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by George N. Green

Miss Clara Holder, an East Texas poultry worker, wrote a letter to Patrick Gorman, Secretary-Treasurer of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workman of America, in June 1953. "I was told to contact your office to secure help in organizing a much needed plant," Miss Holder noted. "The majority of the workers are eager to organize, if only they had some advice from a bonafide labor union. Would you kindly inform me if your organization can help us."[1] Clara Holder's brief and innocently worded letter sparked a tortuous organizing campaign — in Center, Texas — that stirred racial and class tensions, triggered a national boycott, and persuaded the union to launch a successful drive to reform the entire American poultry industry.

Poultry was introduced into Texas by both the early Spanish and the early Anglo-American colonists. It remained a nondescript industry, producing primarily for home consumption and local markets, until outlets for commercial marketing were provided in the mid-1920s by the establishment of poultry packing plants in Fort Worth, Taylor, and a few other towns. It is perhaps worthy of passing notice that as early as 1936 poultry processing in Texas had attracted some public attention as being highly unsanitary. During the wartime boom of the 1940s, when poultry was not subject to meat rationing, the industry entered a new phase with the widespread commercial production of broilers, or young fryers. The first noteworthy production was near Gonzales in South Texas.[2]

Much the same history of poultry processing had occurred in the other Southern states, so that by the mid 1950s the broiler industry was a growth operation throughout the South. Costs were lower in the South because the mild climate was favorable for year-round operations and because there was an abundance of cheap labor. In Texas the industry had spread to Shelby and surrounding East Texas counties, a section of the state that is distinctly part of the South. Aside from the bloody battles between the so-called Regulators and Moderators in the 1840s, Shelby County, deep in the Piney Woods, had been noted primarily for its lumbering. During the 1940s business leaders in the county seat of Center organized the Center Development Foundation to attract industry. Like other small town leaders across the South, they offered the usual inducements of land, buildings, and/or low taxes, accompanied by a typical pool of unskilled, native, black and white laborers who were abandoning their marginal cotton farms. The county and the school district also granted tax concessions to several firms. In 1953 civic leaders boasted that since World War II they had attracted over a thousand new jobs, many of them in the poultry business. Since the town's population was only 4,323 in 1950, the number of new jobs was significant, although perhaps over-estimated. In 1954 Shelby County

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ranked a close second to Gonzales County in chickens sold in Texas with 8,227,247.[3]

Like most small southern towns, those in East Texas had long regarded unions as radical threats to God, home, and country. Timber workers in East Texas and throughout the South had been deeply involved in sporatic attempts to organize unions in the twentieth century, but virtually all were crushed by such lumber barons as John Henry Kirby. Kirby probably summarized the region's feelings in 1911 when he referred to conservative, AFL-type unionism as "a greater menace to Christian civilization than the anarchists, Black Hand, Molly Maguires, Mafia, Ku Klux Klan, and Night Riders."[4] Shelby County consistently supported East Texas' long-time Congressman, Martin Dies (1932-1944, 1952-1958), the anti-labor chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1941 Dies observed that the CIO was infested with 50,000 Communists who were fanatical devotees of Hitler and Stalin and that ninety percent of all strikes could be stopped if the CIO was forced to expel these alien traitors.[5]

Workers in Center's poultry processing plants were paid the minimum wage of 75¢ an hour in 1953. Many apparently labored under highly unsanitary conditions, ten or eleven hours a day on their feet, with no overtime pay — in between times of no work at all. The work was more grueling than might be imagined. One of the town's jewelers, Bernard Hooks, was appalled by the condition of the laborers' hands. They were so bruised and swollen, with fingernails often turned inside out, that Hooks frequently had difficulty fitting them with rings. Several workers attested that they had to become accustomed to painful fingers, swollen hands, and lost fingernails; no one was allowed to switch to a different job in order to rest his hands. The plants had no grievance machineries, seniority plans, or paid holidays.[6]

In the late summer of 1953 Meat Cutters' District Vice-President Sam Twedell and other organizers were easily able to obtain the required number of names for a union election. The National Labor Relations Board scheduled the union representation election for September 15 at the Denison Poultry and Egg Company and November 5 at the Eastex Company.[7]

The local business community, a rather tightly knit group, was stunned at the announcement of a union election in the city's two major plants. Business leaders reacted to the news by launching a drive to discourage a pro-union vote by the poultry workers. The business campaign relied on social pressure and argumentation. A petition opposing the union was circulated among the city's business establishments, and most signed. At least a half dozen businessmen, notably the jeweler, Bernard Hooks, grocery store owner Laurie Hegler, and Weldon Sanders, a Texaco service station operator, refused to countenance the drive. For his dissent, Sanders was accused by his peers of "working for the Union and all the things

that go with it" and suffered a loss in his trade.[8] Five days prior to the election, the 182-man Center Development Foundation purchased a full page ad in the *Center Champion.* Signed by the six directors of the CDF, the open letter declared, "We believe that Center's unusual industrial growth is partially due to the fact that Center was known as a non-union town where there has been no labor violence or strife."[9] The ad reminded workers of the allegedly tremendous monetary sacrifices of Foundation members in bringing industry to Shelby County. The Foundation praised the "harmonious" relationship between management and worker and confided that the "employers tell us that you employees have made them the best and most loyal workers they have ever had."[10] The Foundation concluded its attack on unionism with the plea, "Let's all work together to make Center a better place in which to live and work rather than a town divided and torn by strife."[11]

