



# THE ROAD TO SELMA

Before 1960 Joseph Atlas made his living farming in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana. After 1960 Joseph Atlas had trouble making a living from farming. That year Atlas had testified before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission as to why no blacks were registered to vote in East Carroll. Shortly thereafter, local merchants refused to gin Joseph Atlas's cotton. They also refused to sell him supplies. The merchants were white. Atlas was black.

Ernestine Talbert, a black woman, taught school in Greene County, Mississippi. One day she attempted to register to

*Looking over the Mississippi voter-registration form, 1964*

vote in nearby George County. Shortly afterward, the all-white local school board fired her.

Joseph Atlas and Ernestine Talbert both lived in the part of the South called the Black Belt, an area stretching from southern Virginia to northern Louisiana and southeastern Arkansas.

The Black Belt, originally named for its rich, dark soil, was also the area where the highest percentage of black Southerners lived. It was where black voter registration was the lowest. In 1960 these numbers ranged from 5 percent of voting-age blacks in Mississippi to 37 percent in Arkansas.

Why was black registration so low? After all, blacks did have a constitutional right to vote.



Yet most blacks in the South remained unregistered. This was especially true in the states of the Deep South: Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Here, blacks feared reprisals from the whites who controlled voter registration. Sometimes, opponents of the black vote used economic pressures to prevent blacks from voting. Since most Southern blacks depended economically on whites, the threatened loss of income was often enough to stop them from registering. Joseph Atlas and Ernestine Talbert were the victims of such pressure.

If such measures didn't work, there was always the threat of physical force. Throughout the South, blacks who tried to register often received anonymous death threats. Sometimes these threats were realized. In 1957, bombings and burnings persuaded nine out of ten registered blacks in one Florida county to remove their names from the rolls.

Still, the most effective ways to stop blacks from voting were actually legal. Before 1965 only local registrars could enroll new voters. In the South these officials had almost complete power to determine whether a person had the necessary qualifications to vote.

What were these qualifications? They varied from state to state, from county to county, but the reality was that in the South blacks had a much harder time qualifying than whites.

To keep blacks from registering, some states added a literacy requirement. A potential voter had to satisfy the registrar that he or she could read, write, and understand what was written. In Mississippi a potential voter was required to interpret any section of the state's constitution that the registrar required. If the registrar felt that the person was unable either to read or to understand it, the person would not be registered. Mississippi registrars regularly asked blacks to interpret difficult sections of the constitution. Whites were given the easier questions. Even if a black seemed to understand the section, the registrar nearly always declared that he or she didn't comprehend it. If a white had trouble, the registrar regularly permitted him or her to vote anyway.

The literacy requirements worked very effectively and kept most blacks from even attempting to register. But what about those black people who had managed somehow to register? Could something be done to remove them from the rolls? The