

Review

OH FREEDOM AFTER WHILE

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As presented to the University Film and Video Association - August 1999 Conference at Emerson College

[*Oh Freedom After While*](#) is an intelligent, thought provoking, historical look at a relatively recent, little remembered event in American history that predated the Civil Rights Movement of the latter half of the 20th Century but in the end had as much impact on all its participants as any event in the 50' or 60's. This beautifully researched, visually dynamic, precisely edited, complex video is what all filmmakers hope to achieve.

Oh Freedom After While looks at a time in the American past where vestiges of slavery still existed in the rural south though then known by the name sharecropping. This story in part explores what individuals are capable of accomplishing when they are put into situations from which their oppressors hope they can never extract themselves. It is also about belief in the truth. At a time before the Civil Rights Movement became a powerful force that created changes in the American landscape in the last half of the 20th century, two men, one black and one white, both believers in what is right for all men, came together to fight the forces of the Federal, Missouri State and local governments and the unscrupulous large plantation owners who in one way or another sought to keep the sharecroppers working the land in what amounted to slave conditions while those owners reaped the profits of the backbreaking labor.

The director uses the present day interviews of those who were then children and lived through and actually worked the fields during this shameful period in American history to create an atmosphere so comfortable that all he points his camera at seems to lose any inhibitions to speak and thus they lay their emotions out for all to see. He has managed to find through his research, authorities of the period who on screen concisely relate the narrative of this time. He has found in the archives and libraries strikingly evocative B roll material for each situation he visually needs to amplify.

Like many viewers of this documentary, my knowledge of the rural south of 1939 has been formed by my education, and by my exposure to the popular mass media, both moving and print. Not only was this subject of a sharecropper's passive revolt of that time new to me, I must admit that I was also pitifully unaware of the individuals Steven Ross has so successfully created for his audience. When do we as viewers get the chance to spend this amount of compressed time exploring persons who are as complex and thoughtful as these people are. When, in the media, have we seen sharecroppers presented as articulate, complex individuals rather than as silent generalized stereotypes.

Oh Freedom After While does what a good documentary should do. It takes the viewer on a journey to the unknown or to a place we think we know and when the voyage is over, we are not only richer in knowledge but also in character for the shared experience.

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The opening images of desolate landscapes set the tone. Steve presents a narrative of what it was like to be a sharecropper in that time, mixing the remembrances of those who lived it as children and young adults with the factual research of academics and historians. Particularly effective is a highly charged interview with Barbara Whitfield Fleming, daughter of the Reverend Owen Whitfield, the central character and driving force of this story. The Reverend was the primary organizer of the protest in January 1939 against the evictions of sharecroppers from the land they worked, and against the ultimate negative impact the farming policies of the Federal Government had on the sharecroppers. Fifteen years before the more formal, widespread and better organized Civil Rights Movement, blacks and whites had come together to challenge their deplorable working and living conditions that were the result of the current laws of the land. We find out that doing so put them in harm's way since prior to this time, blacks and whites did not work together to improve their lot as a people without racist backlash. Indeed the director makes us aware of how the KKK was used as a force to keep poor blacks and whites separated so they could both be controlled in weakness.

Oh Freedom After While early on lets us feel the honesty of Ms. Fleming when we listen to her tell the pointed story about how her 12 siblings and her parents were treated by their landowner. One can see in her reflective face and hear in her emotional voice, when she talks about her parents, how it was to work as sharecroppers only to have any profit and dignity taken away by unscrupulous land owners, that after a years' work all her father, the Reverend, was given as profit was an old suit. Whitfield's is the story the director focuses in on and is ultimately one of faith, of the Reverend's faith in a God who would not allow these injustices to happen.

The first half of *Oh Freedom After While* sets up the complex world of how cotton was grown in the south in the early 30's. We learn that though part of parity money was by law to go to the sharecroppers, it often didn't. This injustice and others led to the formation of the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union which was unique in that it was made up of blacks and whites which was against the customs of the segregation of the day. The use of photojournalist images and newspaper headlines helps us throughout the video to see that world so far removed from the present.

Oh Freedom After While shifts to the others who were to play important roles. Thad Snow, a maverick white plantation owner invites the union onto his land to organize, an act unheard of in its day. Snow's daughter's interview relates to us the ostracism he and his family suffered at the hands of the white community. Snow's work for rights and fairness along with other circumstances forced the Federal Government to pay attention. One try at righting the wrongs was the establishment of cooperative farming communities in the area, La Forge in the Bootheel of Missouri being one such place. Thad Snow saw to it that Owen Whitfield, whom he had befriended earlier, and his family were allowed to move into La Forge. But even though now the Reverend was better off, Whitfield's thoughts were for those who were not there, the unfairness for those who didn't know someone. He was active in organizing the rest of the sharecroppers to believe that life could be better if they were to take a hand in their own lives and in their future.