While business leaders worked to sway the opinion of county residents against unionism, the plant management sought to convince the poultry workers that they neither wanted nor needed the Meat Cutters. Prior to the NLRB election, the Denison Poultry Company presented each employee with a two-page letter. The owners argued that they paid all they could afford in wages, and that they already (and voluntarily) financed an insurance program and Christmas bonuses for the workers. The company claimed that it was competing with poultry processors all over the nation and that unionization would cost them customers. The letter asserted that the union had to accept whatever the company offered or go on strike. The owners attacked the "union method of violence, strikes, lost time and turmoil." "You must decide," stated the letter, "whether the union is making false promises to get you to pay dues. You must decide whether you want to keep strikes, violence and hard times away from your town, your job, and your family."[12] In addition, the workers received a mimeographed statement cautioning them not to be influenced by threats that they would lose their jobs if they refused to join the union. In condemning the alleged union threats, however, the Company issued its own prediction of future reprisals. "When the election is over," the statement read, "we [the Company] shall retain in our payrolls all who have rendered faithful and efficient service."[13]

The Denison Poultry employees also received a letter from a group calling itself the "Loyal Employees Committee."[14] The letter closely echoed the arguments of the Company's two letters. In the last paragraph, the letter explained why the "loyal" employees intended to vote against the union. "We would rather keep the goodwill and friendship of the company," the committee explained. "We would rather keep the friendship of the people of Shelby County and everyone connected with the poultry business here." The letter ended with a call for freedom from union intervention into the "good jobs" and bright future of Denison Company employees.[15]

Sam Twedell retaliated in kind. One of his handbills pointed out that the six directors of the Center Development Foundation were bankers, car agency owners, and one lumberman. "They don't do your kind of work or live in your kind of homes or take your kind of vacations," the circular claimed. "Would these men and their wives work in the plant for a lousy 75¢ per hour? THEY ARE AFRAID THAT IF YOU GET HIGHER WAGES THEY WILL HAVE TO PAY HIGHER WAGES TO THE PEOPLE WHO SLAVE FOR THEM."[16]

Despite social pressures, company hostility, and the pleadings of "loyal" employees, both Denison and Eastex Poultry Company workers selected the Amalgamated Meat Cutters to be their collective bargaining representative. At the Denison plant, where all the workers were white, the vote was eighty-one to fifty-five in favor of the union. The election held later at the Eastex Plant approached landslide proportions. Eastex workers, seventy-five or eighty percent of whom were black, cast 118 votes for the union and nine against.[17]

During the seven months following the election the organizers and officers of the Meat Cutters met repeatedly with the company owners. The labor representatives asked for union recognition, higher wages, and working conditions on a par with those in union organized poultry plants in other regions of the country.[18] The union even enlisted the aid of big business. One of Armour's industrial relations directors wrote to Ray Clymer, owner of Denison Poultry, that Armour enjoyed "extremely harmonious relations with unions" and that the Meat Cutters were familiar with the limitations of the poultry business.[19] But the Texas companies never firmly committed themselves to any of the union proposals. Sam Twedell concisely summed up the accomplishments of the first seven months following the election. According to Twedell:

> We have been meeting with the employers continously since that time, and they would make concessions and then withdraw them at the very next conference. They would schedule meetings with us [and] then at the last minute cancel them.[20]

Union organizer Jim Gilker drew the conclusion that the owners were not bargaining in good faith, which federal law required. He felt that the companies were determined to conduct a long fight against union recognition and wage increases. Gilker reported that Ray Clymer, "does not take the position that he can't pay more money, but states very bluntly that he won't."[21]

By March 1954, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters had become weary and skeptical of the negotiations with the companies. The principals on the union side of the bargaining table began to look for a more productive course of action. All were convinced that a strike would not only be costly, but also futile in an area that would quickly supply strikebreakers for the unskilled jobs in the poultry plants. Secretary-Treasurer Gorman and Vice-President Twedell leaned toward economic action. As early as

January Twedell had written Gorman, "we [will] put the 'squeeze' on this poultry processor in every way that we possibly can and that can be done, not by striking, but by taking away some of their large customers."[22] Negotiations were thus subordinated to the national boycott as the means of forcing a settlement with the Denison and Eastex Poultry companies.

According to the contracts which existed between Meat Cutter locals and their retail employers, the latter could not legally sell products which had been placed on the unfair list of the union. After providing the required notice to the Center poultry companies, President Earl Jimerson issued a proclamation which declared that "Denison Poultry Company of Center, Texas is UNFAIR to Amalgamated Meat Cutters of North America, AFL."[23] Once this formality was out of the way, letters were sent to companies distributing Denison products requesting them to comply with the terms of their contracts and desist from handling the products of the firm. Food stores and AMC locals around the country began to comply with the boycott.[24]

Ray Clymer evidently anticipated problems in marketing his merchandise and decided to speed up his production in order to get as far ahead as possible should the boycott become completely effective. The normal chain speed on the production line in the plant was between thirty-seven and forty-two chickens per minute. By April 5 the rate had been increased to sixty-six chickens per minute. According to Twedell, it was not unusual for women to pass out from sheer exhaustion during the course of the day's work. Twedell, of course, was not an impartial observer, but there was no doubt of the workers' unrest. Without consulting any national union official or organizer, every union member at the Denison plant bolted off the job on the evening of April 5. Union members at Eastex initiated a walkout and were followed by all other employees of the company. Both plants were shut down temporarily by the wildcat strikes, but they soon resumed operations, as the AMC feared they would, by tapping the area's unskilled labor supply.[25]

