Steinem tours rural Louisiana with farm worker organizers Joyce Alexander, Bessie Bourgeois, Loma Bourg and Bernadette Stewart. Her coming, Bourg says, "gave us both recognition and confirmation. She's terrific."
Getting off the Plantation with Lorna, Bessie, Joyce, and Bernadette

BY GLORIA STEINEM

We have been driving around the lush green back roads of Louisiana all day together in the rain: six women in one car navigating the vast fields of sugarcane and flooded ditches that surround the farmworker shacks we occasionally stop to visit. The endless rows of cane are quiet today, but they are full of ghosts.

"Women workers have been walking up and down those same rows since slavery," says Lorna Bourg, a white woman from a small Louisiana town, who has been an innovative rural organizer since the poverty programs of the 1960s. "The only change is that most cane is cut by big machines now, but the men who run them still get well below-poverty wages. And it's still the women who walk the rows to do the planting or walk behind the cutting machines to pick up what they miss—and get paid least of all."

The words are directed at me and photographer Mary Ellen Mark: two outsiders being shown the hidden world of sugar plantations by four women from the Southern Mutual Help Association, an 11-year-old group composed mostly of present or former sugarcane workers who are trying to improve life on the plantations for those who want to stay, and to provide training and support for those who want to leave.

The other three women in the car need no such explanations. They are all from families born to these plantations, with relatives who still live and work on this white-owned land as wage slaves, much as their ancestors did as legal slaves more than a century ago. (Even now, there are workers who don't see all or any of their own pay. They may get only an empty "pay" envelope on which their expenses have been computed by the plantation owner, leaving them mysteriously and constantly in debt.) Each of these black women is the first among her own sisters and brothers to be lucky enough or strong enough to leave the fields completely; yet each has chosen to stay and organize among the 80,000 adults and children who still exist on a yearly average of $4,000 for a family of six, and an average formal schooling of three years. (Of the five current and very activist plantation workers on the board of SMHA, for instance, two can neither read nor write.)

The strength and love for their work among all four SMHA women is obvious in the mood of our trip. It is realistic, but not gloomy. Though they are trying hard to pour a lifetime of facts and experience into two visitors who might be able to carry some message of need to the outside world, they still make gentle jokes about each other's tears, and tell proud anecdotes of each other's successes. In the intimacy of the car and the rain, we have begun to exchange bits and pieces of our lives.

Bernadette Stewart, for instance, our 34-year-old driver, was born on the Hayes Plantation where her parents cut cane, and her elder sister and brother quit school to work the fields. Nonetheless, she has risked the disapproval of the growers, and the fearfulness of her own relatives, to help cane workers get the confidence and training to find other jobs (especially for wives, whose nonplantation jobs can provide a first step toward some financial independence for their families), or to locate loans, land, and skills enough to build and own small houses off the plantation.

Today, Bernadette has won a personal victory. In spite of much teasing about a great fear of driving in the rain, she has got us safely through severe downpours, tornado warnings, and 14 inches of rain in this already bayou-filled country. She has also suffered one personal defeat. Ella White, an 86-year-old widow and former cane worker, refused to talk with us. In spite of Bernadette's efforts to distract the plantation's "White Mouth" (a worker who gets favored treatment from the boss in return for reporting on co-workers), Ella was clearly too nervous to answer our questions. After all, she is "allowed" to stay in the no-plumbing, see-through company shack on this plantation where she and her husband worked out their lives. And she has no pension, no savings; no place to go.

On the other hand, as Bernadette explains, Ella White did talk once. When a CBS television crew for "60 Minutes" came here two years ago to do a report on life behind the "Cane Curtain," Ella was the only plantation resident who agreed to be identified on camera. Since then, Ella has received complaints from some of her neighbors who fear that any more "rocking the boat" will threaten their jobs. Nonetheless, her brief notoriety did cause the management to build a railing and steps up to her porch; a repair that she had been afraid to ask for.

