CHAPTER 4

There Is Mean Things Happening in This Land: Terror in Arkansas

On the 18th day of May, the union called a strike
But planters and their bosses throwed the people outa their shacks.
There is mean things happening in this land.
There is mean things happening in this land.
But the union’s going on and the union’s growing strong.
There is mean things happening in this land.
The planters throwed the people off the land where many years they had spent,
And in the cold hard winter they had to live in tents.
There is mean things happening in this land . . .
The planters throwed their people out without a bite to eat.
They cursed them and kicked them and some with axe handles beat.
There is mean things happening in this land . . .
Their people got tired of working and that from sun to sun,
But the planters forced them to work at the point of their gun.
There is mean things happening in this land.
There is mean things happening in this land.
But the union’s going on and the union’s growing strong.
There is mean things happening in this land.

—John Handcox

I was doing pretty well until a friend of mine was up at the store and said some men had a rope and the limb and all they needed was me!

In January, 1936, when the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) met in convention in Little Rock, union leaders had pledged to increase membership to

M. K. Honey, Sharecropper’s Troubadour
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100,000. Six fiery working-class preachers helped to lead the union’s 14-member executive council. The movement remained strongest in John Handcox’s St. Francis County, where nearly 7,000 STFU members reportedly belonged to 81 locals; predominantly black locals in St. Francis and in nearby Crittenden County had strong women leaders. The new year seemed to herald the onset of a new era. However, John Handcox’s song, “There is mean things happening in this land,” explained how events burst STFU optimism in the winter and spring of 1936.

Planters terminated annual contracts with sharecroppers and tenants at year’s end and renewed them in January, and in 1936 this became the occasion for another wholesale disaster for people who worked the land. Planter C. H. Dibble near Earle (in Crittenden County) had been meeting with the union’s attorney to negotiate an agreement based on a “model contract” the STFU had proposed. It allowed tenants to choose their furnishing merchant at the start of the year and also who they would market their cotton to at harvest time, and upheld their right to get the best income for their labor. Dibble seemed sympathetic but H. L. Mitchell at the union convention had perhaps unwisely threatened to picket him if he didn’t sign the contract. Meanwhile, the local bank threatened to foreclose on Dibble’s mortgage if he made any agreement with the union. On January 16, against his own feelings of sympathy for his tenants, Dibble evicted everyone that he thought belonged to the union. He put out 21 tenant families—105 people, 28 of them under 15. They had no place to live in the freezing winter weather.

Union supporters took them to a nearby Baptist church, where people created makeshift tents out of quilts and cotton sacks, and huddled in the church yard exposed to the elements, wearing scanty clothing and with little to eat. Union members organized a protest meeting that very night at a nearby Methodist church. Then things got much worse.

Crittenden County Sheriffs Everett Hood and Paul Peacher busted into the church without a warrant, carrying shotguns and ordering people to leave. People started to run, and an African American named Jim Ball, the union’s doorkeeper, grabbed Hood’s gun to keep him from shooting them. The deputies beat Ball senseless and took him to jail. The workers who remained tried to carry on the meeting, but the officers came back and broke it up, shooting two men in the back as they tried to escape. The atrocities did not stop. Some 450 people held another protest rally at the Providence Methodist church, near one of the tent colonies for the people evicted from the Dibble plantation. Deputy Hood again appeared, leading a mob of white men armed with guns and axe handles. They broke into the meeting, randomly beating people, some of whom leapt out of the windows. Hood and the mob confronted the white Socialist minister Howard Kester as he tried to speak from the podium. Hood leered at Kester and muttered, “There’s going to be another Elaine Massacre, only the next time we’ll kill whites as well as niggers.”