After Twedell observed first hand the conditions that had touched off the strike, he persuaded the union to support it. He wrote Gorman that ". . . these people are 'the salt of the earth' and we must do everything within our limits to see that they get a square deal."[26] Soon the threat of violence hung over the town as pickets tangled with reckless drivers, county deputies, state highway patrolmen, and perhaps Texas Rangers. The Rangers were present to maintaining law and order on election day, but the union alleged that two strikers were beaten by them. Texas Ranger headquarters has no record of this strike, and Captain J.F. Rogers, as one of the three Rangers who were assigned to Center for a month or so, recalls no incidents involving Rangers. He does remember that a state highway patrolman scuffled with a striker at the courthouse, probably after remarks were made by both parties. Highway Patrolmen and Rangers are sometimes confused with one another.[27]

The strike was also engulfed in a wave of racism. As in most East Texas towns, the white citizens of Center were angered by the desegregation decision of the U.S. Supreme Court (on May 1, 1954). Coming on the heels of a strike by blacks, this decision stirred endemic hatreds. Thus, while white strikers seem to have been regarded as curiosities, black picketers were resented. Just after the Eastex strike began, Twedell claimed that he was summoned to the county district attorney's office. There, in the presence of the sheriff, Twedell said he was ordered to "get those goddamn Niggers off the picket line or some of them are gonna get killed."[28] Twedell refused. On May 20 he sent telegrams to the FBI and the FCC concerning a broadcast on KDET radio, a strongly anti-union station, which "openly advocated violence, as a result of Supreme Court decision . . . and other racial problems, if Negro pickets were not removed from the picket lines."[29] Station manager Tom Foster explained that his announcer merely had stated that "Twedell himself was advocating trouble by ordering Negro and white pickets to walk the picket line together. Hancock [the announcer] said that may be common practice in Chicago [location of the union's international headquarters], but we are not ready for that here."[30] Foster, according to one of his friends, was extremely anti-union and simply looking for an angle of attack. Twedell began walking the line with the black picketers.[31]

On May 9 organizer Allen Williams prophetically reported that "We are sitting on a keg of dynamite . . . I honestly think our lives are in danger . . . These bastards will stop at nothing, including murder, if they think there is half a chance to get away with it."[32] On the night of July 23 a time bomb explosion destroyed Williams' Ford. A fire which resulted as an after-effect of the detonation completely leveled two cabins of the tourist court where Williams was residing and did extensive damage to two other buildings. Fortunately, Williams had stayed out later than usual on the night of the bombing and thus escaped injury. The would-be assassins were never apprehended and, according to his reports in the next few weeks, Williams held some doubts that law enforcement officers seriously sought to find them. Remarking on the openly anti-union sentiments of a majority of the members of a grand jury investigating the bombing, Williams jokingly explained that he felt some fear of being indicted for the crime himself. A second bombing occurred near the black "quarters" in Center on August 12. Though the August bombing scared the black strikers, Williams observed that they weren't showing it openly.[33]

Neither of the two banks, whose presidents were directors of the Center Development Foundation, extended credit to their fellow townfolk on strike. But the Meat Cutters paid regular benefits through the duration of the conflict and also conducted a highly successful nationwide clothing drive for the strikers. So much clothing was received from the locals that it actually became necessary for President Jimerson to request members to halt the donations.[34]

Though the union neither expected nor won the support of Center's business and political leadership, it did a surprisingly good job in securing the confidence of some of the area's citizenry. Allen Williams believed that the union had eighty-five percent of the population on its side, though this hardly seems likely considering the historic image of unions in the area or the racism aroused by the strike. Both Williams and Twedell attributed a great portion of this support to the union's radio program. Each Saturday afternoon the Meat Cutters purchased time on the local radio station at Center, during which a union representative would explain various facets of the union's side of the controversy. Twedell believed the program had a fruitful audience; if so, it probably included some of the chicken growers in the area, who suspected price fixing on the part of the feed houses and processing plants. Most of the black community, which numbered about thirty-eight percent of the town, supported the strikers and the programs.[35]

One of these programs early in May 1954 included an explanation of the tax structure in Shelby County. The union revealed during the broadcast that the Eastex Poultry Plant, which had been valued publicly by its owner at $500,000, was listed on county and state tax books as worth only $5,000. The combined county and state tax for 1953 had been $76. The Denison building, according to the labor broadcast, was valued on tax rolls at $1,160 and was taxed only $25 in 1953. These disclosures embarrassed the business community and aroused the populace. Twedell repeated his charges, with 500 persons looking on, before a dramatic evening session of the city council. Mayor O.H. Polley defended the low taxes as necessary inducements for industry. Union leaders then held a pep rally, and the antagonistic *Champion* admitted that they "were soundly cheered by a large portion of the audience."[36] Twedell recorded that the exposé "caused quite a furor and I don't believe there has been as much excitement in Shelby County since the Civil War."[37]

The strike in Shelby County and even the Denison and Eastex boycotts were soon overshadowed by another major thrust in the union's campaign against the Center poultry firms. As early as February of 1954, organizer Jim Gilker reported to Patrick Gorman:

> Our ace with Denison is that they don't have Federal Poultry inspection... This means that there is no doctor on the line checking the birds... At the present time the inspectors are condemning a large number of birds because of 'Air Sac disease' in the inspected plants. At the Denison plants these birds are packed and shipped out.[38]

