

Oh Freedom PRE/POSTviewing Considerations:

Owen Whitfield is a key player in this event.
Identify 3 or more external traits observed in the video

Identify 3 or more internal/character/personality traits observed in the video

What makes Thad Snow such an intriguing person?

Who are some other people who made an impression on you?

What was the role of the media in this event? How would it be different or the same if they were covering the event today?

How was the federal government involved before, during & after the protest? State government? Local businessmen?

CONFRONTATION AT THE CROSSROADS
a reporter's notebook

Cast

Conductor	Woman 1
Boy	Woman 2
Reporter	Woman 3
Thad Snow	Man 1
Owen Whitfield	Man 2
Church Congregation	

Scene 1

A Train Station, Sikeston, Missouri

Conductor's Voice (along with the clink of the bell of a steam locomotive) *drawing out his syllables* B-O-A-R-D! ALL A-B-O-A-R-D! St. Louis train leavin' in 5 minutes. ALL A-B-O-A-R-D!

A shoe shine boy is sitting by his stand, looking for a customer. In walks a young man, a professional. His suit is clean, but obviously well worn. He is looking for somebody.

Boy Hey mister, shine your shoes. Give you the finest shine in the Bootheel! Only cost you a nickel.

Reporter A nickel!

Boy Man's gotta make a living, mister.

Reporter chuckles at this I suppose you're right. Okay, shine me up.

Boy You bet! Just have a seat.

The reporter sits in the chair and puts a foot up on the shine box. The boy starts working on the shoe with a strip of fabric.

Reporter *after a few moments* How old are you, son?

Boy *talks while working on the shoe* Ten. But I'm gonna be eleven soon.

Reporter That old? What about your folks? Where's your momma and poppa? What do they do?

Boy You sure ask a lot of questions.

Reporter *chuckles* Guess you could say that. Questions are my job. I'm a writer--for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Boy *stops working* You're a reporter! What're doin' in Sikeston?

Reporter Meeting somebody. *after a pause* You never answered my questions. What's with your folks?

Boy Ain't got none. They died a little more than a year ago.

Reporter Sorry.

Boy Don't worry 'bout it. Switch feet. *The reporter switches feet. The boy goes back to work on the shoe.* They was sharecroppers.

Reporter That so. That's hard work, tough life.

Boy *working all the while* It's no life. Work like the devil only to be kicked off the farm. Cause the boss said the government told us he had to plow under 'bout half of his crop. "Sorry, no cotton, no work", he told us. Ma and Pa scroungin' for day labor. Most of the time there was none. Lots of people beggin' for the same work. No place to go to out of the cold. No wonder they got so sick. Wasn't much of a Thanksgiving, that's for sure.

Reporter So that's why you shine shoes now instead.

Boy It's better'n nothin'. And it beats workin' like a slave for someone who just kicks you out into the cold when he's done with you. Beats sleepin' in the ditch. Anyhow. Who're you meeting, anyway?

Reporter Ever hear of a guy named Snow, Thad Snow?

Boy Yeah. He's a land boss, over by Charleston.

Reporter What else do you know about him?

Boy Nothin' much. He is kinda' peculiar, though.

Reporter What's that mean?

Boy Folks say he does things his own way. Doesn't care much what anybody thinks. Never heard a cropper say anything against him, though. That says somethin'.

In walks Thad Snow, looking around. He eventually walks up to the Reporter.

Reporter Yeah. I suppose it does.

Boy Well, you're all done. That'll be five cents.

Reporter *paying the boy* Nice job. Here you go.

Boy Thanks. seeing Snow approaching Hey mister, shine your shoes. Give you the finest shine in the Bootheel! Only cost you a nickel.

Snow No thanks kid. No time. *reaching in his pocket* But here's a penny for your trouble. He flips the kid a coin.

Boy Thanks, mister. *He moves off.*

Snow *to the Reporter* You with the paper?

Reporter St. Louis Post-Dispatch! You Thad Snow?

Snow That's me. Come on. I'm going to take you somewhere. Got somebody you have to talk to.

