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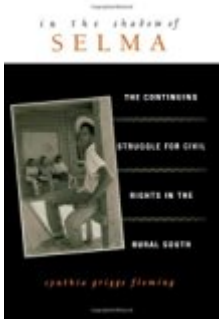
Cynthia Griggs Fleming. *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004. xix + 349 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7425-0811-8.



Reviewed by John White

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In her study of the African-American freedom struggle in Wilcox County, Alabama, Cynthia Griggs Fleming uncovers the "hidden" history of black activism in the rural South. According to Fleming, civil rights activists in Wilcox County have been overshadowed by the significant attention paid to their northeastern neighbors in Selma and Dallas County. She concludes that while scholars have produced exhaustive studies of the civil rights movement in Alabama, the bulk of these works have focused on the well-publicized campaigns in Birmingham, Montgomery, and Selma.

In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South, as the title suggests, is a community-based study that traces the ongoing efforts on the part of rural black Alabamians to achieve equality with their white neighbors. In this endeavor, Fleming employs a variety of primary and secondary sources to illustrate how the black residents of Wilcox County have resisted racial oppression from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The author personalizes the struggle with scores of anecdotal accounts that chronicle black resistance to the daily indignities of the Jim Crow system and its legacy. Fleming supports her anecdotal evidence with well placed guideposts that historicize the events in Wilcox County.

She contends that by the end of the nineteenth century, "white Wilcox residents built a social order on the mirror image assumptions of white superiority and black inferiority." The "unequal but predictable pattern" the author describes is an all-too-familiar story in the history of the American South (p. 15). Following a brief period of Republican control after the Civil War and during Reconstruction, whites began to reassert authority over the black population. According to Fleming, "most plantation owners felt a sense of ownership that was based on the reality of their county's slave past. White ownership of black flesh had helped to define the identity of Wilcox County's white residents for generations, and even after Wilcox slaveholders were forced to give up their slaves, this sense of white ownership persisted" (p. 24).

Black opportunity was even further constrained by an almost complete lack of support for

the publicly funded education of African American children. Fleming points out that in the 1907-1908 school year, the state of Alabama allocated a mere $0.36 per student to educate black children while it afforded nearly $18 to educate each white child. A decade later the ratio had fallen to $0.35:$17.82. Although funding for black schools did improve in the 1920s, the state still spent less than $1.00 per black student compared to over $30 on each of its white pupils (pp. 44-45).

Despite the repressive nature of white rule in rural Alabama, African Americans were occasionally able to resist the burdensome rules of the state's Jim Crow system. Presbyterian missionaries established Camden Academy, which became an oasis for black children to receive a meaningful education in the heart of Alabama's black belt. Fleming also notes numerous instances where African Americans stood up to white officials, and takes special care to point out how careful black parents were in shielding their children from the most severe aspects of white supremacy.

Nonetheless, Fleming contends that it was not until Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reached the sparsely populated rural county that the pace of racial change increased. The author notes that in places such as Gee's Bend, New Deal programs helped promote African-American land ownership. Of course, Fleming also supports the findings of other historians who have found that rural African Americans were frequently frustrated with the local whites who administered New Deal programs and she acknowledges that the introduction of mechanized farming and the farm quota system displaced countless other African Americans.

The mixed results of the New Deal did, however, provide hope to African Americans. The black residents of Wilcox County noticed that many of the activists who were committed to bringing an end to the Great Depression had also joined organizations that were dedicated to racial justice, such as the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW). Fleming argues that increased interest in the plight of African Americans provided a new hope for an end to racial oppression.

These feelings were bolstered by the experiences of Wilcox County's black veterans of World War II and the Korean Conflict. (Surprisingly, the author excludes any discussion of the war in Vietnam from her later analysis). Fleming concludes that the region's black veterans returned to Alabama intent on achieving equality at home. In chapter 4, "Making the World Safe for Democracy," the author emphasizes that this determination, combined with a series of legal victories for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), spurred a dramatic increase in local civil rights activism.