In April 1954 Sam Twedell began forwarding affidavits depicting gory and unsanitary conditions in the poultry plants to Secretary-Treasurer Gorman. One Center poultry worker testified:

> My job was to pull feathers... When the chickens reached me, most of the feathers were off the bodies and I could see the skin of the birds very clearly. It is quite often that thousands of chickens would

> pass on the line with sores on their bodies. Thousands of them would have large swellings as large as a chicken egg on their bodies. These swellings were filled with a yellowish pus, and the odor was very strong. Others would have red spots all over their bodies that looked like smallpox.[39]

An affidavit from another worker declared:

> When I was killing chickens I have cut the throats of many chickens that were already dead and stiff... The first time I saw these kind of chickens come along, I did not cut their throats, but (my) supervisors came and told me to cut their throats and let them go through with the good ones... When on the killing job, I would also kill chickens that would be sick and have long, thick and stringy pus coming from their mouths and nostrils. When clipping gizzards I would see large growths on the entrails that looked like a mass of jelly. These chicken entrails would smell awfully bad, and at times would make me sick at my stomach...[40]

A lady at Eastex avowed:

> ...The entrails would have yellowish pimples all over them, and they would also be covered with a thick and slimy yellow pus which had a very offensive odor. The odor would be so bad I could hardly bear to stay on my job. They would also be covered with stiff worms about the size of a broom straw and from 2 to 4 inches long. The livers would be spotted and have dark red sores on them. The boss told us to save every liver. Sometimes the liver would be green. I have tried to throw these livers away and the boss would stop me and say that they wanted to keep every liver. I always put these diseased livers in with the good ones. It was a regular thing for bad livers to come through for an hour at a time. When they started coming they would all be bad with the exception of 3 or 4 out of thousands.[41]

Sam Twedell dramatically reviewed the loathsome conditions in the Texas poultry industry before the Amalgamated's executive board in the spring of 1954. Reports by others of somewhat similar conditions elsewhere lent strength to the arguments. Upon Pat Gorman's recommendation, the board approved the launching of a campaign for an effective poultry inspection program. The union enlisted the complete support of its 500 locals, as well as the endorsement of the AFL-CIO and most of the nation's labor press. Active support came from public health officers, conservationist spokesmen, and church groups — from the national to the local level. The drive was assisted by at least a dozen national organizations, such as the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers, the American Nurses Association, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the American Association of University Women, and the National Farmers Union. The campaign did not receive notable coverage from the mass media, though several journal articles appeared as well as syndicated columns by Victor Riesel and Drew Pearson.[42]

The Amalgamated also approached the legislative branches of the state and federal governments. Hilton Hanna, the leading black executive in the AMC, was responsible for most of the research and pamphleteering.

He listed thirty-four key supporters in Congress; none were from Texas and only three were from the South. As the campaign picked up public support, the Southwestern Association of Poultry, Egg, and Allied Industries suddenly endorsed state legislation for poultry inspection, but continued to oppose "federal interference." Texas' Agricultural Commissioner John White took the same position, but the state legislature could not be roused. The most graphic union pamphlet, "Check That Chick," caused an Arizona state senator, known for his anti-labor stance, to lose his breakfast and introduce a poultry inspection bill. Gorman and Twedell believed that federal law was best, however, and that state laws would only conflict with each other and allow the processors, through their political connections, to control the various inspection systems.[43]

Five hearings on poultry conditions were held before three different congressional committees in the mid-1950s. AMC spokesmen presented some of the Center affidavits along with statistics from the U.S. Public Health Service and Bureau of Labor Statistics. Expert supporting testimony was offered by veterinarians, doctors, sanitarians, and scientists. During the course of the hearings it was revealed that poultry and man share some twenty-six diseases, twenty-four of which are not ordinarily carried to the consumer who buys eviscerated fowls. The illness most likely to be transmitted is salmonellosis, an intestinal infection marked by fever, nausea, and vomiting. If the victim is very young or very old, this type of food poisoning can be fatal. A third of all listed cases of food poisoning by the mid-1950s were traced to poultry. Several of the diseases constitute a considerable risk for the workers who slaughter, process, and handle poultry. Psittacosis (parrot fever) is the most common ailment. The first outbreak in Texas occurred in Giddings in 1948, and two other epidemics struck the turkey processing workers in that town before 1954; seven died. In May 1954, forty-eight workers in a Corsicana poultry dressing plant were stricken. In 1956, three psittacosis epidemics broke out in Texas, Oregon, and Virginia; 136 men and women were struck and three were killed.[44]

Since the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906), it has been illegal to ship beef, veal, pork, lamb, or other red meat products in interstate commerce unless they have been slaughtered under sanitary conditions and inspected by government veterinarians. Many states also adopted compulsory meat-inspection laws. When these laws were being passed, however, the poultry business was still small and was not included in the provisions. By the mid-1950s poultry was a major food, its consumption having grown to an estimated thirty-five pounds per capita. The government inspection service that was available until 1958 was voluntary and had to be paid for by the poultry processors. Only conscientious companies willing and able to pay the costs had government inspectors on duty, and the companies could transfer the inspectors if they did not like their work. In some companies there was a tradition of "close

relations" between inspector and plant. Marginal plants as well as the unscrupulous and unsanitary companies, the ones most in need of inspection, shipped the poultry uninspected. Less than one-fourth of the poultry marketed in the United States in the mid-1950s had been subjected to federal inspection.[45] Neither Denison nor Eastex hired inspectors, though Eastex claimed it hired a "resident sanitarian" in the spring of 1953.[46]

Eastex owner Joe Fechtel told a radio audience that the union offered him a contract in lieu of exposing the diseased poultry he was processing, which he denied was happening. A letter written by organizer Jim Gilker states that the sick "birds" at Denison were the union's "ace." Pat Gorman, after receiving the first affidavits on the diseased chickens, wrote Sam Twedell that the Amalgamated would "blast the hell out of the poultry industry if the Denison and Eastex strike isn't settled."[47] The union's primary goals were to organize the workers and improve their wages and hours. Obviously the AMC in the mid-1950s did not, and often probably could not, require hygenic factories and unsullied poultry in its contracts.

