

ARTICLES.

MISSISSIPPI STORIES—I

The Fruits of Freedom Summer

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On the evening of June 21, Mount Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Mississippi, offered a memorial service for James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman. Thirty years before, the three civil rights workers were murdered after visiting the burned ruins of the same church. I was in Jackson at that time, two hours west, newly arrived from Manhattan, where Schwerner had trained me and others in tenant organizing at the offices of the Congress of Racial Equality. It was the beginning of "Freedom Summer," a daring project to bring national attention and hence indispensable protection to the primarily black civil rights workers in the most closed state in the union—"the middle of the iceberg," in the words of Bob Moses, the black teacher who conceived the plan. As the first wave of about 1,000 mostly white volunteers were on their way to register voters and teach in "Freedom Schools," Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman failed to phone in when expected. I remember being shocked then by the locals' immediate conviction that the missing men were dead.

Now in 1994 I was back in Mississippi for a reunion/conference of Freedom Summer participants. It had been called by the Mississippi Community Foundation (M.C.F.) to recall the history and assess the effects of the project. (The group was formed a few years ago in angry reaction to *Mississippi Burning*, the film that dramatized the 1964 murders while ignoring the movement's black organizers.) I knew how radically the experience of working in the movement had altered my life and that of the other "outside agitators." In this return trip, I spent twelve days asking the other side of the question: How much had changed for black Mississippians? (Unless otherwise noted, persons named here are black.)

Driving to the memorial service, I arrived late and nearly out of gas. The church was packed, but I found a seat next to a young man who proved to be James Young, a County Supervisor. He rose to say, "If the struggle had not been, I would not be here today. I thank God I'm part of the success of which they paid the cost." But Ben Chaney, James's younger brother, warned that all was not well. In 1990 a black man who had been dating a white woman died suspiciously in the Neshoba County jail. Rousing speeches and singing went on till almost midnight, when I took off alone to find gas for the long trip back to Jackson. It was close to the hour when on these dark roads the trio had been released from jail and into

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the hands of their lynchers. Turning toward an ill-lit gas station, I drove straight into a ditch. High-centered, the car's wheels spun, its tail in the highway. I saw an approaching car, but, weighted by memories of danger, hesitated to flag it. I was relieved, then, to see it held Supervisor Young; he hailed three black youths in a truck, who flung a chain around my axle and tugged my car out of the ditch as deftly as if it were a catfish in a Mississippi stream.

It is impossible to drive the roads of Mississippi without recalling the violence that made them infamous. Four days later, on a southbound charter bus to McComb, Chuck (Tell-the-Story) McDew, chairman of the M.C.F., was narrating a bit of 1961 history: Moses had just come to McComb, a rough blue-collar town, and Herbert Lee was murdered for escorting him around. A week later more than 100 school students marched in the first black demonstration in the town's history. Arrested with them, McDew was held in a cell until 2:30 A.M. After being beaten by a gantlet of white men, he was thrown into a police car to be carried to the jail in the town of Magnolia. "Halfway there, the cops stopped and said, 'Get

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out. There're people waiting for you in Magnolia and we can't protect you once you get there. I don't want to see you die, so y'all can get out.' The black guy with me, Charles, said, 'Thank God' and started to get out. I grabbed him and said, 'We aren't going! They will not find our bodies draped over that barbed-wire fence shot in the back. If you're going to kill us, do it here, do it now, in this car.' The other fellow was 'No! they're letting us go!' So I was talking to the cops and struggling with him until Charles sort of lost it and stopped struggling and fell against the door and started crying." McDew had not finished his story when our bus was met by two local police cars, whose officers, white and black, would escort us into town.

As indicative of the changed racial climate as the integration of local police forces is that of the Highway Patrol, which had brutally served racist politicians. This victory was won by Constance Slaughter-Harvey, in 1970 the first black law graduate from Ole Miss and now general counsel to the white Secretary of State, Dick Molpus. Five years ago, at a commemoration of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman, Molpus made an unprecedented address: "Many of us have been searching for a way to ease the burden that this community carried for twenty-five years. . . . Today we pay tribute to those who died. We acknowledge that dark corner of our past." In his office, bustling with black aides, Molpus told me, "We have a special sensitivity, a heightened awareness, because of what happened in the sixties."

Blacks now enter professions once closed to them and, with 890 black elected officials, Mississippi leads the nation. Yet,

seeking the movement's legacy in education, health and politics, I found problems old and new among the gains. (The political story will appear in the next issue.)

