

Rights Group to Probe Texas Farm 'Peonage'

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SAN ANTONIO, Dec. 12—

The U.S. Civil Rights Commission today ordered its staff to check whether Federal statutes had been violated in what was termed "peonage" of striking farm workers in the lower Rio Grande valley.

The order came after testimony charging mass arrests, excessive bonds, and "partiality" shown for growers by law enforcement officers during a 1967 union-organizing drive in the Starr County area.

"This sounds to me very much like peonage," said the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, an acting commission chairman. "... I think it's a very serious situation that ought to be made a Federal case."

Later, Father Hesburgh told reporters that the testimony indicated that Mexican-American farm workers living far below the poverty line, had been "thrown in jail" when they tried to organize, with cash bonds set as high as

\$500—one-third of their annual income. He also pointed to economic pressure, such as refusal of credit, that was applied to the hard-pressed families.

"If this isn't peonage what is peonage?" he asked.

'Involuntary Servitude'

Acting Staff Director Howard A. Glickstein said Federal statutes prohibiting involuntary servitude were passed shortly after the 13th Amendment was adopted. If his legal staff finds grounds for violation of these statutes, he added, the information will be sent to the Justice Department.

If there is no clear violation of existing laws, he said, the Commission could recommend new legislation.

The controversy over the Starr County farm labor dispute has resulted in a complaint filed in Federal District Court by the Texas Council of Churches. The suit accuses several Texas rangers of con-

spiring with farm owners to violate the civil rights of union organizers and sympathizers.

Today, the Rev. Ed Krueger of Tharr, Texas, one of the principals in the case, told of being slapped "with tremendous force" by one Ranger after being arrested during the strike dispute.

Asked to assess the role played by the rangers, Mr. Krueger said "they acted pretty much as strike breakers." He said the Rangers gave advice to the workers to go back to the farm fields, visited the growers, and seemed to stage mass arrests "after some sign of success by the union."

As for his own arrest, the 27-year-old minister testified he started to take a picture of Rangers directing a train loaded with melons "picked by scabs." He said he was standing 100 to 150 feet away from the tracks in Mission, Tex., when Capt. A. Y. Allee, head of the Ranger detachment, came over and said, "Krueger, I'm sick and tired of seeing you around."

The minister said he was grabbed by the seat of his trousers and his shirt collar, and his wife was seized and her camera confiscated after she took a picture of this scene.

Case 17 Months Old

In the police car on the way to the station, the minister said he was slapped by another Ranger. His case—on a charge of trespassing that was later changed to secondary boycott—has not been tried after 17 months, he said.

Capt. Allee and Ranger Jack

Van Cleve have been subpoenaed by the Commission.

Another witness, Jose M. Martinez, a farm worker from the area, said in Spanish of the Rangers:

"The farmers call in the Rangers, and that is why we cannot have a strike."

Arnulfo Guerra, an attorney from Roma, Tex., told the Commission that one of his clients, a millionaire rancher, had shown a willingness to talk to the Union organizers. The result, he said, was that a grower delegation visited the local bank and threatened to withdraw their deposits unless his client resigned as a director.

Later, he added, the rancher found that he had difficulty in buying crates for his vegetables and had to use a third party.

"If a man like this has to bend how can we expect a Mr. Martinez or a Mr. Garcia to be organized?" Guerra asked.