Reverend Whitfield wanted to have a demonstration to emphasize the plight of the sharecroppers. Snow was unsure about the safety and effectiveness of a campout in January. Though the union was against it as well, Whitfield stuck to his beliefs and on Jan. 10, 1939, the sharecropper's families complete with babies began a campout along two roads, highways 61 and 60, in the Bootheel of Missouri. National newsreels picked up the story and it soon became a major item, with people even offering help. The director was well served by this coverage in his search for actual images of the events and the archival footage used here is particularly impressive because of this national attention that brought newsreel cameras to the Bootheel to record the living, moving details. The director shows us the real people who took part, some speaking in their own voices as well as stills and the newspaper leads from the time.

A major turning point in the narrative of *Oh Freedom After While* happens when the cause was taken up by Professor Lorenzo Green at Lincoln University, a Negro school in Missouri. He brought the issue to his students. Ultimately on their own, the women students gave up their spring prom money to help the plight of the sharecroppers. Again this is a powerful moment in the documentary when the actual reflections of one of these sorority sisters, Cynthia Bolt Bonner, relates how this was to become a defining moment in her young life.

The last part of the documentary deals with how by June of 1939, Whitfield had found 93 acres which with help he bought and so 80 black and white families moved there and called it Cropperville. The same governor of Missouri who was against the sharecroppers in the beginning of the demonstration was now doing what he could to help and posing for pictures with the participants to prove it. One of Whitfield's daughter's relates that in 1943 the Reverend committed his family to living in Cropperville so they would be exposed to what he believed in and preached. In his later years Owen Whitfield continued to be seen as a much respected preacher in his denomination. And now because of this telling of his story, this long neglected and unheralded genesis of the Civil Rights Movement and this early pioneer for civil rights will not be forgotten.

The images in *Oh Freedom After While* are constantly varied. Not in a virtuoso sense but in a sense that the lens is always exploring for the truth, whether it is a sharecroppers family in front of their shack or a baby being brought to the field to be fed as its mother continues to gather her quota of cotton. There are present day interviews that show the pain of remembrance. There are archival still images that show the emotions and conditions of the time, that let us see the honor and sadness of each person. The B roll material from abandoned shack to snow covered roadside always captures the emotions and context of the moment. I would have liked to see dates on screen to help me understand more clearly the time frame of this complex story. Though the narrator does mention the dates, these were not as clear to me as I thought they could be, especially when they could have been seen as well as heard. This problem for me is probably due to the soundtrack being so full of information I was previously unaware of.

The editing never lags, rushes or lacks for a line or still image that makes the point or counterpoint. The video lets us linger and examine details when we need to and takes us elsewhere when we need that perspective. The quality of the photographs is amazing. I am used to seeing the scratches

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and imperfections that old newsreel footage had as I was growing up. The images here are pristine; they are beautiful. They are almost as though taken yesterday. And this is a plus because it makes me see the events as history and reminds me that much of what is shown still happens in one way or another today.

The sound design is a combination of authoritative narration, emotion laden personal interviews, and effective reenactments from the actual words of the participants. Julian Bond's narration is effective in telling the larger picture but perhaps the actual voices of those who participated make for the strongest moments. There is a subtle melancholy when one hears actual participants speak of their feelings of the oppression they saw and lived through. The period and editorial music helps evoke the moods and emotions appropriate for each moment. Perhaps too many authorities talk on screen, though it is not their content that I tire of. They are such a visual and aural contrast to the archival footage and the emotional interviews of those who were actually there, that after one too many I find myself taken out of the moment.

I think I can sum up the power of this documentary in one shot. It is of the woman, the sorority sister of Lincoln University, Cynthia Bolt Bonner, telling of how this experience in her life affected who she was to become and what she would do with her life. It is a brilliant moment and in a sense tells us the two things this film is about. What does one see as one's own responsibility to others and what is it that is expected of us by those in our community? That is what drove Owen Whitfield. That is what drove Thad Snow. That is the code by which Ms. Bonner lived her life. That is what drives the making of this documentary.

As the researcher, Steven Ross has found the archival footage that chills as we watch hungry children and their families standing beside the road on a cold January morning. He puts into pictures that which many of us have only partially read about and never fully visualized. As the director and interviewer, Steve knows when to let the camera reveal and linger on a face and when to show us the power of the land and the images of past injustices. These are not detached images. There is always an attempt to show the layering of the individuals, the hardness of the places and the complexity of the events. This is a video about real people. And a journey worth taking.