In the midst of the boycott and national publicity, after an eleven month strike, the Eastex Poultry Company yielded and agreed to a contract with the Meat Cutters. The terms of the March 1955 agreement called for wage increases of 5¢ an hour for women, 7½¢ for men; time and a half for overtime; three paid holidays each year; the establishment of a vacation system and grievance machinery; and the reinstatement of all strikers. If called to the plant, the workers had to be given at least three hours' work that day. The re-employment was with full seniority, which meant that the twenty or twenty-five "scabs" left in the plant had lowest seniority. The Eastex Company also agreed to submit voluntarily to United States Department of Agricultural poultry inspection. The union labeled the winning of the Eastex strike as a major victory and called for its membership to re-double efforts to win at the Denison plant.[48]

When the exposé began to arouse attention, the manager of the Denison plant informed the supervisor, Florence Smith, that she had been named chicken inspector and would thereafter receive her paycheck from the City of Center. The city government obediently notified Texas Agricultural Commissioner John White that Miss Smith would inspect all poultry for wholesomeness. Like all of White's "inspectors," Miss Smith lacked the guidance of any published tests or standards because Texas had no poultry inspection law. After several days as inspector, Florence Smith discovered that the chickens she had condemned and removed from the production chain had been put back on further down the line by another supervisor.[49] She testified, moreover, that:

> It has been a regular practice to place Texas Department of Agriculture tags of approval on chickens processed in the Denison Poultry plant. These tags of approval were placed in chickens that had never been inspected. In fact, it has been a regular practice to place these tags on

non-inspected chickens ever since I have been working for the company [over three years].[50]

The struggle to unionize the Denison Plant ended in failure — three years after the Eastex victory. In February 1958, the Meat Cutters decided to call off the strike. Both union and company were exhausted by four years of apparently inconclusive boycotting and striking. Ralph Sanders, an organizer for the union, was assigned the un-enviable task of telling the picket walkers that the strike at Center had been cancelled. "It was about the saddest thing I was ever confronted with," he wrote.[51] Hilton Hanna wrote earlier that the striking Texans were the shock troops in the clean-up campaign, that they must be supported to the hilt, and that they "have demonstrated a spirit that has been rare in the labor movement for many years." Their steadfastness and zeal persuaded the Amalgamated to pay strike benefits for four years, which not many internationals would do.[52]

Ray Clymer's unyielding position seems to have been the crucial factor in the union's defeat at Denison. The company lost most of its markets as a result of the boycott and eventually went bankrupt. According to Twedell, Clymer had an independent income which he refused to plow back into the business and preferred bankruptcy to dealing with a union. Certainly his only offer to settle the dispute reflected contempt for collective bargaining. In June 1955 Clymer offered to recognize the union as bargaining agent for six months and allow the strikers to return — with no changes in wages, hours, or working conditions — if the pickets and boycott were called off. A new election would be held in six months and if the union won, Clymer promised to negotiate in good faith.[53]

It is also possible that the workers at Eastex, ninety-four percent of whom voted for the union in the election, seemed more determined than the Denison strikers, sixty percent of whom originally voted to unionize. And being largely black, the Eastex workers were more accustomed to facing community coercion. Black workers recalled that a determined black — union consciousness arose, even though Center's blacks had never fought together for anything before. Moreover, there was no particular black leadership either among the laborers or in the "quarters." The black workers also recollected that they were more willing to walk the picket lines than the whites.[54] The blacks might have appeared to Joe Fechtel, Ray Clymer, and other onlookers, at least during the first eleven months of the strike, as being better prepared to withstand a long siege than the Denison group. Perhaps Fechtel was thus partially induced to come to terms and Clymer was thereby partially persuaded to hold out.

In evaluating the impact of the strike on the town and its establishment leaders, an anonymous Chamber of Commerce spokesman declared that it was "just about the first event from the outside world to reach Center." There had never been a union in Shelby County; from the little that people had read about them, they were considered alien and evil. Moreover, companies seeking new locations at that time were notorious

in demanding a depressed laboring group. Also, most of the townspeople and even many of the local establishment were ex-cotton farmers who had been driven off the land by national economic forces. They were so fiercely independent that they seemed to innately resist even thinking about unionism. They were particularly appalled that the chicken processing plants were "attacked," since it was poultry that saved the town when the bottom fell out of the cotton market in the late 1940s. Blacks and whites walking the picket lines together at the time of the 1954 desegregation decision was deeply resented: "we'd never had any race trouble," the anonymous leader believed. It was natural, then, that much of the community and its leaders would be hostile to an aggressive union. Finally, again according to the anonymous Chamber of Commerce leader, Shelby County was "ignorant and backward and marked by a long history of violence."[55]

But change occurs even in Shelby County. The union, whose members are all local, native workers, has been entrenched for over two decades and can hardly be considered alien. The workers, who were making $4.80 per hour (with no discrepancy among the sexes) in 1984, have never been involved in another strike.[56] Currently companies seeking new sites are included to inquire about local services and schools and do not seem to be searching just for low taxes for themselves. Several companies have brought unions with them. Moreover, the processing plants are not nearly as vital to the town's economy as in 1954. And the racial situation is quieter; the school system is integrated.[57] Probably more townspeople now realize what Bernard Hooks perceived in 1954, that higher payrolls mean more prosperity for more people, more customers for the merchants.

