

MISS

The Plantation and The Oasis

Tougaloo Southern Christian College is often referred to (among liberal elements, that is) as "The Oasis." It is the one place in Mississippi where people of all colors, nationalities, and religious persuasions live and work together as people. The idea of people being people may not sound very radical or unique, but in Mississippi it is considered left of Communism and certain to cause the end of civilization as we know it. (Of course, one might--and out at Tougaloo we do--argue that the end of "civilization" as we know it in Mississippi is something greatly to be desired.)

In a highly "race" conscious state, people at Tougaloo can and do forget that anyone belongs to any race other than the one called "Human." Last week a group of us were going into Jackson in a private car. We had left campus and were almost to the main road when the driver suddenly put on the breaks and exclaimed, "I just remembered, you could..." I moved from beside him to the less conspicuous back seat as another girl took my place. No one had to say anything. This was Mississippi and we had just remembered that I was white and he was Negro.

The majority of the student body is Negro, but there are a few Orientals and whites enrolled. This spring, the first white male student moved into the mens' dorm. A week or more later, some of the other men in the dorm were unaware that a white was living under the same roof as they (which is against Mississippi law). This wasn't because they weren't up on the news--it was just that the color of a person's skin wasn't news.

I decided to enroll (or to try to enroll) in Tougaloo last February--shortly after the riots when Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes entered the University of Georgia. I was sincere in my desire to be a

student at Tougaloo, but I had almost equally sincere doubts that I would be accepted. If human behavior had reached such low levels in Georgia, what on earth would happen in Mississippi! The college administration certainly had to be concerned with the safety of the students and my presence might endanger everybody. At that time I was unaware of the liberal (or should I say "human") traditions of Tougaloo. From Hank Thomas, who was to meet "much violence on Mother's Day" (as one of the Freedom Rider songs goes), I learned that the Freedom Riders were going to spend a night at Tougaloo. This gave me some encouragement. Two or three weeks later I learned that I had been accepted. The order which had been maintained by the police when the first Freedom Riders arrived in Jackson suggested that maybe I wouldn't die in a race riot before I was 21 after all (as some of my friends frequently and morbidly suggest--to which I reply that since we are usually together when their prophecy seems about to become reality, we'll at least have an integrated slaughter). However, I assumed that I would be spending the first semester in jail for breaking one of the numerous, vague, catch-all, unconstitutional laws they have down here. I took care of that little obligation somewhat earlier than originally planned; for, when, as a Freedom Rider, I stepped off the train last June, the first person to greet me was none other than Captain Ray, Freedom Rider expert. Much to my surprise, one of the police took my arm and helped me into the paddy wagon, saying in explanation, "We don't want anything to happen to you chil'en." I was the stereotype (appearances and background only) of the young Southern Womanhood he was trying to protect and the ~~3~~ third "white female" arrested. I guess he just forgot himself.

After three months at the exclusive Parchman Plantation, I was well rested, well versed in Scripture, (only "white males" got the additional material: Race and Reason by Carlton Putnam), and eager to begin classes.

I cannot, in all honesty, say that the first week of school was "normal." The first night, my roommate and I found out that the door to our room would, unlike any other door in the dorm, slam closed on its own volition. "Room" was off somewhere when this knowledge was first imparted to us. We wouldn't in the least have minded finding this out, except that our keys were on one side of the door, and we were on the other. Our room is at the top of the stairs, and I sat down on the top step to wait for Gwen to return. After awhile, I got rather bored and decided that I'd get a drink of water to kill time. The lights in the hall were off and I was feeling my way down the hall: deathly white from my recent confinement, long blonde hair flowing, and pale pink shorty catching the breeze--a rather ghostly sight. At the same time, another girl was feeling her way along the hall in search of a drink of water. She took one look at me and decided I looked altogether too ghostly. She also lost all interest in a drink of water. (Either I didn't notice her distress or she did a remarkable job of concealing her panic, because it wasn't until several months later that I learned of her first "reaction" to me.) After getting a drink, I returned to the stairs until some girls invited me into their room for a "hen party." Eventually, Gwen found me and, since we couldn't awaken the house mother, we doubled up with some other girls for the night.

