

A CENTURY OF BLACK STRUGGLE

STORY OF JANE PITTMAN

No one may have heard of Jane Pittman a year ago, but now she is famous. "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," presented by CBS on January 31st was one of the most progressive and talked-about shows to come along in many years. A century of the Afro-American liberation struggle was revealed as Jane Pittman told her life story to a reporter.

Jane Pittman was billed as a fictional character, but in fact, her experiences were the collected experiences of thousands of Afro-Americans living between the Civil War and the modern civil rights movement of the 1960's. The film shows, through Jane's eyes, the realities of life in the Black South during that period—the racist attacks and lynchings, and the continuing plantation system, based now on sharecroppers rather than slaves, which tied most Afro-Americans to the soil of the southern states.

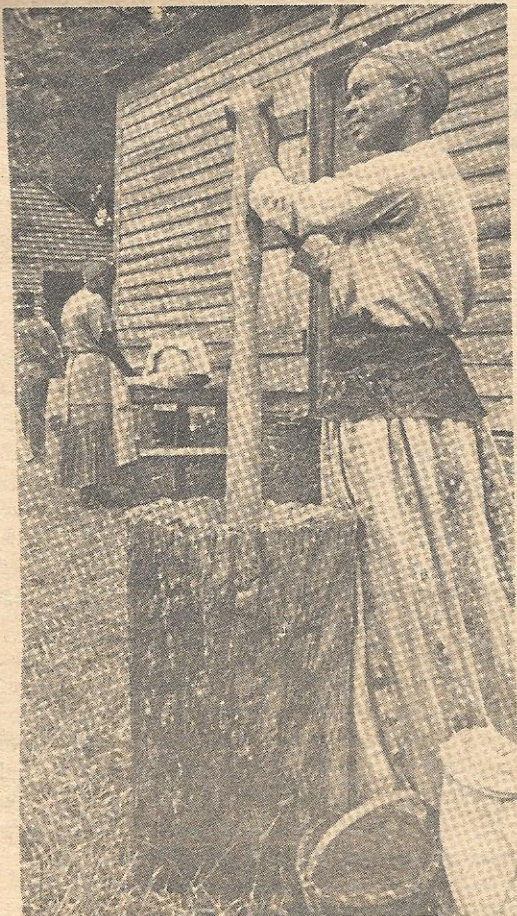
The emphasis of "Miss Jane Pittman" is on the continuing nature of the movement for equality. No specific tendency or period within that movement is thoroughly examined. The film is more a cursory history of the movement as a whole as it developed after the Civil War, through Reconstruction, the Depression, and into the Civil Rights era of the 60's. The film documents the development of organizations for self-defense, educational advancement, civil rights, and political power as they grew within the Afro-American liberation movement. The film points out the gains and setbacks of each period, always emphasizing that the struggle continues.

BABIES BORN

Many leaders are born and killed during the course of Jane's life. Jane tells the reporter that every time a new baby is born, the people ask if he is going to be the leader who sees them through to complete liberation. The point Jane is trying to make is that as long as there is racist oppression, people will struggle against it. No Black child born in this country can escape that oppression. As one leader falls, another fighter takes up the call. For as long as there is oppression there will be leaders and fighters in the liberation movement.

This point is most dramatically emphasized in the last scene of the film. Jimmy, a young activist, returns to the plantation to enlist the help of the people there for the school integration struggle going on in town. He is killed. When Jane hears of his death, she leads the people from the plantation into the town, although the owner has said anyone who goes into town would be thrown off the plantation. Once in town, Jane, with all the slow grace of 110 years, walks past the sheriff and the mayor to drink from the "Whites Only" fountain.

The film does an excellent job of showing how the plantation system stayed intact throughout Jane's 110 years. She was always a farm laborer. With the exception of the small ranch her husband owned part of, Jane always worked with other Blacks for a white man. There are several scenes where the plantation owners call together their Black workers. First one slave owner reads the emancipa-



"Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," documents a hundred years of Afro-American struggle for equality.

tion proclamation to his slaves and finally the owner warns his workers not to go into town where civil rights activists are staging various forms of protest. The scene is the same in each case, emphasizing the continuing oppression of the Black farm laborer.

Jane tries throughout her life to get off the plantation, but is always forced back. As a young freed slave she tries to cross a river on her way north and is refused because she doesn't have a nickel. She goes to work on a plantation to earn the nickel. Twelve years later, she is still at that plantation. Jane's entire life was spent in the rural South, the heartland of the Afro-American struggle. Even today, 50 per cent of the country's Afro-Americans live in the South. During Jane's lifetime the majority of Black Americans were tied to the land. The signs of industry clearly read "whites only." The film attempts to differentiate between the conditions in the North and the South by portraying the North as the Promised Land for Afro-Americans—a place where Black leaders could go to be educated, a place without discrimination. The characters from the North, including a Union soldier and the magazine reporter, are sickeningly paternalistic. This is a major weakness in the film. Any attempt to portray racism as a regional attitude is quickly seen through by the audience. Terrorism, discrimination and other expressions of racism seen in the show are as much a part of life in the North today as they were in the rural south in 1870. Exploitation of Afro-Americans by bosses in factories, service and domestic jobs in the North has historical roots in the plantation system exemplified by the treatment Jane and her friends received from the plantation owners in the South.

"The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" was an excellent document of a hundred years of struggle in the mass movement for racial equality from the viewpoint of a participant. It was both informative and engrossing. CBS is planning to rescreen the show in the fall.