

[“Peace in the Kingdom”]

[Beliefs and Customs?] - Cults

“PEACE IN THE KINGDOM”

(Religious Cult of Father Devine)

by Frank Byrd

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St. NYC

DATE September 5, 1938

SUBJECT RELIGIOUS CULT OF “FATHER DIVINE”

1. Date and time of interview August, 1937
2. Place of interview Sayville, Long Island
3. Name and address of informant Chief Tucker, Police Headquarters (Chief of Police, Sayville, L. I.)

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4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

New York Daily News

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Reporters from other N. Y. Newspapers

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Usual precinct room

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St. New York City

DATE September 12, 1938

SUBJECT POLICE CHIEF TUCKER'S STORY "PEACE IN THE KINGDOM" PEACE IN THE KINGDOM AS TOLD TO THE WRITER BY THE CHIEF OF POLICE; SAYVILLE, L.I.

Major T. (Father) Divine has become almost a legendary figure in lower Long Island where he first set up his cult headquarters. Many stories about his peculiar religious doings and subsequent tiffs with the law are told by native inhabitants. The following is only one of many. The writer has taken the liberty of changing names of persons and places.

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The changes as they appear in the story:

Major T. (Father Divine) to Rev. Andrew Elijah Jones.

Police Chief Tucker to Chief Becker.

Macon Street to Pudding Hill Road

Sayville to Hopeville

Mineola to Salt Point

Judge Smith to Judge Walker

* * * * *

When they first came to town nobody paid much attention to them. They were just another group of Niggers who had moved in. They were a little different from the others though. Instead of gallivanting all over the country-side at nights, drinking home made hootch and doing the Belly-Roll until almost dawn, they worked hard in the white folks' kitchens all day and, as soon as night came, hurriedly finished up with their pots and pans and made a bee-line for Andrew Elijah Jones' little meeting house in the back of Joe Kersak's grocery store.

Andrew Jones, a squat, wooly headed, middle aged, little black man with a sly, rougish gleam in his eye, was their leader. In the daytime he ran the Hopeville employment agency for "colored domestics" but, at night, he was a man of God. In fact, many of his followers insisted that he was "God his self—in person"; and nobody could dispute them. Their bodies belonged to the white folks during the day but their souls, both day and night, were the exclusive property of their foxy, pint-sized patriach. They even slept with him in a big, rambling old house planted among a grove of elm trees at the end of Plum Hill Road. They

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called themselves his disciples; his children. And they called him “Father—Father Andrew-Elijah”.

Well, the townspeople didn't mind this so much but that business of nightly worship in the back of Kersak's store began to get them down. When the sisters and brothers began to feel the spirit in earnest, they whooped and hollered something awful. And 2 their shouts, in a quiet, suburban place like Hopeville where everyone went to bed early could be heard for miles around.

The townsfolk rose up in arms and got together to see what could be done about it. They finally decided that Jones, that is Father Andrew-Elijah had to go. A representative committee waited on him at his place of business bright and early one morning and did what they could to persuade the good reverend to move on to greener pastures.

“Nothing doing!” or words to that effect, answered the the right reverend.

He was doing all right in Hopeville and the idea of giving it up was the last thing that ever occurred to him. His disciples were all employed as cooks, maids, gardeners and chauffeurs in the homes of the countryside's wealthiest people and they brought all their earnings home to him. Why should he move? The very idea was preposterous.

The natives retreated for another war-council and Father Andrew's disciples continued happily, almost ecstatically, about their work. Whether they were in the midst of shopping for their employers, or baking a deep-dish apple pie, the unexpectedly used to burst forth with little exclamations of delight like “Peace[?]” “It's truly wonderful!” “Thank you Father!” and so on. Even when they stumbled and fell or accidentally upset a glass of water in their masters' or mistresses' laps, they said: “Thank you, Father, I'm sorry.”

Well even then, the employers couldn't find it in themselves to be mad.

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“They're just great, big children.” they'd say, and smile indulgently.

The fact is, the religious satellites, who called themselves by such funny names as “Happy Boy Job”, “Patience Delight”, “Eternal Faith” etc. were honest as the day is long and were excellent servants in every other respect. In addition to that, they could be hired for half the price of the lazy, sullen, shiftless [?] Niggers who were natives of the town.

And so, Father Andrew-Elijah remained. And when the white house-wives greeted their cooks and maids with an amused, patronizing:

“Good morning, Charity Light, How are you today?”

Charity Light would answer in all earnestness:

“Peace! Ain't it wonderful? Father Andrew-Elijah's God! You'all want bacon 'n' eggs fo breakfas', dis mo'ing”.

Even on Main Street it was not unusual to hear one of Father Andrew's angels, in a none too melodious voice and with the gleam of the fanatic in his eye, singing: Father Andrew-Elijah's The Light of The World.”

