



THE FAYETTE SAGA

In July 1969, the people of Fayette, Mississippi, entered a new era when Charles Evers was inaugurated as the first black mayor of a biracial town in the South. At the time Fayette, with 1,800 residents, was one of the nation's poorest communities—and going downhill steadily.

The Evers administration brought a new spirit to the Fayette region—a spirit based upon reconciliation between the races. Further, it promised to use all of the powers of the city government to better the lot of the most humble and the most poor.

Its major objectives for the Fayette region (comprising roughly 10,000 citizens of Jefferson County, about eighty percent of whom are black) were economic and social. It pledged to create a sound economic base and to dramatically upgrade the community's social services and facilities, including health, day care, family planning, sanitation, housing, and recreation. The new town administration was also committed to improving the level and delivery of the municipal government's services and to making that government more responsive to the needs of its citizens.

Underlying these objectives was a compelling desire to demonstrate that a small town—with a modest amount of outside private assistance—could break with the past by radically altering the social and economic conditions of the vast majority. Secondly, it was hoped that a perseverant and systematic effort to utilize the multitude of federal programs would produce substantial federal grants to finance the long-term development of the Fayette region.

Founded in late 1969, the Medgar Evers Fund made its first grant to Fayette in 1970. In its first five years, the Fund has expended almost \$800,000 on programs in Mississippi, for the most part in the Fayette region. Of this sum, almost \$750,000 was awarded either as direct grants or in the form of technical support. The bulk of the cash grants served as Fayette's local share towards matching federal grants, often two or three times greater than the local share. As a result of grants made by the Fund alone, between \$6 and \$7 million have been generated in federal and state grants. More than \$1 million in additional grants have been obtained by the town directly, without matching funds, at times with technical aid supplied by the Fund.

Program achievements since 1969 include:

1. Launching of the region's first public medical clinic open to the poor of all races. This has grown to a two-county comprehensive medical and dental program with more than 90 doctors, nurses and other health workers providing a total of 200,000 medical services and 100,000 dental services annually at a cost of \$3,000 a year with dental care;

2. Construction of Mississippi's largest and most comprehensive multi purpose community center, which houses the Head Start, health and dental programs, as well as a modern kitchen and dining facility and offices for social services and civic groups;

3. Initiation of the region's first child day care center;

4. Organization and staffing of an economic development office, which has played a decisive role in attracting more than 500 new jobs, public and private, including a 160 worker automotive parts plant and the county's first modern shopping plaza;

5. A variety of vocational and job training programs, including a Public Service Careers program for more than seventy local men and women, half of whom were previously unemployed and are now completing their training to become municipal staffers;

6. Planning and construction of a multi-faceted, 24-acre recreation park, including a swimming pool, wading pool, and modern and traditional playgrounds, under professional supervision—the first public recreation facility in Mississippi open to all citizens regardless of race;

7. Training and equipping the Fayette police department, which has been transformed into one of the South's best small-town law enforcement agencies;

8. Sponsorship and construction of the town's first low-income housing project, a total of 80 units, for the aged and the poor, which will eradicate most of the slum housing within the city limits of Fayette itself;

9. Financing of an engineering survey which has developed a total plan to revamp and modernize Fayette's water and sewage systems. Part of that plan was implemented in 1974 with Fund grants, but the major features await approval of federal funding with the local share to be matched by the Medgar Evers Fund. (Until recently, federal funding for these purposes had been frozen.)

Concrete changes have taken place in Fayette since 1969. The changes are, however, even more sweeping—they affect the attitudes and living levels of the thousands of people who, until recently, had been locked in a traditional vise of immobility for centuries. The yoke of racial oppression has been cast off by the people of Fayette—*forever*. All of its citizens—black and white—are the better for it. And we have only just begun.

Greetings
from the
Men, Women and Children
of Fayette, Mississippi.
May the New Year bring us all
Peace, Justice and a Better Life

Medgar Evers Fund, Inc.
Hon. Charles Evers, President

Photo by John Messina