Freedom in Schooling

The 1964 makeshift Freedom Schools, which operated mostly in church basements or backyards, were designed by two white New York schoolteachers, Norma Becker and Sandra Adickes. They offered black literature and history, addressed remedial needs and cultivated leadership skills. Adickes was exhilarated by her reunion in Hattiesburg, site of the largest and one of the longest-lived Freedom Schools. The number of black high school graduates has increased about sevenfold since 1960. "Post-secondary education is the norm now," she said. For preparation in the earlier grades Bob Moses has brought his Algebra Project, proven in inner cities from Boston to L.A., "home" to the Delta and Jackson. Believing math literacy is the key to higher education, and adapting techniques used in the Freedom Schools to math, teachers get students to think mathematically by drawing problems from daily life.

What about integration? When the public schools were desegregated, private academies mushroomed in areas where black children outnumbered whites. In 1971, 15,000 white children in Jackson abandoned public schools for the academies, leaving a dual system divided by race. Dick Molpus, who had helped make school mandatory in the only state where it was not, organized other white parents in the mid-1980s to put their children back into public schools and demand quality education. In northeast Jackson, where whites constitute a large majority, 60 percent of the elementary public school children are now white. As these children move on, Molpus's Parents for Public Schools (now a national organization) hopes to redress the racial balance in middle and high schools.

Many, however, doubt that Molpus's strategy will work where blacks are the majority. Henry Kirksey, a statistician at Tougaloo College, says that in Jackson's inner-city schools there are fewer than sixty white children among 20,000. In exceptional areas like McComb, integration has prevailed thanks to the initiative of progressive whites, according to Ronnie Wilkinson, the white Mayor. Jackie Martin, one of the student demonstrators there in 1961, now working in City Hall, said with cheerful irony, "I now experience more sexism than racism."

Higher education is now the most burning issue. At a reception in Jackson for pioneering black civil rights families, the most impassioned speech was by Alvin Chambliss, attorney in the highly contested *Ayers* case. Chambliss was 10 when his grandmother used to sneak food to the Freedom House next door in Columbia; now he's at the center of a case—challenging the low level of state funding of black colleges—that since 1976 has forced the court system to revisit the question of "separate and unequal." In 1992 the case reached the Supreme Court, which charged the state to "educationally justify or eliminate" its dual system of black and white colleges. The state opted for elimination, proposing to close a black school in the Delta, Mississippi Valley State, and require largely black Alcorn State to merge with largely white Mis-

issippi State. The Justice Department, supporting the *Ayers* plaintiffs, offered an alternate plan, which would save all three historically black institutions and greatly enlarge the biggest, Jackson State. The case is now back in the lower courts, but Chambliss says it's bound to return to the Supreme Court.

While some assail the Justice Department plan as segregationist, Chambliss argued that if each of the schools is assigned an exclusive strength for which it is equitably funded, students should be drawn to the strength they seek, regardless of race. As Margaret Walker Alexander, retired from Jackson State, testified, "It boils down to whether the state of Mississippi is prepared to make historically black institutions equal partners in the system." State Senator Willie Simmons stressed the years of neglect of black education, beginning with inadequate funding at the primary and secondary levels. Then at the college level, he said, "it's kind of like having two children. You put one in a room and lock him up and give him air and slip food under the door enough to survive. And you nourish and take care of the other one, and then all of a sudden, if you've got to eliminate one, well, you eliminate the one you invested less in, quite naturally. But it's not the answer, because in this instance you deny a large group of individuals the right to go to university."

Ayers advocates want to prevent a repetition of what happened when primary and secondary schools were integrated—black schools closed, teachers fired, principals demoted, tradition and black community involvement lost. They want to protect the historically black schools, from which the vast majority of black professionals and elected officials have come and which encourage students denied admission to or made to feel uncomfortable in other schools. Thus, Elias Blake, former president of Clark College assisting in the case, argued, "As many as 60 to 70 percent of the Delta schoolchild-



ILLUSTRATION BY MANDALL BRON

dren are below the poverty line. Mississippi Valley at its peak was producing up to 350 college graduates a year out of the poorest and most desolate legacy of the plantation slave system." Now the state wants those students to go to Delta State, where, Blake said, students like these make up maybe 5 percent. "For blacks, Mississippi Valley is a unique and precious social institution. It breaks that bitter and grinding poverty in one fell swoop. You come out of a family with an annual income of \$9-10,000 and less, and in five, six or seven years you are propelled into the middle class."

Although *Ayers* derives much of its impetus from the ways *Brown v. Board of Education* has ironically undermined black culture, it does not contradict or threaten *Brown* because both cases seek educational opportunities for blacks. The case will have significant reverberations, since eighteen other states also maintain historically black institutions.