Reporter Where're we going? Who's the mystery person?

Snow You're going to meet the Reverend Owen Whitfield. We're going to church.

Before he has a chance to respond, Snow takes him by the arm and they exit the station.

Conductor's Voice (along with the clink of the bell of a steam locomotive) *drawing out his syllables* B-O-A-R-D! ALL A-B-O-A-R-D! Last call for the St. Louis train. ALL A-B-O-A-R-D!

Scene 2 A Church

We hear strains (live or tape) of a spiritual, like Go Down Moses, being sung. Snow & the Reporter enter during the song and take a seat in the back. Snow points to the front at Owen Whitfield, who is about to talk. The reporter takes out his pad and pencil. Snow looks on pleased as the reporter feverishly takes down Whitfield's words--clearly spellbound by the passion and the message.

Whitfield *moving around, working the room as he speaks--the congregation responds fervently to his questions and suggestions* I'm here to tell you brothers no more pie in the sky. Take your eyes out of the sky, cause somebody might be stealing your bread. Did you hear what I said?

Now, how many of you all got notice to move? And how many of you all got a place to go? Well, that's why we're here. If we gonna starve, let's starve together. If we gonna starve, let's starve out there. If we gonna starve, let's starve where people can see us.

Now, what does the Bible tell us? It tells us that Moses gotten down to the Red Sea and they made camp there. But here come old boss Pharaoh and his ridin' bosses in their chariots. And Moses raised his hand and the waters parted and the children of Israel walked across on dry land. And then when they got across, he raised his hands again and the waters came down on those old ridin' bosses. Well, that's what we're gonna do. We got to make our own Exodus. It's history repeatin' itself in 1939.

Music starts up again--Go Down Moses. Whitfield walks to the back of the church and whispers something to Thad Snow. Snow nudges the Reporter. They get up and follow Whitfield out of the church. End of Scene 2

Scene 3 Outside the Church

Snow, Whitfield & the Reporter are in a serious conversation.

Snow Owen Whitfield, this gentleman is with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Whitfield Now, why'd you go and invite the paper in on this. You know how important this is.

Snow I invited him because it's so important. Whit, what you're talking about doing--lining the highways with whole families in protest--this has never been done before. You're going to need all the support you can get. You've got to get your message out to as many people as possible.

Whitfield I can appreciate that, but the paper. They might get it all wrong and then we're worse off for their interference. There's too much at risk here.

Reporter Reverend Whitfield, let me assure you I will represent you and your cause in the best possible light.

Whitfield Son, I'm sure you mean well. But I've seen how good intentions can be twisted around and good people get hurt. Thad, you know what I mean. You yourself let us use your property to meet and organize the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union. And when we went to join up with the CIO, and the press got a hold of that, everyone started yellin' "Communist". And good people were dragged off and beat up. Some of us were even killed. The stakes are too high. This must succeed.

Snow Whit, you're right. I only wanted to help. A good story, done just so could bring your message to people all across the country. But if you feel it would jeopardize things, I'm afraid this can't go to the papers. Not yet, anyhow.

Reporter Reverend Whitfield, I'm with Thad Snow, here. I respect what you are trying to do and would not want anything to get in the way. I can only tell you that I want to write this story when you are ready to let it be read.

Snow We'll let you get back to your people.

Whitfield *clearly fighting an inner battle* Thank you. *He turns and starts to walk away. Snow & the Reporter turn to leave in the opposite direction. Wait!*

Snow & the Reporter turn back

Reporter Reverend Whitfield?

Whitfield If I let you print this story now, you'd better get it right!

Reporter You have my word.

Whitfield All right, then. Let's talk

Snow You're making the right choice.

The three men come together. End of Scene 3

Scene 4

The Reporter, back at his desk

Reporter *thinking out loud, referring to his notes, addresses audience* January 10, 1939. What we have here is an event of major historical proportion. Sharecroppers, both black and white--together, leaving behind what little shelter they could find in their shacks, to line the intersection of highways 60 & 61. A human cross of suffering for all passers-by to see. I like how Thad Snow put it--

Snow's voice I could scarcely believe my ears. My imagination refused to picture women taking their small children to shelterless roadsides in midJanuary. It was beyond my belief that those people would willingly expose themselves to so much suffering and danger--but Whit had me half convinced.

