

Oh Freedom After While

Reader's Theater

By Lynn Rubright

Narrator:

January 8, 1939. Sikeston, Missouri. In a small church, Rev. Owen Whitfield has called a meeting of Southern Tenant Farmers Union members. Whitfield encourages STFU members, black and white together, to walk out onto highway 61 to protest deplorable farm labor conditions and unfair treatment of sharecroppers.

All sing:

**Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom,
Oh Freedom after while
And before I'll be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
Take my place with those who loved and fought before.**

Owen Whitfield: (dramatically in his preaching style)

**The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heaven have nests,
but the son of man hath no where to lay his head.**

All: Uh-huh!

Owen Whitfield: How many you all got eviction notices to move off your farms?

All: Me preacher. I got one. I got one, too, brother preacher.

Owen Whitfield: And how many you people got a place to live?

**All: We ain't got no place. We ain't got no place to live!
No place to go!**

Owen Whitfield:

And that's why we're here. Let us all bear our burdens together. Let us make our plans.

**All: Where we gonna go? 61 highway! That's where we'll go!
We can take our furnish and clutter out on the road.**

Owen Whitfield: Suppose it be a raining?

All: (shouting) It ain't gonna rain!

Owen Whitfield: But suppose it be a snowing!

All: (more quietly) We'll be all right. It ain't gonna snow!

Owen Whitfield: But suppose it be a hailing and a lightning?

All: (shouting) We goin' anyway. Yea, we goin' anyway!

Owen Whitfield: Then we a goin'. All together. We're gonna make an exodus, like the children of Israel. Remember, Moses got 'em to the Red Sea.

All: Yes sir! We' goin'. All together, we' gonin'.

Owen Whitfield:

That's right. But there came old boss Pharaoh's riding horses in their chariots. And Moses raised his right hand and the waters parted, and the children of Israel walked across the dry land!

All: Yes Lord.

Owen Whitfield: We must make an exodus. It's like history repeating itself in 1939.

All:

**That's right! We must make an exodus out onto highway 61.
Come rain, snow, hail or lightning, we will go.**

All: singing:

Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom,

Oh Freedom After While.

And before I'll be a slave,

I'll be buried in my grave,

Take my place with those who loved and fought before.

Narrator one:

This text is taken from Sam Armstrong's page one article in the St. Louis Post Dispatch, Sunday, January 8, 1939. It is based on reporter Sam Armstrong's listening to Rev. Owen Whitfield addressing black and white Southern Tenant Farmer's Union members at a Sikeston, Missouri, church on Saturday, January 7.

Narrator two:

Under the leadership of Rev. Whitfield, the sharecropping union members and their families walked out onto U.S. highways 60 – 61 in the bootheel of Southeast Missouri to protest unfair farm labor practices.

This historic Sharecropper Protest took place on Tuesday January 10, and was documented in newspapers across the country.

Primary Source:

St. Louis Post Dispatch, Sunday, January 8, 1939, page one eye witness account of the STFU meeting at a Sikeston church by reporter Sam B. Armstrong.

Headline:

SHARECROPPERS, ORDERED EVICTED TO CAMP ON ROAD

Mass Exodus From Homes of 1700 Southeast Missouri Workers Arranged for Tuesday

‘MAKE NO TROUBLE’ LEADER TELLS THEM

**Mass Exodus from Homes of 1700 Southeast Missouri
Workers Arranged for Tuesday**

Make No Trouble', Leader Tells them