

The Lie of Voter Fraud

IN THE YEARS following the passage of the VRA, key segments in the criminal justice and political system insisted that the real voting violators were not the states but black people. Alabama civil rights attorney Hank Sanders had witnessed this vicious scenario play out. Whenever blacks won political office or started to assert their voting rights, he remarked, the prosecutor's office would launch an extensive investigation. This move had but one purpose: intimidation.

"Every time people start investigating you," he explained, "you start drawing back and decide no matter how right you are to leave that alone," because if you don't, the criminal justice system will rip you apart for simply exercising your voting rights. People in Pickens County, Alabama, learned that all too well after county elections in 1978.

Julia Wilder, a black woman who was president of the Pickens County Voters League and an officer of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), had been hard at work to make the Voting Rights Act viable in rural Alabama. By the late 1970s, no black American had ever been elected to county office in Pickens, a county that was 42 percent black.

Joining Wilder, then in her

sixties, was Maggie Bozeman, a black woman and president of the local NAACP. For the 1978 county elections, Wilder and Bozeman collected absentee ballots from more than three dozen elderly black people, had those forms certified as valid by a notary, then sent them to the Board of Elections.

Enter Sophie Spann.

On Election Day 1978, this black woman went down to the local grocery store to cast her vote but was turned away. An election official told Sophie Spann that she had already voted.

Absentee.

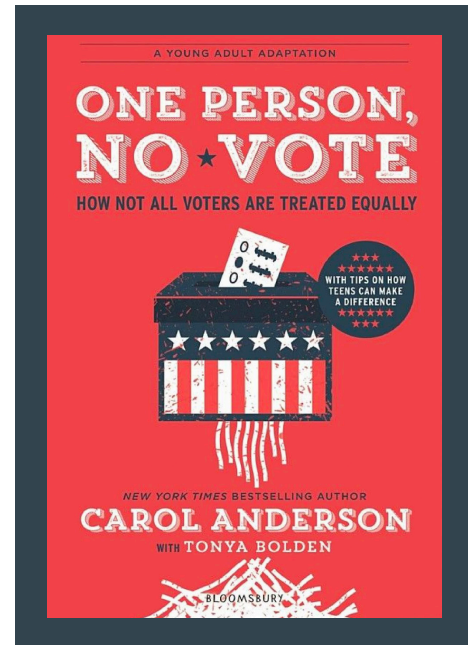
That set off an investigation by the Pickens County district attorney followed by a tumultuous, haphazard trial that was so riddled with holes and contradictions that the appeals court labeled the key witnesses' testimony "confusing," "conflicting," and an indecipherable "hodgepodge."

Of the original and alleged thirteen "victims," the only one who remained steadfast in insisting that her vote was stolen was Sophie Spann, who just happened, wrote one journalist, to have "reared the sheriff's deputy and son-in-law" and who was brought lunch by the sheriff personally before she took the stand. Based on Spann's testimony alone, Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman

were found guilty by an all-white jury. The verdict was upheld by the appeals court.

In January 1982, Bozeman, then fifty-one, received a four-year prison sentence. Wilder, sixty-nine, got hit with the maximum, five years. "The sentences are believed to be the stiffest ever given in an Alabama voting fraud case," reported the *Washington Post*.

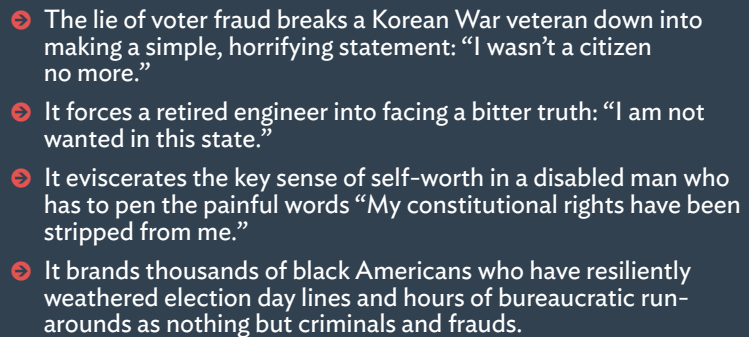
The two activists deemed troublemakers by the white power structure had pushed for and won better wages for sanitation workers and to have roads paved in black neighborhoods. And their commitment to black voting rights was unshakable. For example, if it meant giving someone her last fifty cents "to get to the polls," that's what Wilder was going to do. If it meant teaching a civics lesson to those who had been beaten



down for so long that they didn't think their vote mattered, she had no problem with that, either.

For many in the black community, the district attorney going after Bozeman and Wilder was nothing but retribution "for trying to make democracy work." The sheriff disagreed vigorously. There was no need for what Wilder and Bozeman did. Blacks had it good in Pickens County. "We have a policy of not beating 'em," he bragged. "We treat 'em right. We don't run over 'em just because they are black."

In the end, a measure of mercy prevailed for Wilder and Bozeman—that is, after protests on their behalf. "The women spent less than two weeks at an Alabama prison before they were transferred to special work release assignments and permitted to live in a private home in heavily black-populated Macon County, some 200 miles from their home," reported the United Press International (UPI) news agency on November 10, 1982. "Mrs. Bozeman taught classes at a mental health center in the Tuskegee work release program and will teach at a school in Sumter County, adjacent to her home county, while she is on parole. Mrs. Wilder, a quiet, frail woman, worked at a senior citizens center in her work release assignment."

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- The lie of voter fraud breaks a Korean War veteran down into making a simple, horrifying statement: "I wasn't a citizen no more."
 - It forces a retired engineer into facing a bitter truth: "I am not wanted in this state."
 - It eviscerates the key sense of self-worth in a disabled man who has to pen the painful words "My constitutional rights have been stripped from me."
 - It brands thousands of black Americans who have resiliently weathered election day lines and hours of bureaucratic run-arounds as nothing but criminals and frauds.