

Poor Marchers Pray for Kennedy at Lincoln Shrine

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They knelt this hot afternoon on the dusty concrete in their shabby, muddy clothes, with sweat on their dark faces, and sang and prayed.

On the plaza at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial they prayed for a friend, and when they finished, they walked back to their stark plywood huts and gathered around the few transistor radios that were available and listened to the news.

For the poor who live in Resurrection City, the campsite for participants in the Poor People's Campaign, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was considered a friend, someone who cared about them, and they reacted to the attempt on his life with bitterness.

"He was for the poor niggers, that's why they shot him," and old Negro woman from Detroit said as she sat with a group at the doorway of her sweltering hut and listened to a small radio.

Word of the shooting came to Resurrection City in the middle of the night. A blaring announcement over the loudspeakers, which usually call the residents to demonstrations, aroused them from their sleep with the news.

The few who had radios listening to the news. Others huddled in groups and talked among themselves.

In the morning, those who had radios kept them near the front of their huts, tuned loudly to share the news. But radios are few in the Poor People's settlement, and most of them had to go about their business caring but not knowing.

In the early afternoon they gathered at the front of the reflecting pool by the Lincoln Memorial for prayer.

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"It's a doggone shame," said a light-skinned woman in a blue-striped dress. "They ain't afraid to kill anyone because they know they can get away it just like they did when they shot Dr. King."

The others nodded their heads in agreement.

"I knew they were going to shoot him," said a short, young Negro man in muddy overalls. "I knew they was going to shoot him, and they are going to do that to anyone that tries to help us poor folks."

There were several hundred at the brief service at the memorial. Many were tourists and Government employes on lunch hour strolls who just dropped by.

The Rev. Ralph David Aber-

nathy, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and leader of the Poor People's Campaign conducted the service.

He read a telegram that he had sent to Senator Kennedy's wife in behalf of the residents of Resurrection City and then he asked those who stood in the hot sun to kneel and pray.

Mr. Abernathy said that his heart was saddened and that he felt sorry "not so much for Senator Kennedy but for my nation." He said that America is in "pitiful shape."

He asked God to "look in on Senator Kennedy" and prayed that "he will be given back to us." But he said that "if he must go, give him peace somewhere."

There were shouts of "Yes, Jesus" and "Yes, oh Lord," as Mr. Abernathy prayed. And there were more when a frail, 68-year-old white woman from Atlanta, Mrs. Lila Washburn, asked in a prayer "that you spare our wonderful Senator Kennedy."

The bitterness that was evident in the camp was noticeable in Mr. Abernathy's remarks, too.

"A nation that will assassinate Medgar Evers in Mississippi, John Fitzgerald Kennedy in Dallas, Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, and then shoot down Senator Kennedy

in California, is a sick nation," he said.

"All of these were young men," Mr. Abernathy continued, "trying to put an end to poverty in America," and then he shouted: "I believe there is a conspiracy going on and we've got to put an end to it or it's going to put an end to this nation."

Although the residents of Resurrection City were hurt, there were few tears. And while they were angry, there was no evidence they would abandon their nonviolent philosophy. But as a precautionary measure the city's policemen were put on 12-hour shifts.

Because there were few radios to listen to and few papers to read, many in the camp spent the afternoon in workshops and at an open meeting of the council that now runs the still muddy campsite.

There were plans initially for a mass march on the offices of the National Rifle Association, which had lobbied against gun control measures. But in the late afternoon, that demonstration was called off without explanation.

Earlier in the day, Hosea Williams, the head of the direct action for the Poor People's Campaign, accused the rifle association of "encouraging this sick nation to go out and get guns."