Throughout the 1950s, African Americans in Wilcox County attempted to register to vote, called on local and state governments to improve black schools, and continually pushed for better treatment from their white neighbors. According to Fleming, their activity met with little success. The author claims that, especially after the Supreme Court's decision in ***Brown v. Board of Education***, white resistance in Wilcox County was fierce. Local whites were quick to form a White Citizens' Council, and it became "an important part of their community" (p. 128).

In the 1960s, local activism combined with the labors of national civil rights organizations, such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Fleming's description of grassroots organizing by the SNCC in Wilcox County is an informative and valuable contribution to the history of the organization. The author accurately depicts the difficulty of civil rights activism in the Alabama black belt while simultaneously exposing the political infighting caused by class-based and generational divisions within the black community.

Fleming's work is also proficient in its discussion of the limited success of African-American attempts to create a more egalitarian electoral process and in describing the failure to ever bring about meaningful school integration in Wilcox County. She points out that after a brief period of minimal desegregation, the county's schools resegregated and most of the white students attended an all-white private school. As one of Fleming's interviewees noted several years ago, "It's 2002 and we're still segregated" (p. 292).

Overall, *In the Shadow of Selma* is a successful attempt to personalize the African-American freedom struggle and to shed light on the movement in rural Alabama. Even so, there are several criticisms that can be made about the book.

As at least one other review has pointed out, Fleming is occasionally too reliant on oral history interview.[1] Much of the book's narrative is derived solely from first- or second-hand accounts. Fleming rarely corroborates these accounts with contemporary sources. This is mostly due to the fact that many of these stories are previously untold and underreported, but, since the author also notes the significant attention Wilcox County received from the press during the demonstrations of the 1960s, it is likely that at least some of these protests were captured by journalistic accounts.

Also, Fleming's discussion of the white community is too often reduced to descriptions of individual acts of intimidation without adequately explaining the white power structure. The focus, of course, is on the African Americans who reside in Wilcox County, but much of their story is derived from their antagonistic relationship with the white powers there.

Though Fleming discusses the demeaning aspects of racial etiquette for African Americans and the insistence from whites that blacks submit to the culture of segregation, she never fully describes how whites "managed" the Jim Crow system.[2] For example, when the author describes the formation of a White Citizens' Council in Wilcox County, she notes how important the organization was to local whites, but never discusses the degree to which racial intimidation was organized through the Councils (pp. 127-128).

These are minor criticisms, however, when compared to what the book does well. Though historians have long ago abandoned a view of the civil rights movement that begins with the ***Brown*** decision and ends with the federal civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965, that view persists in the public mind. Hopefully, Fleming's book will help correct this misinterpretation. The author skillfully recounts the continuity of black protests from the late nineteenth century to the present day with compelling personal histories. As one of Fleming's subjects succinctly put it, "We knew how to boycott a long time before Martin Luther King came in" (p. 94).

Fleming is also adept at demonstrating that violence played an important role in black protests (even during the so-called "non-violent" period of civil rights activism). The author mentions that many of the county's black residents carried guns (p. 144) and exposes numerous incidents of African Americans using violence or threats of violence to defend themselves against white intimidation. For instance, African Americans in Possum Bend once confronted a group of whites at gunpoint to prevent an attack on one member of the small black community (pp. 90-91).

Perhaps the most successful aspect of ***In the Shadow of Selma*** is Fleming's discussion of the divisions within Wilcox County's black communities. Class, ethnic, generational, and political differences are especially prevalent in the final two chapters of the book where Fleming focuses on the "post-movement" period. These chapters and the stories revealed in them are perhaps the most important in the book.

Fleming's case studies are vivid reminders that after the spotlight of national attention was lifted from Alabama in the late 1960s, the struggle for social justice and equality continued. They are

also reminders of the continuation of poverty, educational inequality, and political disenfranchisement in the rural black belt.

Notes

[1]. Charles Eagles, "Review of *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South*," *Alabama Review* 58 (2005): pp. 141-144.

[2]. See J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).