Reporter If I have anything to say about it, every reader in St. Louis--and beyond, will bear witness to the plight of these poor people, just as if they were driving highway 60

or 61 themselves. As soon as I put the story to bed, I promised Snow & Whitfield I'd return to speak with the protestors themselves.

He gathers his supplies and gets up to leave. End of Scene 4

Scene 5

The Crossroads of Highways 60 & 61

The reporter is writing down the comments we hear from people lining the highway.

Woman 1 *holding a small child* Well, they're gettin' six bits to a dollar a day and we can't make an honest, decent living at it. And that's the reason we're out here on Highway 61 right today.

Man 1 *with his wife and child* One hundred and thirty-two families on this highway. Harmless people. And the only thing they want is shelter and food and a decent place to live.

Reporter What about the federal money? I heard that the Roosevelt people sent money to the land owners to be shared with the sharecroppers.

Man 1 I ain't seen a penny of that money. How 'bout it? Any of you seen any government money?

Man 2 Not me.

Woman 1 Me neither.

Reporter *to another woman* It's rather courageous of you to be out here in the dead of winter. Maybe even more so since here you are, black & white, together.

Woman 2 Don't you see? We're held by the same chains. We're dealing with the same people. The same system is oppressing us both. If we separate, into black and white, that's the problem we've been dealing with all along. We're being separated when we should be together.

Reporter How can you bear it out here in the cold. Everyone is so orderly, so well behaved. How do you keep your spirits up?

Woman 3 Oh, we're doing all right. We got Reverend Whitfield givin' us hope. He set up leaders to remind us to hold our tongues and keep our peace. He told us all to be on our best so people could see our goodness shining right along next to our need, here on this stretch of road.

Reporter Where is Reverend Whitfield now? I heard he was walking among the families.

Man 2 You haven't heard the latest. He's gone into hiding. They're puttin' up posters with his picture, offerin' reward money for his capture.

Woman 2 He didn't want to go either. He said his place was with us.

Woman 3 But he's got his family to think of too. They say his children are cryin', 'fraid their daddy's gonna get taken away and killed.

Woman 1 'Sides, it don't matter where he goes. He's here. He's here with all of us. We got his words inside our hearts and we're gonna be all right.

End of Scene 5

Scene 6

The Reporter, back at his desk

Reporter *addressing audience* Desperate times require desperate measures. It's almost a week now, and the sharecropper families still line the roads. The weather has taken a turn for the worse--it's been snowing. And you'd think this would dampen their spirits and send them in search of shelter. But no, even more families have shown up to join the ranks. In spite of the abuse of drunken motorists, they are holding strong, keeping the faith, not giving into despair. Some kind souls are shipping in warm coats and food. But they can only provide a small portion of what these people need. I wonder how long they can hold out. I doubt I could survive out there even this long myself.

Rumor has it Governor Stark will take action to break up the protest. He better be careful how he handles this. It has attracted a lot of attention. Even Eleanor Roosevelt herself is supposedly going to write about the protest and the needs of these people. Maybe the President will intervene. I hope Reverend Whitfield and his family are safe. I hope they can come out of hiding soon.

We'll all just have to wait and see how all this turns out. This is one reporter who can only hope for the best.

by Greg Weiss

with credit to Lynn Rubright & OH FREEDOM AFTER WHILE

for facts, ideas & some dialogue

'2000

Create a television talk show episode

Select your characters/guests from the list below:

- a. Owen Whitfield
- b. Thad Snow
- c. Newspaper Reporter
- d. A Land Owner
- e. A Federal Government Agent
- f. Family of Protestors
- g. Others?

