

## Winston County farmhouse to see

# Saint Marcus

(In February, Marcus A. Gober, custodian of Camp McDowell for two decades, died. The following account of the author's last visit with him is offered in gratitude for a very special life.)

BY DOUG CARPENTER

I hesitated on the slanting stoop with the hot Alabama sun engulfing me in a timelessness reminiscent of childhood summers. The smell of rotting wood and hot earth and the sound of wind through pines brought a felling of eternity into the farmyard.

My foot jogged down onto swept sand, and I realized again that the old man I was leaving brought the same feeling as the sun and the earth and the pines — a feeling of timelessness.

I had come down the dusty road to see Marcus Gober out of a sense of duty to a dying man, but the visit turned into a spiritual pilgrimage. Mrs. Gober had shown me into a sparsely furnished room, moved a cat from a wooden rocker, and retired to take my four children to pick beans in the garden.

His gauntness stunned me. His shrunken frame was smaller than I had remembered it, and his eyes were buried deep in the sun-abused face. Red hair had turned to white, and the steel rimmed glasses were now laid aside, marking a page in a well-worn Bible. Pain crossed his brow as he struggled to turn his head. Calm blue eyes met mine, and the sound of his familiar voice cut through the sickness and through my fear for his life.

"D-D-Douglas."

He had always stuttered. Poverty and abuse had left early and deep scars. The exhausted soil of the Gobers' small Winston County farm had forced young Marcus to grub for coal on his belly with a claw hammer in the hazardous mines that opened not far from his home. There had been no time for childhood, but he had somehow learned early that the human will can take the place of missed meals and the luxury of health.

Scott Eppes had hired Mr. Gober in 1947 to be straw boss for a group of teenagers who volunteered to begin building Camp McDowell. I first met him on the other end of a crosscut saw and felt sorry for him. He was ugly, and his scrawny body looked older than his fifty-five years. But forty years my senior and thirty five pounds lighter he outlasted me and then another teenager on that crosscut saw, and my opinion began to change abruptly.

Our jokes about his remarkable resemblance to Dick Tracy's friend, B. O. Plenty, quickly ended as he began to teach us about will and endurance and commitment and about the earth and the woods and the rhythm of nature. Nor did we realize what impact he was uncsciously having on our lives until reflecting later we placed him above college professors, clergymen and statesmen when evaluating who had influenced us most for good. Others had offered a bit of well ordered reason. He showed us a well ordered life.

One hot afternoon we had been asking him questions as we dug pipe lines. Suddenly he turned with anger in his face. We were stunned.

"You c-c-college boys th-th-think it's funny to ba-bait me 'cause I ne-never finished grade school."

There were tears on his emaciated cheeks as he turned to walk off alone.

We recovered in time to say in all honesty, "No. We're asking because you do know answers that we haven't found before."

He turned in disbelief, looking for a moment pathetic in his tattered overalls. Then we made him believe us. We had to, because we needed him. And he shared with us some more of his life.

After coal mining from dawn until dark, and often after dark in winter, he had gone to Mobile to work in the ship yards. When he was needed back home he returned to eke out a meager subsistence on the farm. And not a night passed that he didn't have either an encyclopedia or the Bible in his hands, making up for the lost formal education.

My attention was brought back to the sick bed.



MARCUS GOBER