# THE VIRGINIA CARAVAN

## *Roving Around Martinsville, Va.*

By James L. Hicks

Mrs. Mary A. Watkins, Mrs. Juanita Moyer and Miss Gladys Watkins, are busily at work as fitters in the Standard Garments Pants factory.

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL—J. Elmer Turner, principal of the Albert Harris School, broadcasts a directive to his classroom teachers over the complex intercom system located in his offices.

INSPECTOR — Mrs. Mary Walker examines one of the factory's products. She has been with the firm since it first started in 1936.

INTERRACIAL TEAM — Mrs. Sarah Queenberry, and Miss Virginia Spencer work side by side at the pants factory.

MARTINSVILLE, Va.—Martinsville, Virginia is an independent, last living city in which both colored and white citizens combine the "devil-may-care" philosophy of the Old West with the modern technocracy of the East, and never stop to worry about what the mixture might bring.

It's a city located deep in the heart of Senator Byrd's Virginia. city which never goes along politically with the powerful machine, but which has the guts to stand up and fight the machine and then say "to heck with it" when it loses.

It's a city whose 5,000 colored citizens derive their principal source of income from a garment plant which they themselves built. They own stock and work side by side each day with white workers pulling down an annual income of more than a million dollars.

• • •

**IT'S A CITY** which has its slums, but one in which housing among colored people is as good as any city in the state. Ninety-one per cent of the colored people living in such housing, own the homes in which they live.

It's a hard cruel city which, to the horror of the rest of the nation, executed seven colored men for the rape of one white woman, but when a stranger today asks its citizens if the city has ever gotten over the shock of the wholesale execution, they will tell you, "We got over that the next day."

This is Martinsville, Virginia!

**Martinsville is an industrial town in the rural South, and at the present time, there is a terrific struggle going on within the city as to which force will dominate.**

But the odds are all in favor of industry and, as a matter of fact, the Henry county farmer who comes to Martinsville on Saturdays has already become more urbanized, and more sophisticated in the ways of the city than farmers who are under the influence of other cities such as Danville, Farmville and South Boston.

In the total population of 17,251 people, there are 2,356 colored men and 2,687 colored women, making a total colored population of 5,043.

• • •

**FIFTEEN YEARS AGO,** only 27 of these five thousand colored citizens bothered to go to the polls and vote. But today, slightly more than 450 of them are on the registered rolls.

If they go to the polls on election day, they constitute a "reasonable influence" on the outcome of the election since their number of 450 registrants is about one fourth of the entire city's population that votes.

There are no barriers to voting, but Martinsville citizens, both colored and white, simply do not bother too much to go to the polls on election day.

Said Andrew Muse, attorney, NAACP leader and a bulwark of the forward looking element of the community: "The trouble with this town is that its citizens have never been hungry. They have the money and it's not too difficult to get them to pay their poll tax—the difficulty comes in getting them to register and then to vote."

But Martinsville doesn't seem to worry. It goes right on making money and having a good time.

**One of the earliest industires in the area was the marketing and processing of tobacco and during last year's auctioning season, gross sales on the Martinsville market totaled $4,000,000.**

Indicative of its industrial trend, Martinsville has gradually turned from farm products and has progressively become a manufacturing town.

The vast majority of colored people are employed in a unique pants factory known as the Standard Garment Company. The plant is owned by S. M. Schriebfeder and his son Joe, native Baltimoreans.

• • •

**THE PLANT** got its start as a trial factory back in 1936 when leaders of industry approached colored citizens and said they would operate a garment factory in Martinsville and hire colored citizens if colored people would build a factory to house their plant.

This odd challenge was accepted and Dr. D. O. Baldwin, one of the most wealthy colored men in Martinsville, took the lead in setting it up.

Dr. Baldwin at that time owned a large park which he had leased to other interests. At great financial risk to himself, he cancelled the lease on the park, gathered prominent colored citizens around him and raised enough capital to build a $40,000 factory on the site.

**The city helped by giving the factory a tax exemption, and soon the factory was in business with 250 women employed in it. In order to help pay for the costs of the factory the 250 women were given an opportunity to buy stock in the corporation, paying twenty five cents a week for their shares.**

Many of these same women are still with the firm and still own stock in it. Among them is Mrs. Mary Walker who has been with the factory since it first began.

Today the factory hires about six hundred women of whom 95 per cent are colored. They draw down an annual payroll of more than a million dollars.

