

Justice Comes, Slowly, For Two Alabama Activists

by Eileen Hanson
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CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Four years after being arrested for alleged "voting fraud," Maggie Bozeman, 51 and Julia Wilder, 70, were released on parole last month and allowed to return to their West Alabama homes in Aliceville.

The arrest, conviction and imprisonment of these two black activists from Pickens County drew national attention to the continued denial of democratic rights in the Black Belt area of the South. Their case also sparked a new movement for equality and justice that included a 1500-mile Pilgrimage through the South to save the Voting Rights Act, sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

"The wheels of justice are rolling in their favor," Evelyn Lowery, Convener of SCLC / Women, told the *Guardian* following their release. "The stacks and stacks of telegrams and petitions had a strong impact on the Parole and Parole Board."

SCLC / Women spearheaded a petition drive that drew national civil rights and women's organizations into the case. The file of petitions was over two in-

ches high.

The day following Bozeman and Wilder's release 250 supporters jammed the courthouse in Tuskegee. The two had been on a work release program there since their imprisonment last January. Later in the day they traveled to Pickens County for rallies at the courthouse and at a local church. They had been barred from their home county during the prison sentence.

"It was definitely the public pressure that brought about their early release," said Judy Hand of the Southern Organizing Committee for Racial and Economic Justice. "It was necessary to get an unanimous vote of the 3-member parole board."

Wilder's parole was granted without restrictions. Bozeman was told she must first secure a job. The all-white Pickens County School Board had fired her following her conviction, after she had been an elementary school teacher there for 27 years. The all-Black Sumter County school board quickly found a teaching position for her following the Parole Board's action, although the school in Panola, Ala. is 30 miles from her home.

"The struggle is not over," Bozeman told the *Guardian*.

"This is the first step towards the right road home to justice. Pickens County is Glory Land for us, but we are not free. We don't know how long it will be before our civil rights are restored. We don't know what the power structure might do to us."

"Glory Land" is found 75 miles west of Birmingham, hugging the Mississippi line. The land in Pickens County belongs to the descendants of the old plantation owners, who still control the political, economic and legal levers. The Lewises, the Sanders, the Brittons — they're called the "big-time white families." They still rule Pickens County the way their ancestors ran the slavocracy over a century ago. It is a rule of terror and fear.

"It used to be nightriders to intimidate us. But Klan activity is sneaky. Now they wear neckties and suits," said Geraldine Sawyer, the former mayor of McMullen, a small unincorporated black community in Pickens County. "People are afraid. They fear they'll lose their jobs or their homes if they register and vote." Forty-two percent of Pickens County is black, but there has never been a black elected to a county-wide office.

The only place to register is at

the county courthouse in Carrollton, population 1000. When you get there, the doors may be closed, or the sheriff may be called in to stand over the applicants as they attempt to fill out the forms.

"Sometimes they stand over people with their guns when trying to register to vote," according to Bozeman.

A century ago, a black man, Henry Wells, was hanged outside this courthouse for a crime he didn't commit — raping a white woman. Residents say you can still see his shadowy face in the window of the courthouse, although the glass had been replaced several times. For years it was a crime for blacks to look at the "ghost" of Henry Wells.

It was in this courthouse that Bozeman and Wilder were con-

victed by an all-white jury in 1979 of voting fraud. Civil rights activists called it a "political lynching," another attempt by the traditional power structure to chill the efforts of blacks for political representation.

Struggle For Representation

"Long ago I sensed something was wrong," said Bozeman. "It seemed like every board was all one race and all one sex — white male. Some classrooms had paper, and others didn't. Some had seats for the children, others didn't. So I started going to the school board meetings. It was the early 1950s. The hall where they met was so small the public couldn't even get in the room. I got a few others and we kept on going. They said we were "interfering with their meeting."

I didn't know it was their meeting. I thought it was mine too."

In the 1960s Bozeman and Wilder registered blacks to vote. They organized chapters of the NAACP and SCLC, and started the Voters League. They continued to bring blacks to the city council, county commission and school board meetings.