At the time of the strike, *Champion* editor Bob Pinkston charged that Sam Twedell had done more damage to the community than any one man ever had. The town spent six years building up consumer acceptance of Center poultry and Twedell, he charged, had torn it down in a month. Affidavits "from a few strikers" were used all over the nation and forced Center to cut production, but an employee from the Agriculture Department's Poultry Marketing Division told the editor that Center's chickens were as fine as those anywhere. Twedell's half-truths and prejudice, he wrote, split families, neighbors, church members, friends, and workers. It was a pretty high price to pay, Pinkston thought, for a few pay raises. After Twedell left, he noted, the rest of the townspeople had to live with each other in Center. Shelby County, he said, was being rapidly drained of population in the late 1940s, but the Chamber of Commerce scrambled for enough jobs for the town to hang on; the Chamber was not especially proud to announce that after eighteen months of effort they had brought a plant to Center that paid 75¢ an hour, "but it was something." Even that sum doubled some people's salaries overnight, and they at least had a minimum wage. Pinkston concluded by asking Twedell to fetch some new, high paying industries for Center.[58]

The editor made some valid points, but even he warned the companies at the time that they should "not make the mistake of thinking that this [support] might be approval of your wages or working conditions by our people." The editor seemed to know that 75¢ an hour was not a living wage, but still thought it ought to be tolerated. Poultry processors, he noted in the interview, live precariously and the prices they charge retailers are very dependent on wage scales; a price increase of ¼ of a cent a pound can lose a processor his customer. But the wage hands making 75¢ an hour were existing precariously too, and most did not think that the possible loss of a few friends was too high a price to pay for another nickel an hour. If Shelby County could not survive without placing its labor force in peonage, perhaps Shelby County did not deserve to survive. But, of course, it did survive and, in fact, prosper. Pinkston pointed out in 1972 that the county was growing, the banks were "filled with money," and the old hatreds had "faded away." Former strikers confirmed that bitter feelings had disappeared.[59]

The events in Center followed a dreary southern pattern. Irving Bernstein noted that little establishments in the small towns in the South were among the few sectors that paralyzed the union movement in the fifteen years after World War II. Many unions, of course, have not been interested in small units of unskilled workers. The wartime exemption of poultry from meat rationing triggered a decade of growth in the southern broiler industry, especially among independent operators.[60] The southern independents were difficult to organize, partly because of a slow-moving NLRB and because of Taft-Hartley provisions that permitted employers to influence workers and to intiate representation elections. "But the greater barrier," according to one historian,

> was the southern pattern of employer and community resistance, small towns, race antagonisms, and violence — for instance, the beating of Amalgamated representatives in Gainesville, Georgia, in March, 1951, and the dynamiting of a tourist cabin of an Amalgamaged organizer in Center, Texas, in 1954. The southern independents remained a threat in 1960.[61]

The outlook for the union in southern poultry brightened somewhat in the 1960s, as the structure of the industry changed. During the 1960s and the early 1970s the independent poultry operators largely were supplanted by the integrators, a few big vertical oligopolies that own hatcheries, feed companies, processing plants and even distribution facilities. The broiler industry became the premier agribusiness in the South. In 1971 Dick Twedell, successor to his father as regional director of the Amalgamated, asserted that the southern integrators were more amenable (or vulnerable) to unionization than the independents. Though less than a third of the thirty of so poultry plants in Texas, for instance, were unionized, the one in Center, which had become part of the Holly Farms chain, produced more birds than half the non-union plants put together.[62]

The roles of the union and the federal government in the nationwide drive for compulsory poultry inspection were duly noted by Senator James D. Murray of Montana. In his report that followed one of the congressional hearings in 1956, Murray spoke for the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in praising the ". . . definitive and thoroughly documented exposé of conditions in the poultry processing industry under the Department of Agriculture's voluntary inspection program . . .." The report deemed the Department "seriously remiss" in never having called the poultry conditions to the attention of the public and in never having taken the initiative in recommending corrective measures to the president or Congress. The committee was shocked that the Agriculture Department opposed compulsory inspection even though it was in command of more facets than the union in regard to diseased poultry. The committee report added:

> While we are grateful to the union and believe the American people will share that gratitude, we think it a shame that an organization of workers whose earnings are very modest should have to spend its funds to alert the Nation to a situation which is already known to a division of a governmental department which has apparently put its processor relationships ahead of its responsibilities to the people of the United States.[63]

After a three-year, uphill fight the union overcame the opposition of the poultry industry and the Department of Agriculture, which changed its position in 1956. On August 28, 1957 President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Poultry Products Inspection Act, which established compulsory federal inspection of all poultry moving across state lines and in foreign commerce. The law attempts to assure the wholesomeness of poultry and poultry products placed on the market, the maintenance of sanitary facilities and practices at slaughter and processing plants, and correct and informative labeling.[64] Thus, just as the "sick chickens" sold in New York by the Schechter brothers had national implications in the 1930s — the invalidation of the National Industrial Recovery Act — so did the diseased poultry shipped out of Texas in the 1950s. The union organizing drive in Center, Texas, inspired the national boycott and clean-up crusade, which persuaded the public to ask searching questions about the quality of poultry being consumed in the United States. The resulting legislation must surely be judged as a permanent benefit for American consumers.

