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The One-Town Skirmish

"What is the 1952 version of the old-fashioned Christmas story?" wired TIME Correspondent John McCormally from Kansas. "Isn't the story basically the same—charity? Not just the rich being charitable to the poor, but the free giving a hand to the struggling, the confident reassuring the doubtful? Isn't it a whole people being measured up?"

At Christmas time a year ago, McPherson, Kans. (pop. 9,000) was unshakable in the certainty that it was a satisfied, solid, respectable U.S. community. The county seat of a prosperous, diversified farming area on the eastern edge of the wheat belt, it had never known depression. In the 1930's, it discovered oil, avoided a raucous boom, and managed to build a conservative prosperity around the big Bay Petroleum and National Co-op refineries. On the cultural side, McPherson could count two small colleges: the Methodists' Central College and the Church of the Brethren's McPherson College.

Then early last fall, McPherson became aware that **a group of African students had arrived at the colleges on missionary scholarships**. Central College enrolled Augustine Njoku-Obi, 22, an ebony-black graduate of a Nigerian mission school. McPherson College took in six other Africans: James Craig, 25, a half-Scots Nigerian who wanted to be an agricultural missionary; **Joseph Obi, 26, a onetime math teacher in a mission high school (who soon topped McPherson's honor roll)**; Isaac Grille, 21, a surveyor aiming for a degree in civil engineering; Daniel Onyema, 28, an accountant who wanted to be an electrical engineer; Emanuel Thompson, 24, a pharmacist studying to be an orthopedic surgeon; Elijah Odo-kara, 21, a railway telegrapher who was taking a premedical course.

Odokara had come to the U.S. in spite of warnings from his father, 97-year-old ceremonial leader of the idol-worshiping Omenani religion. "Christians," scoffed the father, "don't practice what they preach."

Flight by Night. Like most Midwestern towns, McPherson was unaware that it had a segregation problem: before the students arrived from Africa, it counted only 23 Negroes inside the city limits, and they managed pretty well to keep out of the way. So when Nigerian James Craig went into a barbershop for his first U.S. haircut, the barber sputtered uncertainly, then announced that he could not cut a Negro's hair. Said Craig later: "I told him I was half-Scotch. I asked him if he would give me half a haircut. He asked me to leave." Augustine Njoku-Obi got a job in a laundry, discovered that he was being paid only half as much as the whites next to him. The first time the boys went to the movies, they were hustled upstairs to the balcony.

Joe Obi, the ex-math teacher, went one evening into a downtown cafe and sat down at the counter. The counterman told Joe he would have to eat in the kitchen. "I was awfully hungry," Joe said later, "so I went back there to the kitchen. They put me at a little table near the sink. The dishwasher splashed soapy water on my food, and someone started to sweep the floor and made a dust cloud." Joe was terrified. He plunked down the price of his meal, dashed out through the front door, and ran without stopping all the mile and a half back to the college.

"This Made Me Scared." The boys were unprepared for another Midwestern phenomenon: winter. At the first cold snap, McPherson College telephoned around town to line up some warm clothes.

One of the first calls went to a loyal McPherson alumna, Rozella Switzer, the town's Democratic postmistress. Rozella, a widow in her 40's, runs an efficient post office, smokes Pall Malls, drinks an occasional bourbon & coke, likes politics and people. She was curious about the African students and invited them over. Two nights later they sat comfortably around her living room, sipping coffee, browsing through her books, listening to her records—and talking.

What they said was an earful. Nigeria, they told Rozella, is surging toward its own nationalism. "We are struggling for independence," Isaac Grillo explained. "We won't stop. That is why we want education—to help with the revolution."

They told about their Nigerian friends who study in Communist countries, come back home "with plenty of money for political activity" and hot with praise for the Communists. They read Rozella an editorial from the West African Pilot, written by their hero, Nnamdi Azikiwe, known as "Zik." Zik, they said, is a nonCommunist, but he hates the U.S. for its segregation, and writes that Communism is the form of government most likely "to ensure equality of freedom to all peoples."

As Rozella told the story: "Discrimination always makes me mad. But this was different. This made me scared. All they knew about America was what they knew about McPherson. For the first time I really saw how important little things, a long way off, can be. We had to fight a one-town skirmish away out here in the middle of the United States."

"Are You Nuts?" Next morning Rozella was on the telephone to Luther Palmer, the manager of the C. R. Anthony Department Store. "Luther," she said, "would you spend 50 bucks to help stop a war that's going to cost billions?" "Are you nuts?" snapped Luther. Replied Rozella: "We've got a chance to whip some Communists, and all we have to do is act like Christians." She urged Luther to "act" by kicking in for winter clothes. In some bewilderment he agreed. Then Rozella called up other merchants—J. C. McDonnell Co., J. C. Penney, Morris & Sons—and told them what Luther was doing. Next day the four merchants outfitted each of the seven students with a new suit, overcoat and gloves.

In the following weeks Rozella moved through McPherson as relentlessly as a combine, trying to straighten things out for the Nigerians. She ran into trouble. Shorty the barber agreed to cut the boys' hair, but other barbers began spreading the word that "Shorty is cutting niggers' hair." Said Shorty sadly: "It hurt my business. Even some preachers told me I was doing the wrong thing." One minister warned Rozella: "We must be careful we're not called Communists."

When Rozella heard that some of the local American Legionnaires were muttering about her crusade, she buttonholed a Legion official and said: "I'm going to make a decent guy out of you if it takes all next year."

New Measurement. **Last week** the Nigerians—some of them in native costume—went caroling with the other college students, wound up at Rozella's house to help her decorate the Christmas tree. Elsewhere in McPherson there were no miracles to report, but Rozella's skirmish was gaining ground. At the Ritz theater the boys can now have any seat in the house. Luther Palmer and the three other merchants have promised to ask the Chamber of Commerce to look into the barbershop situation. (But the boys were still going 35 miles away to Hutchinson to get their hair cut.) The high school is planning to send its social science students out into the community to check up on race relations. And **Joe Obi, who once fled from the hostile restaurant kitchen, finds he can eat in any restaurant, and says he isn't afraid any more.**

But the biggest change of all was one that McPherson itself would be the last to recognize. In a short twelve months, the town had cast aside its old measurements of comfortable solidity. Challenged by a fragment of the world's demands on the U.S., McPherson was trying—as a whole humble people was trying—to "act like Christians" and measure up.