• • •

**THE PLANT** makes trousers for some of the largest and best known firms in the world including McGregor and has proved so successful that plans are already under way to open a second plant in which 600 girls will be employed.

This and other employment for women here possibly accounts for the reputation of Martinsville as a "fast town." These women make good salaries, they dress well and are attracted to the community because of such work.

**The result is that in Martinsville, unlike many other southern towns, women are not entirely dependent upon the school teaching profession and domestic work for a livelihood.**

And just as they do in Washington, Philadelphia, New York and other places where women can get good jobs, they buy cars and circulate freely instead of sitting at home waiting for men to come and take them out.

• • •

**MARTINSVILLE** at the present time, is in the unique spot of a city attempting to give colored people a new school and having colored people of the community turning it down.

A few years ago the city conducted a survey and decided that colored students of Martinsville would not need a new school until 1960.

Last year, however, shortly after the Supreme Court decision of May 17, the white people suddenly decided that they had been all wrong in the survey and that the colored students needed a new school immediately.

But when they approached the colored leadership on the school, Attorney Muse and a few others turned thumbs down on the offer.

The gimmick here was that the whites, with an eye on the Supreme Court decision, suddenly decided that if they built a new and larger school in the area where the present colored school is located, there would be little trouble in having colored students apply for admission to the white school.

**But Muse and his followers, with an eye to the same decision and another eye on the expanding city itself, are holding out until after the court hands down its final decrees with a view toward having a new school built in a location convenient to all students without regard to race.**

Actually the Albert Harris School headed by handsome Elmer J. Turner as principal, is crowded, but as some colored leaders have pointed out, it is no more crowded since May 17, than it was when the city came up with its survey that colored people would need no new school until May 17.

The Harris school has an enrollment of 1,084. Its teaching staff is as follows:

Oris Carter Amos, Sadye F. Baldwin, Lillian A. Branch, Ramona R. Butler, Claudia B. Caldwell, Margarette Carrington, librarian; Belle B. Cole

Richard M. Cole, Geraldine Durante, William W. Edwards, Alfred W. Ferguson, Sophia J. Foster, Bronce O. Griffin, Agnes S. Hairston, Thelma L. Hicks, Charmion Higginbotham, Oscar H. Hinnant Jr., Virgia B. Hobson, Lula W. Johnson, Elsie C. Jones;

W. Lawrence Jones, supervisor; Launettie Lamberth, Marian L. Lightfoot, Mary E. McDaniel, William L. Miller, James Daniel Morgan Jr., Carolyn V. Paige, Dorothy D. Phelps, Lauramer Randolph, Walter Reynolds;

Johnny Hall Saunders, Hattie M. Smith, Mary N. Travis, Ruby Mae Turner, Letha T. Vickers, Clyde L. Williams, Howard L. Williams, Willie M. Womack, Sarah Wise Wooten, Lessie W. Yancey, Alice P. Young, Mary Kathryn Williamson, secretary.

The president of the student council is Shirley Hairston. The senior class president is Adele Brown.

• • •

**JUST OUTSIDE** Martinsville at Fieldale is the $750,000 George Washington Carver School opened in 1950 of which Nathan E. Johnson, a Virginia State College man, is principal.

This is a joint elementary - high school with an enrollment of 843 students with a varied program of extra curricula activities being made a part of the regular school program.

For instance under this plan the school band becomes a class and a student playing in the band is given full credit for his time spent in the band. The same is true of students in dramatics and choral groups.

**The school is accredited by the State Department of Education and the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.**

Its faculty includes Mrs. Cassie Flanigan, Mrs. Ardmese Foster, Mrs. Evelyn Watkins, Mrs. Emmadean Commander, Curtis Higginbotham, Odessa Baker, Mrs. Eula Mitchell, Mrs. Ada Via, Mrs. Pearl Powers;

Mrs. Ada Scales Reynolds, Lewis R. Webb, Henry C. Martin, Joseph Millner, Reginald Lee, Mrs. Edith Reynolds, Mrs. Irma Harris, Inez Tatum, Dorothy Tatum, Robert W. Jones, Samuel S. Trott, Mrs. M. Jewell Smith Jones, Albert T. Jones, and Joseph B. Davis who is assistant principal;

Elementary teachers at the school are Mrs. Alton H. Johnson, Mrs. Elinor Alexander, Mary Eggleston, Aurelia Craighead, Mrs. Mary Fizer and Mrs. Hazel Miller, Mrs. Gertrude Edwards is school secretary.