NOTES

[1]Clara Holder to Patrick Gorman, 26 June 1953, Sam Twedell Collection, Texas Labor Archives, U.T. Arlington Library. Twedell's papers are collection 44, and the Center poultry files are in boxes 15, 18, 19, and 23. All letters, telegrams, affidavits, contract proposals, radio addresses, statements before Congress, leaflets and organizers' reports cited hereinafter are from this archival source. Back issues of the *Center Champion* are found only in the newspaper office and were made available by the editor generously. Unfortunately, none of the owners or managers could be contracted. They are no longer in Center.

[2]*Texas Almanac, 1956-1957* (Dallas, 1957), p. 278; *Proceedings, Texas State Federation*

of Labor, 1936, p. 77.

[3]Ken Lawrence and Anne Braden, "The Long Struggle," *Southern Exposure* (November-December, 1983), p. 86; *Texas Almanac, 1956-1957*, pp. 278, 700; *Center Champion*, September 10, 1953 and May 13, 1954; Interview with Dick Twedell, Dallas, September 17, 1971; Interview with anonymous leader of the Chamber of Commerce, Center, October 13, 1972.

[4]*Fort Worth Union Banner*, August 26, 1911. See also George T. Morgan, "The Gospel of Wealth Goes South: John Henry Kirby and Labor's Struggle for Self-Determination, 1901-1916," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 75 (October 1971), pp. 186-197.

[5]S.S. McKay, *W. Lee O'Daniel and Texas Politics, 1938-1942* (Lubbock, 1944), p. 457; *Dallas Morning News*, June 17, 1941.

[6]"Poultry Workers' Vote Pledge," union leaflet, n.d.; "Denison Contract Proposal," management brochure, n.d.; Interview with Dick Twedell; Interview with Sam Twedell, Dallas, April 6, 1971; Interview with Bernard Hooks, Center, October 13, 1972; Interviews with Martha Allen, Hazel Powell, Angie Grace, and Christine Jones, Center, May 31, 1974. All four worked in the plants.

[7]The effort was secret when it began July 8, but soon became public.

[8]Weldon Sanders to Sam Twedell, October 7, 1953; Interviews with Sam Twedell, Bernard Hooks, Martha Allen, and anonymous leader of the Center Chamber of Commerce.

[9]*Center Champion*, September 10, 1953.

[10]*Center Champion*, September 10, 1953.

[11]*Center Champion*, September 10, 1953.

[12]"TO ALL OUR EMPLOYEES," Denison letter, n.d.

[13]"A Word to the Wise," Denison leaflet, n.d.

[14]Since there was a very high turnover in the plant and since every employee walked out in the strike which began seven months after the election, there is some doubt as to the identity of the "loyal" employees.

[15]"Loyal Employees Committee," leaflet, September 14, 1953.

[16]"Just a Few Simple Questions for the Poultry Workers to Think About At This Time," Amalgamated Meat Cutter handbill, n.d.

[17]*Dallas Craftsman*, September 25, 1953; Allen Williams, "Organizer's Weekly Report to Vice-President Twedell," November 8, 1953; Interview with Sam Twedell.

[18]Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, January 19, 1954. About 30,000 of the nation's 300,000 poultry workers were unionized. Neither the Meat Cutters nor the federal government systematically accumulates information on poultry workers' wages, union or non-union. In 1953 an Amalgamated contract with a Swift poultry plant in Muskogee, Oklahoma, called for a minimum of 95¢ an hour for unskilled males who had worked at least thirty days and 92¢ for women.

[19]Joe Post to Ray Clymer, March 30, 1954.

[20]Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, April 12, 1954.

[21]Jim Gilker to Patrick Gorman, February 28, 1954.

[22]Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, January 19, 1954; Interview with Sam Twedell.

[23]Earl Jimerson and Patrick Gorman, "Resolution Proclaiming Denison Poultry Company Unfair," April 1954.

[24]Ray Clymer to Director of Personnel and Labor Relations, Lucky Stores, telegram, April 1954; Patrick Gorman to Sam Twedell, April 13, 1954; Earl Jimerson to local unions, March 29, 1954.

[25]Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, April 12, 1954.

[26]Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, April 12 and 17, 1954.

[27]*Dallas Craftsman*, September 25, 1953; Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, April 12, 1954;

Sam Twedell to Homer Garrison, April 15, 1954; *Butcher Workman*, September and October 1954; Interview with Captain J.F. Rogers, Houston, June 26, 1974.

[28]*Butcher Workman*, September 1954.

[29]Sam Twedell to the Federal Communications Commission, telegram, May 20, 1954.

[30]*Shreveport Times*, May 19, 1954.

[31]Interviews with Sam Twedell and anonymous leader of Center Chamber of Commerce.

[32]Allen Williams, "Organizers' Weekly Report to Vice-President Twedell," May 9, 1954.

[33]*Ibid.*, August 15, 1954; *Butcher Workman*, September 1954; *Dallas Times Herald*, July 24, 1954; Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, September 9, 1954.

