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### **Defining “Poor” In Peoplestown**

The Muriel Lokey Papers are a collection of documents that are underutilized and represent a period of Atlanta history that is relatively unknown. The collection covers the period roughly from 1970 to 1993, and highlights two organizations, the Poverty Rights Office (PRO) and Emmaus House, that were active in a low-income neighborhood called Peoplestown, located in central Atlanta. The collection also includes copies of the Poor People’s Newspaper (PPN), which was a monthly publication of PRO. In reviewing this collection my goal is to investigate how these organizations and the main characters involved defined being poor in Peoplestown during the timeframe the collection covers and how that definition changed over time.

The PRO is an advocacy organization located in Peoplestown. From PRO’s documentation it is clear that they identify themselves with the poor, using the term “we” when mentioning the inequalities suffered by the people in the neighborhood. PRO also uses the sterile term of “client” when referring to people they help in their factsheet and volunteer manual.<sup>1</sup> In its documentation the PRO also identifies protagonists and antagonists. The protagonists are poor people, the client, and anyone the PRO serves from “anywhere.” The antagonists are government agencies that deal with welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, Social Security, housing, education, and the political infrastructure of

the time, and are all included in “the system.” Through the PRO’s documents, the poor individual is contrasted and pitted against institutions and the system.<sup>2</sup>

The PRO stylized itself as an organization for social change, taking the position that they were advocates for poor people.<sup>3</sup> PRO defined advocacy as going to “bat for our clients” and stated that they should “cause trouble” on behalf of clients, because “changing the system is what we are all about.” PRO also showed itself as an open organization with a great deal of flexibility, writing in its volunteer manual that at any one time, PRO was the “sum total of what the staff wants it to be.”<sup>4</sup>

The Poor People’s Newspaper was a monthly newsletter informing the residents of Peoplestown about poverty related issues and the interrelated subjects of politics and social change. One of the seminal voices of PPN was Ethel Mae Mathews. By her own account Mathews was a single mother, welfare recipient, and activist. At the time of the first issue of the PPN in 1970, Mathews was forty-four years old and had been involved in welfare rights for two years. In that first issue of PPN, Mathews associated the newspaper with the poor by using the article “we” similar to how PRO did in its documents. Different from the PRO documentation, Mathews used a style from the street. Gone was the near clinical style of a manual. Mathews calls on PPN’s readers to be proud to be poor and closed that first newsletter with “BREAD AND JUSTICE FOR ALL!”<sup>5</sup> By the second issue of PPN, Mathews made a clear distinction; poor people had the same rights as “rich folks” and “welfare is a right!”<sup>6</sup> In issue number four, Mathews makes being poor a proper noun by writing “Poor peoples have to help Poor Peoples, because the rich are never concerned with about the Poor.” She alludes to some racial distinction in being poor when speaking of the rights of the poor that to “Black Poor Peoples

freedom is everything.” Mathews recovers the idea that being poor does not have to mean being black as she closed her column with “so let’s all get together and fight for the rights of all Poor Peoples regardless of race or color.”<sup>7</sup>

During the election season of 1974, four years into the printing of PPN, Mathews tone makes a distinct change. She calls the election corrupt and calls politicians in downtown Atlanta “fat cats” and “city fathers.” In the same issue Mathews pits the poor against the middle class, rich, and the politicians; and invokes the proper noun now calling the rich “Rich Peoples.”<sup>8</sup> Seven months later Mathews changes the way she signs her columns to “I live in the struggle”, signaling another transformation in her tone and possibly her personal frustration.<sup>9</sup> In the very next issue of PPN Mathews calls out President Gerald Ford for cutting six million dollars from public welfare programs. She also lists several Georgia politicians including Governor Busbee as being just like Ford. Using a phrase from America’s revolutionary history Mathews tells her readers that “we must tell them, Don’t tread on us!”<sup>10</sup> Two months later, gone is any sense that poor means anything other than being Black and poor as Mathews tells readers that they must keep marching and protesting “until justice is done for all of us who are black and poor.” Mathews almost seems to be calling down supernatural judgment upon Governor Busbee and other city officials as she states that they will be “left in the hands of God.”<sup>11</sup>