Later in the week came physicals--including eye tests. Admittedly, my vision is not 20-20. However, I would rather not have provided quite so much comic relief to the tedious procedure of standing in line waiting to read rows of letters. During the summer, I had been deprived of my contact lenses. Had I only tried to wear them for 8 hours on the first try in three months, everything might have been o.k.--but I tried for 16 hours (unpremeditated). Consequently, the next day I was almost blind. Coincidentally, this was the same day as we were to have our eyes checked.

I tried to explain quietly my delima to the young man who was checking eyes. However, he managed to have me explain the whole situation so that virtually everyone in the room was aware that something was not as it should be. Just for the record, I had to try to read the chart--starting as far down as I could. "E," I said. "Go one," he said. "That's all I can see," I said. He might have said something else, but I couldn't hear it for the laughter--friendly laughter. Not knowing what to do with someone who could only read "E," the young man found another young man, and they decided to consult the nurse. Off one of them went, until someone reminded him that he was headed into the area where the young ladies were having somewhat more than their eyes examined. I can now see--but people still remember the "E."

A few more all too similar situations arose. At the time, I could have managed quite satisfactorily without such introductions to the student body; but, looking back, they served their purpose and provide many things to laugh over--now.

I haven't talked about "adjustment problems" and "relations" and what have you, because there isn't anything to say that couldn't be said by any other student entering a new school. Off campus, however, the situation is somewhat different. The local white citizens haven't been disturbed enough to even write a letter, except for one to wish success. Captain Ray and his underlings take a different view of the situation. They feel that violence is imminent and that my life (or at least health) is in grave danger. Therefore, they find it necessary to pick me up every time they learn that I am walking down the street with a friend toward (not in, but toward) the "white" section of town. To date, this has led to nothing more than rather lengthy explanations as to why it is necessary for them to do this. Captain Ray has advised me that soon the situation will reach such grave proportions that it will be necessary to protect me for six months or so--unless I give up my wayward habits (i.e., associating with classmantes).

Aside from having plans interrupted by visits to the police station, there are certain other difficulties which are resultant from the police and the system of segregation of which they are the chief upholders. For instance, if I should go shopping for clothes with my roommate, we would have to try them on in segregated dressing rooms--if she could try them on at all. Shoes would have to be bought at opposite ends of the store, different drinking fountains would have to be used, we couldn't eat anywhere together. If we became tired and wanted to sit on park benches, it would be impossible: she wouldn't be welcome in the park, much less able to sit on a bench. Riding the buses, we would have to sit on different seats. Many of these problems never arise because both of us refuse to shop on Capitol Street (except sometimes I eat at the "Negro" counter at Woolworth) because of the various discriminatory policies practiced there. However, one place downtown IS integrated: the Federal Building, which includes the federal court where a number of interesting cases have been heard lately on school integration and voting rights.

The only remarkable thing about Tougaloo is that it exists at all--in Mississippi. There are many similar schools across the nation. It is, in brief, a small, liberal arts, church supported school, primarily geared to the meet the educational needs of Mississippi Negro students. Operating on limited funds, and having many students with defficient educational backgrounds, it faces the problems described daily in the press as besetting the nation's colleges. Since the worst schools in the nation are in the South, and the worst schools in the South are in Mississippi, and the worst schools in Mississippi are the ones for Negroes, it is understandable that Tougaloo's problem of students with a/ inadequate educational backgrounds is probably greater than that of other schools. However, there is a sincere effort to fill in the gaps resulting from the public schools; to provide a college education, and to expose the students

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to ideas and values which, though they may be prevalent throughout the rest of the nation, are unheard of or ~~tabooed into~~ impotency in the South.

Tougaloo is "The Oasis."