

Tent City Blues

The year is 1927, and you are a 16-year-old Black teenager who was born and raised in Greenville, Mississippi, a small town on the bank of the Mississippi River. Black people make up 75% of the population in Greenville, and they provide 95% of the farm labor.

Lately, Greenville residents have been concerned about the increasing levels of rainfall, and the effects it will have on their crops. A year of heavy rain has caused frequent flooding along the Mississippi River, and a big storm in April finally broke the Greenville levy. Floodwaters rushed into town, destroying houses and farm structures. Now, Greenville is under 10 feet of water.

Most of the White residents were evacuated by steamboat. The Black residents were less fortunate, ordered by National Guard troops to move to higher ground. A refugee tent camp has been established on top of a narrow, muddy hill near the levy. There are nearly 200,000 people living in the camp, including many children. The guards will not allow Black residents to leave, although Whites can come and go as they please.

Living in muddy tents, surrounded by dangerous floodwaters, the Black residents of Greenville are collectively suffering. As a teenager, you have been recruited to help rebuild the levy. This is a difficult and dangerous job. Worst of all, when payday arrived, the bosses announced that the payments would be delayed.

With no money, no food, and no home, you find yourself struggling to survive. Your mother and little sister have been looking unhealthy and skinny due to the lack of food. Feelings of fear, sadness, and anger are swirling around in your mind.

Then, one night, your friend Fred comes to your tent with a small cloth package. He unwraps it, and reveals a big piece of salted bacon and a small hunk of cheese. Your eyes grow wide at the sight of the food, and you are relieved when Fred offers it as a gift to your family. He says, "The guards are going to let us starve out here, so I stole this from their supply tent. I'm not going to die on this muddy hill."

Two weeks later, the conditions have not improved in Tent City, and hunger has returned to your belly. Fred says that he is going to visit the supply tent again soon. He says that this time, if you want any food, you'll have to take it yourself. Will you go with Fred to steal food from the supply tent tonight?