In July 1978, the perception was that the political climate to some degree would change in favor of the poor with the election of Maynard Jackson, Atlanta’s first Black mayor and other people of color in positions of power. But for Mathews, the situation harkens back to the days of slavery and Southern reconstruction after the American Civil War, as she essential calls the new Black politicians Uncle Toms. Mathews states that

even though Blacks hold positions in Atlanta that are highly visible, that “in reality these positions are “white roles” that hide the people that are in real power” – the whites.<sup>12</sup>

Exactly one year later, without explanation, Ethel Mae Mathews writes her lasts words in the collection. She states that she wants “all Black people to understand” that it is the “system” that has perpetrated a crime against them. She states that poor Whites and Blacks are victims, but “the Blacks especially.”<sup>13</sup>

Emmaus House was and is an outreach of the Episcopal Church in Peoplestown. By their own claim their interest is in social change by involvement in the political scene and activism. During the time period of the collection Emmaus House sought to partner with existing community organizations, which they did with PRO, or to create new organizations as the need came up. Emmaus House desired to “live as neighbors” in the community of Peoplestown, and to “become part of its total life.” In a much different approach from PRO or the writings of Ethel Mae Mathews in PPN, Emmaus House wanted to turn the strangers of Peoplestown into “brothers.”<sup>14</sup> In an earlier letter from Frances F. Pauley of Emmaus House, she states that “it has NOT been a good ten years for poor people.”<sup>15</sup> Later letters do not seem to paint the picture as getting much better. In a letter dated in 1981, Pauley blames the political climate with the start of the letter listing the ailments under which the community is suffering, “Reganonmics, Busbeeitis, evictions, hunger, cold fear, sickness and death,” before harking back to the activism of the 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

From the perspective of PRO, they defined the poor as clients and associated themselves in that group by using the article “we”. Ethel Mae Mathews writing in the PPN began by defining the poor as “we poor people” regardless of race and color. Over

time however her tone and definition changed from “Poor Peoples” to “Blacks.” She also began to pit a system run by whites against poor Blacks. Even after people of color gained positions of power in Atlanta, Mathews called them Uncle Toms. Emmaus House, through the brief amount documented about them in the collection seems to be the most consistent in its view of Peoplestown. Through its outreach programs Emmaus House did become part of community life. They made friends and brothers of the people of Peoplestown. Ethel Mae Mathews may have changed her definition of what it meant to be poor in Peoplestown. She may have had good cause. Her perspective was different and unique from others around her. Mathews’ real view on being poor may best be summed up in one of her earliest columns when she wrote; “we do not want our children to become welfare recipients in the future as we have become.”<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “Poverty Rights Office Fact Sheet,” folder 1, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, and “Poverty Rights Office Volunteer Manual,” folder 3, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Poverty Rights Office Flyer,” folder 1, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>4</sup> “Poverty Right Office Volunteer Manual,” folder 3, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>5</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, c. 1970,” folder 4, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>6</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, Volume 1, Number 2, September 11, 1970,” folder 4, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>7</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, Volume 1, Number 4, December 11, 1970,” folder 4, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>8</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, Volume 4, Number 10, November 1974,” folder 4, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>9</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, Volume 5, Number 7, November 1975,” folder 4, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>10</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, Volume 5, Number 8, November 1975,” folder 4, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>11</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, Volume 5, Number 11, December 1975,” folder 4, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

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<sup>12</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, Volume 8, Number 7, July 1978,” folder 5, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>13</sup> “Poor Peoples Newspaper, Volume 9, Number 9, July 1979,” folder 5, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>14</sup> “Emmaus House: A Brief Description, June 1982,” folder 8, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>15</sup> Frances F. Pauley, Letter, April 15, 1978,” folder 14 box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>16</sup> Frances F. Pauley, Letter, November 1981,” folder 12, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

<sup>17</sup> “Poor People’s Newspaper, Volume 1, Number 3, October 1970,” folder 4, box 1, MSS 967 Muriel Lokey Papers, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.