Lorna points to other reasons why even a brief TV report can be helpful. "That's the building where the company store used to be. Now it's closed down," she says with pride. "And so are all the other company stores but one. That happened after we showed empty 'pay' envelopes on camera. Plantation owners still deduct things like utility bills and doctors' fees, but at least the company store is mostly gone."

"See those houses? They've all been patched up because the TV crew was here. That canal still has so many chemicals in it that dead fish float by, but at least the houses were moved back from it.

"Of course, some things take more than publicity. Three SMHA workers were arrested for criminal trespass on another plantation because they drove on the only road to the cane workers' houses. We had to get a three-judge federal panel to say they have a Constitutional right to free association."

Bessie Bourgeois is small and quiet. Mostly she has sat in the front seat listening to the rest of us, but she knows the back roads well. At 12, she began hand-cutting sugarcane in the winter. At 13, she left school to marry. Now she's 41, and has three children and four grandchildren. Her work history includes waitressing, cooking for a white family, and once, after she was divorced and had been sick for three years, supporting her kids on welfare. She's been coaxed into telling only one favorite story: her mysterious refusal, at the age of eight, to call the white overseer "Mister Paul."

"My Daddy gave me a beating for getting us in trouble," she says with no rancor at all, "but he kept calling me 'Bessie'—so I just kept calling him 'Paul.'"

It's the sight of the polluted canal that inspires her to describe a project she has undertaken in addition to her work as job-training director for SMHA: the collection of facts about the impact on health of chemicals sprayed in the cane fields. When her own fig trees died and she experienced breathing problems during spraying time,
she began to interview caneworkers. She is now convinced that Agent Orange—the herbicide alleged by Vietnam veterans to cause medical and genetic abnormalities—is among the chemicals being used or misused on plantations.

In fact, Joyce Alexander, the last member of our group, has testified in Congress about seeing caneworkers “whose skin literally peels off after the fields are sprayed—who go home to their children with clothes soaked with chemicals because they don’t have washing facilities.”

We talk about the need for medical testing of caneworkers. Right now, the information collected by Bessie and others—like that collected by mothers at Love Canal—is subject to being dismissed as “housewife data.” I put them in touch with an expert on environmental medicine who specializes in farmworkers, and hope for the best. We need squads of feminist organizers (and a school to train them); women who could fan out over the country, spreading organizing skills and contacts. Right now, each of us feels alone, and many of us must reinvent the wheel.

By the end of the day, it’s clear that these four women are attacking systemic problems in a bottom-up and practical way. Their training ranges from Lorna, who has a graduate degree, to Bessie, who received a high school equivalency diploma 25 years after dropping out, but they share an entrepreneurial strength and ingenuity that comes from defying a complex resistance every day.

Lorna explains matter-of-factly, for instance, that windows were broken and the staff was harassed when SMHA moved to the small town of Jeanerette two years ago—but not anymore. “We were probably the only black people on Main Street where black people and white people worked together.” She also talks calmly about their successful lawsuit against the Department of Agriculture—the first successful class action suit on behalf of farmworkers.

Altogether, there is a sense that these women have hit their stride, and are already doing the work they do best. That is, except for Joyce. At 26, the youngest of the group, she still seems poised at a crossroads that could send her out to a unique future or plunge her backward again.

In fact, this may be literally true. Joyce is waiting to hear whether or not she will be awarded a National Fellowship in Rural Development; a one-year combination of academic courses with on-site instruction at rural projects around the country. It’s her chance for new horizons, experience that might allow her to return to the caneworkers as a kind of female Saul Alinsky—and a personal bulwark against falling back into poverty. But her sisters of SMHA are afraid that, even if she wins, she’ll be forced to turn it down by her feeling of responsibility for a dependent mother and

brothers who have not yet escaped what everyone, including Joyce, refers to as “the plantation mentality.” It’s a miracle that she escaped this dependency herself.

At 18, she became the only member of her family to graduate from high school. At 19, she was pregnant. (“I just didn’t know how not to get pregnant,” she says simply.) That same winter, her father got frostbitten while working in the cane fields and had to have both legs amputated. With his wife and eight children, he was put off the plantation that had been their family’s home for more than a hundred years.

