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VISIT TO THE “DOMINICKER” MIXED-RACIAL GROUP IN HOLMES COUNTY, FLORIDA

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By Calvin Beale

I first went to Bonifay, the county seat, and visited the county health nurses, Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Sims. They immediately mentioned the letter of inquiry from Dr. Witkop of Public Health Service and asked if I had any connection with it. I allowed as how I did. Both were glad to talk about the Dominicker group. Only one family is among their current patients. The patient is an elderly man, Jim Simmons, who has diabetes. The nurses, especially Mrs. Sims, a native of the county, knew other Dominickers. The term Dominicker is not acceptable to the group and is not used in their presence. They do not wish to be considered colored. One became very angry with Mrs. Lee when she, not knowing the family, listed a new-born child as Negro because of the somewhat Negroid appearance of the family. I believe she changed the record after the protest. The appearance of the group was said to be variable. Jim Simmons claims to be part Spanish and Indian.

The nurses knew of the Forehand, Goddin (the present spelling), and Thomas families but had not been sure of the connection until I confirmed it. They also mentioned a Curry family. The names were all said to be held by white people too. The teeth of the Dominicker children were said to be better than the average for white children. There is no dentist in the county. Some in the group suffer from TB. The group extends over into Walton County, where a couple of children in one family have a congenital malformation. (There is a Negro family in Holmes County [sic] with three albino children. I did not get the spelling of the name, which sounded like Hodah or Hoodah.)

The nurses knew nothing of the origin of the Dominickers. They said Jim Simmons was approachable and probably would be glad to talk. All in the group were said to be poor. A separate elementary school is still maintained for the group, called the Mt. Zion School. Current enrollment is 12, said once to have been about 25. The nurses estimated the population of the group at 40.

I next visited the Soil Conservationist, who knew of the group, but, not being a county native, took me to the man in charge of the Selective Service office. The S.S. man went over some of the same ground covered by the nurses. He said the Dominickers were sensitive on the race question and might not get information unless the questioner were referred in by someone accepted by the group. It was his opinion that the children attending Mt. Zion school were essentially the darker ones and that some of those who looked white were in surrounding white schools. The teacher of the separate school is a white woman, Miss (?) Dupree, who lives in Westville. The present building was erected after World War II at a cost of \$8,000. The S.S. man did not know how the Dominickers were drafted racially during World War II. Some farm, others work in forest industries. He said they were low in culture.

I went on down to the school, trying to get there before it dismissed for the day, but when I arrived everyone had gone home although it was only 2:30 PM. The S.S. man had indicated the school was informally kept, and might dismiss at any time in the afternoon on the wish of the teacher or if the children were wanted at home for chores. The school is east of Ponce de Leon about $\frac{3}{4}$ miles on a dirt road which runs roughly parallel and south of the main highway. Proceeding west from Westville on the main highway, take the first road (dirt) to the left after crossing Big Reedy and Little Reedy Creeks. At the end of the dirt road the school is visible. The building is modern, of painted cinder block with indoor plumbing, an outdoor fountain, and a large window for the one class room.

This is very poor agricultural country. The soil is a deep sand, the woods scrub pine, the land flat. Jim Simmons' house is one of those adjacent to the school. Proceeding east along the road in front of the school, over a wooden bridge, beyond a sharp left-right turn, one can by watching closely see a cemetery on the right side of the road. It is perhaps 100 yards off the road, with a road leading in to it. Many of the graves are of Dominickers. Most (unfortunately) are unidentified. The graves characteristically have mound of earth upon them which do not look like the surface sand. Upon these are shells, glasses, pieces of colored glassware, bottles, and even electric light bulbs and a toy or two. (Usually only one type of item to a grave). The earth mound has eroded from rainfall leaving columns of dirt standing up under the objects, similar to a butte with a cap of resistant rock. This gives the cemetery a very strange appearance. I have recorded some name and dates from the cemetery elsewhere.

After leaving the cemetery I drove back to Bonifay to see the Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Fred Johnson, to whom the Selective Service man had referred me. However, it was then 4:00 PM and his office had closed for the day.

All four of the people I interviewed agreed that the group was not as large as it once had been, although it was never very large. They could give no information as to where those moving out had gone. At one time they maintained their own church, but I could not determine whether this was still true. The S.S. man volunteered that he had heard the term Dominicker used in Louisiana and had also heard the term Red Bone used in Holmes County. He was not certain whether Red Bone was a local term or whether those using it had, like himself, picked it up in Louisiana during the war.

Not having time to stay any longer, I left without talking to the school authorities or to any of the Dominickers themselves.