[34]*Butcher Workman*, October 1954; Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, October 2 and November 2, 1954. It should not be assumed that a small-town ruling elite, even in the South, is always antagonistic to strikers. As the Celanese strike in Rome, Georgia, 1948, local merchants were neutral, one bank suspended collections on appliances, and Georgia Power waived electric bills for three months. See Samuel Lubnell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York, 1952), p. 110.

[35]Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, May 10, 1954; Allen Williams, "Organizers' Weekly Report to Vice-President Twedell," May 3, 1954. See the *Center Champion* May 20, 1954. The black population percentage is derived from the *U.S. Census of Population: 1960. General Population Characteristics, Texas* (Washington, 1961), p. 127. Everyone who was interviewed, including three black picketers, affirmed the general support of blacks for the strikers and their activities.

[36]*Center Champion*, May 13, 1954.

[37]Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, May 10, 1954.

[38]Jim Gilker to Patrick Gorman, February 28, 1954.

[39]Hilton Hanna, column in the *Butcher Workman*, May 1954.

[40]*Ibid.*

[41]Mildred Garrett affidavit, April 20, 1954.

[42]Hilton Hanna and Joseph Belsky, *Picket and the Pen* (New York, 1960), pp. 135-138; Hanna, column in the *Butcher Workman*, June 1954; Interview with Sam Twedell.

[43]*Ibid.;* Patrick Gorman to Sam Twedell, November 17, 1954; Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, November 19, 1954; Patrick Gorman to John White, November 29, 1954; *Houston Post*, November 10, 1954.

[44]Ruth and Edward Brecher, "How Safe is the Poultry You Eat?" *Redbook*, August 1956, p. 94; "Foul Birds in America," *America*, March 10, 1956, p. 624; "A Sick Chick Goes to Market," *Consumer Reports*, March 1955, p. 143; Statement by Shirley Barker before the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, U.S. Senate, February 28, 1957; *Center Champion*, May 27, 1954; Earl Jimerson and Patrick Gorman, "A Victory for the Consumer," *American Federationist*, October 1957, pp. 22-23.

[45]Brecher, "How Safe is the Poultry You Eat?" p. 32; *New York Times*, June 16, 1956, sec. 1, p. 40; "A Sick Chick Goes to Market," *Consumer Reports*, p. 144; Harrison Wellford, *Sowing the Wind* (New York, 1972), p. 57.

[46]John Erhard to Patrick Gorman and Sam Twedell, May 1, 1954. Erhard was general counsel for Eastex.

[47]Transcript of Joe Fechtel speech on KDET, April 28, 1954; Jim Gilker to Patrick Gorman, February 28, 1954; Patrick Gorman to Sam Twedell, April 19, 1954.

[48]Amalgamated Meat Cutters Press Release, March 1955; Contract with Eastex, March 16, 1955; Sam Twedell to the editor of the *Houston Labor Messenger*, March 15, 1955; *Center Champion*, May 17, 1955.

[49]E.W. Haley to John White, April 26, 1952; Hanna, column in the *Butcher Workman*, May 1954; Florence Smith affidavits, April 26, and June 1, 1954. Haley was Mayor Pro temp of Center.

[50]Florence Smith affidavit, April 26, 1954.

[51]Ralph Sanders to Patrick Gorman, February 23, 1958.

[52]Hanna, column in the *Butcher Workman*, June 1954; Sam Twedell to Dick Twedell, February 25, 1958; Interview with Sam Twedell.

[53]Sam Twedell to Patrick Gorman, June 29, 1955.

[54]Interviews with Angie Grace, Martha Allen, and Christine Jones, all of whom are veteran black workers.

[55]Interview with anonymous leader of Center Chamber of Commerce.

[56]Interview with Hazel Powell. She is the union steward in Center; Interview with Paulia Weaver, Dallas, July 6, 1982.

[57]Interview with anonymous leader of the Center Champion of Commerce; *Texas Alamanac, 1970-1971* (Dallas, 1971), p. 334, notes the rising importance of agribusiness and tourism in Shelby County.

[58]*Center Champion*, May 20, 1954; Interview with Bob Pinkston, Center, October 13, 1972. Pinkston believes that the union persuaded the illiterate workers to sign the affidavits. He thinks Eastex Poultry in particular, which had a new plant that he toured, was the cleanest in the country at that time. Yet he concedes that it was time for a federal inspection law.

[59]*Center Champion*, May 20, 1954; interviews with Bob Pinkston, Hazel Powell, Angie Grace, Martha Allen, and Christine Jones. A very few "scabs" remained in the Eastex plant until the middle or late 1960s, before joining the union or quitting. The bitter feelings that survived the fight were more evident in the plant than in the community.

[60]Irving Bernstein, "The Growth of American Unions, 1945-1960," *Labor History*, 2 (Spring, 1961), pp. 151, 153; *New York Times*, December 5, 1954, sec. 3, p. 6.

[61]David Brody, *The Butcher Workmen* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 247.

[62]Interview with Dick Twedell; Wellford, *Sowing the Wind*, pp. 102-104; Worth Wren Jr., column in *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, March 3, 1979; Hope Shand, "Billions of Chickens: the Business of the South," *Southern Exposure* (November-December, 1983), p. 76.

[63]*U.S. Senate Report No. 129*, 84th Cong., 2nd Sess. (1956), pp. 6-7.

[64]Hanna and Belsky, *Picket and the Pen*, p. 136; *New York Times*, August 29, 1957, sec. 1, p. 21.