In a small town nearby, where they barely existed on public assistance plus odd jobs, a welfare officer suggested that Joyce take secretarial courses. She had to get up at 5 A.M., walk two miles to a bus stop, and then transfer to a second bus in order to reach the business school—as well as waiting three hours after her last class to reverse this travel procedure—but she persisted through seven months of pregnancy.

After the baby was born, however, the only jobs she could find were harvesting peppers and stacking clay pots. Only the accident of hearing about a Department of Labor program got her into the SMHA office as a temporary trainee.

Thanks to Lorna’s sharp eye for talent, Joyce was retained as a secretary, then promoted to managing support services for caneworkers (child care, health care, transportation, and the like), and then promoted again to administering programs: especially consciousness-raising groups to help workers gain self-confidence and dignity. After five years, she writes complex proposals that document SMHA’s need for government grants (“I don’t have that many words,” she says, “so I’m brief and to the point”) and faces Congressmen, growers, or colleagues with the gentle strength that has allowed her to bend but never break.

Two years ago when her son was five, she gave birth to a daughter; this time joyfully and by choice. Though she still sees the child’s father, she doesn’t want to marry now. “I haven’t found anyone yet,” she says, “who’ll agree to be the partner and not the boss.”

At home with her widowed mother and remaining brothers, she is the responsible member of a household in which drinking is a problem: the despair and dependency created by generations on the plantation has transferred its weight to her shoulders. “I want the fellowship,” she says. But her voice sounds very uncertain.

We are off the plantation now, visiting the Pioneer Self-Help Group: the first nine houses that SMHA helped caneworker families to build and to own. Their site was once a garbage dump—the only land that workers could afford—but it has been filled in, and planted with lawns and flowers.

In the cheerful living room of Simon

Daniels, a plantation worker and SMHA board member, we talk about distances traveled. For the current total of 25 SMHA home-owning families, it’s a long way from feeling vulnerable to every whim of the boss, and surrendering the decisions of everyday life. It occurs to us that, next to farmworkers, it’s a problem that only generations of dependent wives might understand.

“We laugh—but only because some truth is there. Though nine of the 12 board members are men, the founding crew of SMHA were women—and so are most of the staff. Perhaps their sensitivities to the humiliations, causes, and cues of dependency are part of the reason for its success.

Or perhaps it’s their very unusual practice of working with everyone, and not leaving half the workers behind.

When self-help houses are built, for instance, women as well as men are taught wiring and plumbing, roofing and carpentry. The first self-taught construction supervisor turned out to be a woman, and women on nontraditional trades are brought in from Baton Rouge and New Orleanas as instructors to show that women can do these jobs, too. On the plantations themselves, SMHA encourages women to go after the better-paying jobs, and not just walk behind the machines. Though the resistance there is greater, at least one tractor driver now parks his giant machine outside her house as a mark of pride.

Because we are emissaries from the outside world, we also begin to discuss the kinds of messages we should take home. For instance, SMHA needs: (1) Contributions, of course. Send information requests or tax-deductible contributions to: Southern Mutual Help Association, P.O. Box 850, Jeanerette, Louisiana 70544. (2) Land. It’s a SMHA dream to create a land bank. Is there anyone who has (or knows someone who has) Louisiana land to sell or contribute? (3) Invitations to conferences, homes, community projects, sight-seeing: anything that might provide workers with experience and support.

Postscript

Joyce Alexander did win the fellowship—and she did accept it. By the time you read this, she and her two children will be in Amherst, and Joyce will be studying at the University of Massachusetts.

Bessie Bourgeois was awarded a VISTA prize in Washington, D.C., “for exceptional service and work to end poverty.” It’s far from a happy ending for the plantation workers still existing on minimum wage by the hour and season work.

But it’s a good beginning.

Gloria Steinem is cofounder of Ms. Magazine. She began writing about agricultural labor in 1966 as a volunteer for the United Farm Workers.

40 Ms. August 1980