Lelia Mae Hylton is president of the Student Council, Bertha Pritchard is class president.

• • •

**ONE OF THE** unique things about the George Washington Carver School is the fact that the principal and the school secretary are on duty the year round.

This is because students in the school's agricultural department, develop projects which continue the year round and the school must remain open ot chart the progress of such experiments.

The Martinsville community is serviced by a beautifully located and modern Community Hospital.

Under the directorship of Woodrow W. Walston, a bachelor, who has held his position since 1952, the hospital has 36 beds and 10 bassinets and is self supporting.

**The four colored doctors on its interracial staff are Dr. G. S. Price, Dr. D. O. Baldwin, Dr. Ferne M. Georges and Dr. H. P. Williams. Dr. Georges, the only colored woman doctor in Martinsville, is the wife of Dr. Price and was a patient herself in the hospital when the AFRO team visited there.**

The hospital employs 19 persons including five nurses who are under the direction of head nurse Elaine Parker.

Among the colored members of the hospital board are William T. Alexander, A. W. Ferguson, T. L. Finney, William D. Hobson, W. H. E. Jones, George Mitchell, D. H. Scales, J. Elmer Turner, J. D. Hairston, the Rev. James Hairston, Rev. S. H. Hairston, N. E. Johnson, Willie C. Martin, Hezekiah Morris, Raymond Staples, and Mrs. B. GC. Woodward.

• • •

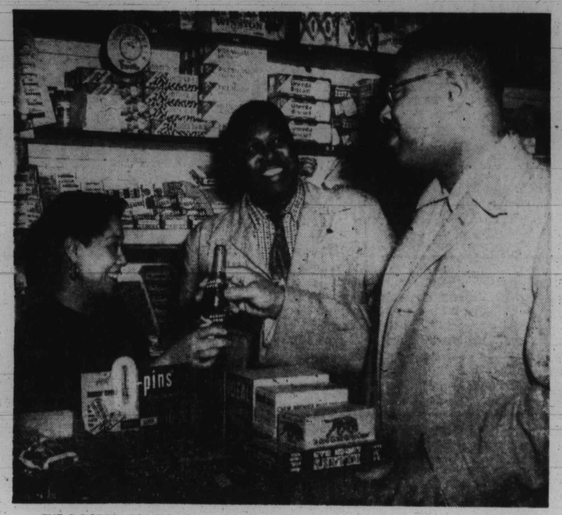
**THE FUTURE** of Martinsville appears to be bright and there is a feeling of confidence both in the colored and white community.

Colored people own some of the more valuable property in town. Dr. Baldwin alone owns an entire city block on Fayette Street and Attorney Muse and Matthew Mitchell, a successful plumber in the city, are presently planning the opening of a 57 acre housing development out on the west side of town.

**The colored people of the city are not limited to any one industry. They work virtually across the board in the furniture-making business in the town and are employed at various skills elsewhere including clerical personnel in the downtown stores.**

Mrs. Tillie Koger works in the Grant Department store which was just opening when the AFRO team arrived. Miss Frances Wismut is employed by the Tuberculosis Association and Willie C. Martin appears to experience no difficulty in handling both white and colored personnel in the Standard Garment factory as a personnel assistant to the president of the firm.

Among the more optimistic citizens of the city are Mr. and Mrs. Tommie Martin who are AFRO distributors for the area and who operate a successful business on Fayette Street the main stem of the colored area.



THE DOCTOR ORDERS—Mr. and Mrs. Tommie Martin, cheerfully make a sale to one of their well known customers, Dr. G. S. Price. Mr. Martin has operated his store in the same site for five years. He is AFRO sales representative for the Martinsville area.

Miss Frances Wimbush, staff worker for the Martinsville Tuberculosis Rehabilitation, watches Harry Ramesuer make one of his birdhouses. She holds one of the few integrated jobs in the community.

Dr. Ferne M. Georges looks on with a practical eye as head nurse Elaine Parker of Martinsville's community hospital takes her blood pressure. Dr. Georges is the city's only colored woman doctor. Miss Parker is a graduate of St. Agnes Nursing School in Raleigh.

LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING—The 75-voice choir of the George Washington Carver High School at Fieldale, Henry County, just outside Martinsville. A. T. Jones is director of the group.