Health in a Harsh Climate

When my foot became infected in the summer of 1964, I was grateful to find a black movement doctor who was willing to treat me (little appreciating then how, as a white woman going to his offices, I magnified his danger of losing his license). Dr. Robert Smith told me then about how he had lost his first job, at a state mental hospital, after leading a picket line in 1963 protesting the A.M.A.'s refusal to address segregated hospitals. He now directs a family clinic. The dramatic heart of the health care story he tells is this: that in a state at the bottom of every index (with the highest rates of infant mortality, malnutrition, hypertension and cardiovascular disease), the civil rights movement set up models of health provision that broke open a closed profession and transformed national health care for the poor.

First, the movement pulled in a handful of courageous black physicians. Dr. James Anderson was starting his practice in McComb when Moses needed his head stitched up after a beating. "I didn't consider myself a civil rights worker," he told me in his office at the Jackson-Hinds Comprehensive Health Center. But when the Freedom Riders came through, they were badly beaten. "One had spinal fluid coming out of his ears. I took care of him and found myself more involved."

Then in 1964 three black doctors, Smith, Anderson and Albert Britton, met with a group from the National Council of Churches and Physicians for Social Responsibility and formed the Medical Committee for Human Rights (M.C.H.R.). Dr. Smith became Southern coordinator, responsible for distributing supplies and supervising the hundreds of volunteer health professionals who came South. "Bob Smith often took heroic risks," said Jack Geiger, a white doctor who is now at the CUNY Medical School, "seeing people in jail in the face of state troopers, or facing down state police who were harassing him."

M.C.H.R., Smith said, "attracted some of the most dedicated health science personnel, people who were changed forever." The experience led white psychologist Tom Levin to set up the Child Development Group of Mississippi (C.D.G.M.), the pilot project for the largest integrated community-run Head Start program in the nation, based on "maximum feasible participation of the poor." Poor people, he said, "had to be able to make mistakes; it was the only way to learn."

Such ideas were already in the air, Levin told me, but "Mississippi put blood and tears on ideas." At the same time, Dr. Smith came to recognize that the wide array of disorders in Mississippi had socioeconomic and political roots. In a meeting of M.C.H.R. and Head Start people, Dr. Geiger thought of adapting to Mississippi the antiapartheid community health centers he'd known as a student in South Africa. Thus evolved the pilot community health center, funded by the federal poverty program under the auspices of Tufts Medical School. It was built in the Delta, where black population is densest, in Mound Bayou, an all-black town offering political support and safety. The Delta Health Center was ambitious, including a cooperative farm and daycare center. In simpler form the idea caught on and weathered the harsh cuts of the Republican era. Dr. Geiger said about 600 such centers in the country now care for about 7 million low-income people. By law, policy is set by a board whose majority must come from the patient population, and the centers combine medical and social services. At the Aaron Henry Community Health Center in Clarksdale, director Aurelia Taylor described the center's bus service, school health and job creation programs.

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The community health center concept has now become part of the health care reform debate. "Once the poor are funded for health care," said Dr. Geiger, "they become attractive for for-profit providers, which are unlikely to offer the same quality care, let alone the community control." But Taylor expressed guarded optimism about the competition: "We know more than others about serving this population."

The dilution and devouring of their most creative social inventions is an old story to movement activists. How Levin's C.D.G.M. and other federal programs were compromised, and the black community set against itself, by Washington bureaucracies is well told in John Dittmer's new book, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Yet L.C. Dorsey, who once trained nurse's aides at the Delta Health Center and now directs it, credits the federal programs: "The money freed you up from that complete oppression. I remember grown folks talking in whispers in their own house at night because they didn't know who was listening. Someone might tell the white people and they'd wind up dead."

The quality of care for black Mississippians is now "almost respectable," said Dr. Smith. "Almost. Infant mortality has gone in some counties from 60 per thousand at worst to 12 per thousand. We've gotten off the bottom. Gross hunger and malnutrition, gross anemia and parasites have disappeared. We're a long way from placing a primary care health center in every community, and 3-400,000 Mississippians still are uninsured."

The nature of misery in the Delta has shifted in these thirty years. By the mid-1960s machines harvested over 90 percent of the cotton; herbicides also displaced field workers. The new catfish industry and newer gambling casinos have offered some relief, but migrating to towns, rural folk encounter urban

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ills—drugs and violence. Traveling with me to her native Clarksdale after thirty years, Hellen O'Neal-McCray was shocked by boarded-up stores on once-busy Issaquena Street. An acquaintance in a new black middle-class neighborhood confessed to her he never imagined he'd fear going into a black neighborhood. "Black people used to live all together, shacks and nice houses," she told me. "Now they're divided." Worse, "drugs have succeeded in doing what slavery and all the white people in the world could not—destroy the black family." □
(To be continued.)