Include also a host, audience questions, "theme" for the show

Focus on issues raised in the video documentary

Work for equal participation

Structure with beginning, middle/high point, resolution

Be sure "good taste" prevails--Oprah is okay, Jerry is NOT

Time limit: 4 minute minimum

Your evaluation will be based on the above criteria, as well as quality performance standards

Create a television commercial

You will be promoting a future television airing of OH FREEDOM AFTER WHILE

Select your characters from the actual historical figures (named or unnamed) mentioned or seen in the video documentary:

Owen Whitfield, Thad Snow, other members of the Whitfield family, other land owners, individual protestors, government officials...

Include a narrator/spokesperson who will create a through-line for your commercial

Focus on issues raised in the video documentary

Work for equal participation

Structure with a build to a high point--cliff hanger (don't give away the ending, peak our interest)

Time limit: 2 minute minimum

Your evaluation will be based on the above criteria, as well as quality performance standards

Create a scene/roleplay

Select one of the following situations:

- a. students at Lincoln University involving their decision to assist the sharecroppers who were removed to the spillway
- b. a newspaper reporter and a family on the highway (the protest lasted approximated 8 days along the highway until the Governor of Missouri had a health inspector present a rationale to clear the roadsides of Highways 60 & 61-- then many were removed to "concentration camps" on the spillway)
- c. Owen Whitfield & Red Cross representative (they refused to assist the "man made disaster")
- d. Two children in their shack home the night prior to the strike (Consider: What is your home life like? Your house--with paper plastered to the walls to keep out the wind. What was Christmas like for your family this year? What possessions do you have? What will you bring to the picket lines? What will be your "comfort object"? Do you have a pet? What have your parents told you about the strike?)
- e. the Whitfield children (Barbara, Shirley, Josie...) and their parents (Owen & Zella) after the threats have been made against Owen (reward posters...)
- f. Whitfield and other sharecroppers at a "unionizing" meeting of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union
- g. Thad Snow & Owen Whitfield--Owen presents the idea to Thad about the protest ("I could scarcely believe my ears. My imagination refused to picture women taking their small children to shelterless roadsides in mid January. It was beyond my belief that those people would willingly expose themselves to so much suffering and danger--but Whit had me half convinced.")
- h. People/situation of you own choosing (clear with the teacher first)

Work for equal participation

Structure with beginning, middle/high point, resolution

Time limit: 2 minute minimum

Your evaluation will based on the above criteria, as well as quality performance standards

Create a newsreel

A newsreel was a short movie which played in the theatres prior to the feature presentation in which a current event was covered in a way similar to 20/20 or 60 Minutes. This was pre-television. You saw partial examples in the video documentary, OH FREEDOM AFTER WHILE

Select your characters from the list below:

- a. Owen Whitfield
- b. Thad Snow
- c. Newspaper Reporter
- d. A Land Owner
- e. A Federal Government Agent
- f. Family of Protestors
- g. Others?

Include a narrator

Focus on issues raised in the video documentary

Work for equal participation

Structure with beginning, middle/high point, resolution

Option: You may select to perform this live or to present a videotaped performance

Time limit: 4 minute minimum

Your evaluation will be based on the above criteria, as well as quality performance standards

Other ideas:

A. Solo Performance

a. Living History Museum/Civil Rights Hall of Fame

1. select character, research
2. costume
3. script
4. present

b. Create a Music/Poetry presentation*

1. focus--character(s), issues
2. further reading/research
3. select music/poetry
4. create original music/poetry
5. title/theme for presentation

*This could be solo or partner or group

B. Compare/Contrast

a. Harlan County USA (video documentary)

1. 1939 vs. 1976
2. sharecropping vs. coal mining
3. racial issues
4. governmental intervention
5. role of unions
6. role of music
7. role of religion

b. a fictional work (i.e.--MATEWAN, GERMINAL)

C. What is or what could be the event in the year 200_?

Create a speech in which you give a rationale for a Bootheel Strike type of event which has occurred or might occur in the future.

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Oh Freedom After While Interdisciplinary Unit
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Credit:

All materials contained in this interdisciplinary unit were created by Greg Weiss, to be used in conjunction with the videotape, OH FREEDOM AFTER WHILE (produced by Candace O'Connor, Steven J. Ross, and Lynn Rubright)

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