The “Jonesities”, as they were called, soon saved enough to buy the two houses adjoining their property on Plum Hill Road. One of the houses was converted into a sort of temple where the nightly meetings were held and Sunday dinners served. Free dinners, they were, and sumptuous. Feasts to rival those of Biblical times. Not only the “angels” participated. Everyone was invited.

Not many outsiders came at first. They were a still a little wary. A few of the bolder townspeople ventured in, however, and came away with wild stories of the huge banquet tables and savory 4 Cooked meals. More and more people appeared as the Sundays passed. Some came all the way from the city or the end of the island. And they were not

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disappointed. The banquets were as colorful and extravagant as they had been pictured. But most amazing of all was the fact that, of all the hundreds of people who ate their fill, nobody paid. Everything was free. The treat was on Father Andrew-Elijah.

“God provides everything for his people” some of the angels were heard to say, as the free chicken, pork chops, roast brown duck and suckling pig, smothered spare-ribs and an assortment of vegetables, fruits and nuts were passed around in abundance.

Judging from the size of some of their eyes, the visitors still did not, believe it was true, even after they had sat down at the tables. With hundreds of darkies storming the quiet, bourgeois community in dusty, broken down cars every Sunday afternoon, running over the carefully tended lawns and trampling the municipal shrubbery, the ire of the townspeople was once more aroused. They tramped down in a body to demand that the police do something about it.

“Chief Becker”, the spokesman for the group began, “You've got to do something about these niggers. They're not only a nuisance but they're running property values down to nothing, they've got most of us crazy, whooping and hollering until all hours of the night and putting on their war-dances on the lawn.”

Well, election was coming up. Chief Becker got busy. “No-Parking” signs began to appear everywhere in the vicinity of the Kingdom, although no one could remember having ever seen one in the history of the town. Many of the poor whites solved this problem for the Kingdom by letting visitors park their cars at twenty five cents each. Chief Becker, not to be outdone, began stopping all cars, looking at registration certificates, and being generally annoying to all niggers seen driving a car in the neighborhood. This did not stop the crowds. In fact, they got bigger. Chief Becker cursed a blue streak. He pulled his hair out. But not matter what he did or how much he raved and ranted, the influx could not be stopped. The chief was licked-and he knew it.

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“Boys,” he said to the citizens' committee, “Iv'e tried everything I could think of but the niggers keep comin', I'm sorry, There's nothing else I can do.”

The town-fathers, more alarmed than ever, got together and petitioned “God's” arrest on the grounds of not only maintaining but being a public nuisance. The fact that the populace was becoming more and more jittery through lack of sleep caused by the “Kingdom's” nightly goings-on was specifically sighted in the petition and Father Andrew-Elijah hustled unceremoniously into court. The atmosphere there was so hotile, however, that the defense moved for a change of venue and the proceedings were resumed in the little neighboring town of Salt Point.

Judge Walker, who presided at the hearing and who didn't like niggers anyhow, literally jumped on the good reverend with both feet. He not only sentenced him to a year in jail but fined him five hundred dollars to boot.

Four days later, much to the surprise of everyone, Judge Walker dropped dead.

The doctors said: “Heart trouble.”

Father Andrew-Elijah, grinning with a sly, knowing look and acting for all the world like the cat that swallowed the canary, proclaimed:

“The cosmic forces of nature work with me.”

The townspeople back in Hopeville shook their heads and began to wonder if there wasn't something to the story of old Jonesy's black-magic after-all.

The “angels” went hop-skipping through the streets shouting: “We told you so! Father Andrew-Elijah's God! Peace! Ain't it wonderful?”

Old Andrew's slick city lawyers appealed the case and the Appellate Division immediately reversed the late Judge Walker's fateful decision. Then the “angel” really got beside

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themselves. That night they hung lanterns in the trees, danced wildly around a greasing banquet table, flung their arms skyward, babbled in unknown tongues and sang, more lustily than ever; "Father Andrew-Elijah's The Light Of The World!"

Once again there was peace in the Kingdom.

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NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St. NYC

DATE September 5th, 1938

SUBJECT RELIGIOUS CULT OF "FATHER DIVINE"

The interview is, as near as I remember, a fairly accurate report of Chief Tucker's description of the advent and stay of Father Divine's religious followers in Sayville, L. I. The interview was given while Father Divine was on trial at Mineola, L. I. for "being and maintaining a public nuisance."

Chief Tucker's whimsical and humorous description, I feel, represented the general attitude of the townspeople who seemed to feel that the cult and all its followers were

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somewhat ridiculous. There were others who apparently felt just the opposite. A report of other narratives will subsequently follow.