"We started raising serious questions about the way funds were being appropriated," said Bozeman. The power structure didn't like people raising questions.

It wasn't voting per se that angered the powerful ones in Pickens County. When whites hauled blacks to the polls, they could intimidate them into voting, "right."

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"They would try to keep you out of the courthouse when you wanted to register, and they come around trying to get you to vote for them so they could represent you in the courthouse!" explained Bozeman.

It was an educated and aware black voter that threatened the rulers.

In 1978, a black woman, Manny Dunner Hill, ran against a white banker for a seat on the all-white school board. Bozeman and Wilder and other members of the Voters League went to the home-bound elderly citizens and helped those who couldn't read to fill out their ballots.

Hill was unopposed and won the primary. But the district attorney subpoenaed 39 elderly black voters that Bozeman and Wilder had helped. Fear began to spread in the black community.

The day before the general election, five police cars came to Bozeman's school and arrested her as she was returning with the children from recess. The following day Hill lost the election by 106 votes.

At their 1979 trial all but one of the absentee voters said the accused women had properly assisted them with their ballots.

"One woman testified that she didn't know what the voting was all about," said defense attorney Solomon Seay of Montgomery. On this testimony the two women were convicted of voting fraud. Bozeman was sentenced to four years, and Wilder to five.

Although the State Court of Criminal Ap-

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juries found the evidence of the only key witness "confusing." the convictions were allowed to stand. The Alabama Supreme Court refused to review the cases. In November 1981, the Supreme Court refused to hear the cases.

Last January the two women returned to the

Carrollton Courthouse, which was packed with supporters. In the shadow of Henry Well's ghost, they heard the judge order them to prison. The citizens of Pickens County were enraged.

The two women spent 11 days in Tutweiller prison. Besieged with protests from civil

rights activists in Alabama and nationwide, the courts quickly transferred them to a Tuskegee work-release program, where they worked in centers for the elderly and retarded.

But the wheels of justice do not move in the Black Belt without

...Bozeman

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political pressure.

Last February the SCLC launched a 160-mile march from Carrollton to Montgomery, to protest the convictions and to demand a strong Voting Rights Act. It was joined by 30 national organizations. They marched through several Black Belt counties, where the white power structure tried to intimidate black churches from hosting the demonstrators. The march traced part of the path of Martin Luther King's famous Selma-to-Montgomery march that brought about the original 1965 Voting Rights Act. In spite of the national publicity, the two women remained incarcerated.

On April 19, SCLC took up the Pilgrimage again, marching from Tuskegee through the Black Belt of five Southern states, covering 1500 miles to reach Washington, D.C., on June 23, the same day the Congress finally approved the renewal of the Voting Rights Act.

Back Home Again

The case of Maggie Bozeman and Julia Wilder has sparked a new movement in Pickens County.

"It regenerated some. Ministers got involved for the first time. Some young people marched all the way to Washington, D.C., because they were so stirred up about it," said Bozeman.

"It really stirred up the nation, too," she continued. "New people are getting involved in the struggle. The lord is in this business. What

we were doing was right. But the struggle isn't over. Pickens County is just the same today as it was then, still governed by the same power. We ought to be marching right here, every day, from Carrollton to Aliceville. There's still no black representation. I'm still a convict. I'm not free to leave the state without permission."

Bozeman says they will not ask for a pardon of innocence in their case. "The system inflicted this on us, let the courts overturn the conviction. I want to see it resolved in court. We'll not come begging for mercy."

While in prison Bozeman and Wilder received a flood of mail from across the country. They received visits from both black and white citizens of Pickens County.

Bozeman is still denied her old job at Aliceville Elementary School. Letters of protest may be sent to: Pickens County Board of Education, Carrollton, Ala. 35447. Letters of support may be sent to Maggie Bozeman and Julia Wilder at Box T, Aliceville, Ala. 35442.

A flood of mail from around the country in the Pickens County post office could tell authorities there that the nation is still watching, and waiting for justice to be done in Alabama.

Materials for this story came from Southern Changes, SCLC magazine, the People's Tribune, Southern Fight Back and the Southern Advocate.

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