Minneapolis Moline this morning and asked if they would sell us a combine to be delivered to you people in Clarendon County and they agreed to do so. But when they called their distributor in Columbia,

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South Carolina and told him to deliver that combine, he refused to do so and said if he did deliver a combine to you black ... colored people then ... that he would lose the majority of his business and it was not going to side against the white people and furnish the combine for blacks.

So he refused to deliver it.

When Vic asked me, "If we were to give you the money, do you think you could go on the open market and purchase a combine?"

I told him I thought we could.

He said, "Go find one and call me back and give me a price."

When I got this message, I got Bill Regan and John Edwards McDonald in Summerton and we went to Sumter and we began looking for a combine.

We found one, but fortunately the dealer didn't know who we were.

And we started pricing, got a price and came back and called United Automobile Workers and they wired us the money. And we went to Sumter and bought the combine and had it delivered to the home James P. Martin who was not a known member of the NAACP, but was a strong supporter.

They delivered the combine that afternoon and the next morning the combine was taken down to the Pearson farm. Some of the white neighbors passed and saw the combine. They came into Manning and began to raise the devil with the local dealer who they thought sold us the combine. He denied it. And of course when they found where we bought the combine, they went to Sumter and told the man that he either get that combine back or they were going to boycott him out of business.

He came to Manning and brought the money back and offered it to us. But we said nope you sold us that combine. It's ours and we are not giving it up.

And that way we had a combine for the black farmers who were members of the NAACP.

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When Rev. DeLaine and the group started there were economic reprisals. As you know Rev. DeLaine was fired from his job as a school teacher. His sisters were all fired.

Levi Pearson was a farmer. Levi Pearson found himself in a position where his credit was completely stopped. Cotton gins refused to gin his cotton. He was not able to borrow money from banks or other lending institutions. Fertilizer dealers refused to sell him, even for cash money, fertilizer. Oil distributors refused to deliver oil. Levi Pearson was selling timber at one time. And the men came in and cut the trees. They were preparing the trees to load. Some of the white neighbors passed and saw the men there working. Went into town and got the man that was buying the timber and threatened him, that if he moved those trees, he would be ostracized and completely cut off from the white community.

The men walked away and left Mr. Pearson's trees on the ground and it couldn't sell them. The only way we were able to help him sell them, we got to people and sold it to them under a different name.

These are the type things. And I remember very vividly down at the Davis station community every Saturday afternoon they had baseball. Levi Pearson would go down on Saturday afternoon but because the black people in the community were afraid to even be seen talking to him. You go down and poor Levi would be over standing by a light pole with hundreds of people in attendance, but nobody would have the courage even speak or talk to the man. So life for him was lonely, it was depressing, it was degrading and it was a great sacrifice.

End of Video.