

# Join the struggle, its ours' - Cissie Gool

ON the Easter weekend 43 years ago, the biggest mass meeting that Cape Town had ever seen took place. 20 000 people gathered on the Grand Parade. People came from all parts of the Peninsula, from Paarl and Stellenbosch. They carried banners and posters. They sang freedom songs:

Dark Folks arise,  
The long, long night is over . . .  
They had come to protest against a new Segregation Bill which the Malan government was trying to introduce. A bill which would extend apartheid even further by applying it to "coloured" people as well as Africans.

Cissie Gool, James La Guma and Abdurset Brown addressed the meeting from the top of a lorry parked in the middle of the Parade. After the speeches, the people marched on parliament, led by Cissie on the lorry.

The march was well controlled, but the police were afraid. A large squad of police met the marchers at Parliament Street. They tried to break the march

with force. Many people had to go to Groote Schuur Hospital because of their injuries. Fighting continued all night between the police and some of the marchers.

In May 1946 Cissie Gool, together with Sam Kahn, again led a big march. This time the march was one of thousands of women, who were protesting about the shortage of food after the Second World War. The women marched around District Six, visiting all the shopkeepers who were suspected of hoarding rice and other scarce foods.

The women told the shopkeepers what they thought of them. Cissie and Sam went into one of the shops and found 30 bags of rice which was distributed among the people. The women then went from shop to shop, finding all the food they could.

Who was Cissie Gool - this woman who led thousands of people to demand their rights.

Cissie was one of the first blacks to study at the University



of Cape Town, and first woman advocate in Cape Town. She had a long history in Cape Town politics. She came from a political family. Her father was Dr Abdurahman, who started and was one of the leaders of the African People's Organisation (APO).

Cissie's first speech was at an APO meeting in 1930. She spoke about the vote being given to white women and not to blacks. In this first political speech, she said that talk was not enough. She then led the people in a march to Parliament to object to

the ministers themselves. Thousands followed her to demand to see General Hertzog.

But, Cissie soon rejected her father's politics and the APO. She felt that they were too worried about being respectable and what the authorities thought. Instead, in 1935, she was one of the people who started the National Liberation League.

Three years later she became the first president and chairperson of the Non-European United Front. Both these organisations tried to unite all the oppressed people.

Cissie also tried to use the government's own institutions to fight for the rights of the people. At that time, "coloured" people could still vote for and be elected to the City Council. In 1938 Cissie stood for Council and was elected. For many years after this she used her position to fight against all discriminatory laws both by the City Council and by the national government.

She fought against beach and train apartheid, she fought

against the introduction of the Coloured Affairs Department, she fought for creches for children of working mothers, she fought for soup for the poor . . . Above all, she fought against apartheid.

These are only a few of the campaigns in which Cissie took part. For Cissie believed in action. She knew that talk would not bring unity and freedom. She knew that as a leader, she herself must take an active part in the struggle. Cissie believed in working with all organisations opposed to unjust laws.

She said, "Don't watch the experiment; join the struggle; its yours, its mine, its ours. We shall resist."

Cissie Gool died many years ago, but her memory remains with many people. We wrote this story from reading old newspapers and from talking to people who knew Cissie. Cissie is remembered for her enthusiasm, her readiness to fight on all issues.

## A UWO BRANCH PROJECT Claremont - a people's history

"FOR many, a community is not simply a place where we live. It is much more than that - The community is our home. It is a place where many of us were born and it is the place where we will die. It is the place we come home to after a heavy day's work to rest, to be with our friends and neighbours. It is a place of warmth, of friendship, of neighbourly quarrels. Even though our lives may be hard, our community gives us strength and hope."

This is the opening paragraph of a book written by the Claremont branch of the United Women's Organisation. The story is a record of peoples memories, their personal feeling and experiences.

It also looks at what happened when the Group came to Claremont.

The booklet is available at U.W.O. office, Open Books and Grassroots office.

This article will describe how and why the booklet was written to

share with other groups the experience of writing an oral history of their areas.

In May 1982, there were strong rumours that the last few old families of Claremont were to be evicted.

At a meeting called by the Claremont UWO, the residents decided

not to let the evictions go unnoticed. It was agreed that a working group of six people would write a booklet to record the history of Claremont's people.

The group soon found out that libraries and newspaper archives had very little information

on Claremont. It was clear that the information had to come from the people themselves.

A book by Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past" gave useful tips on how to go about writing an oral history.

Soon a list of questions to be asked and the people to be interviewed was drawn up. The schools, churches and traders played an important part in Claremont, so these were the starting points.

Two experimental interviews were done, which helped in determining which questions to ask and how to ask them. They also gave the group more confidence to go ahead with other interviews.

### Interview

The interviews were done in two's. One person would do the interview and the other would take notes. Each interview was written up and shared with the rest of the group. Each person had a chance to interview.

Among the 25 people interviewed were people who still lived in Claremont, others who had been moved out, some homeowners, tenants, professionals, tradesmen, labourers and housewives.

Old photographs, letters, maps and any other documents were also collected.

Once all the information had been gath-



ered, the next step was to decide how it should be written up.

The information was divided into sections. Two people worked on each section. Ideas were brought back to the group and discussed. Two rough drafts were written and re-written. The second draft was given to different people to read and comment on. Some people who had been interviewed were asked what they thought.

The final draft was written by the group. This was then edited by one person so that there was a common style throughout the booklet.

Besides the content of the booklet, decisions and plans had to be made about lay-out,

money for printing and distribution. These tasks were shared out amongst the UWO branch members.

Laying-out the booklet needed some skills. Fortunately some skilled people were ready to help. They showed the others what to do. Finally after 9 months the booklet was completed.

The group would like to encourage other people to write social histories about their own areas. Many people have interesting stories to tell about their lives - stories that aren't written in history books.

When these people die, the stories are lost forever. These unwritten stories need to be preserved for our children's children.

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