

July 18 1965

Dear Friends,

For some reason I thought that when I came to Mississippi, I would Emote-- be inspired to write letters full of prophetic fire, etc., etc. But it turns out that although I am very happy with my work here, neither my style nor my view of life seems about to become transformed even by a very eventful four weeks so what follows will probably sound very much like me in my pre-Mississippi state. Also, it's still too soon for me to disentangle how I feel about the really important issues people argue about down here or about many things that have happened to me. So I'll just describe my life here in Hollendale and some aspects of the Freedom Movement as they seem to me from this vantage point.

But first I better tell you what I am doing in Hollendale, a town of a few thousand 45 minutes south of Greenville. I was intent on being placed in Greenville because it was the most "liberal", safest town in Mississippi, with many Headstart centers and a host of white volunteers working for various organizations stationed there. During the ten days before the orientation for everyone working for CDGM (Child Development Group of Mississippi), when I was down here working on the pre-planning, people kept telling me that Greenville wasn't really Mississippi, that I ought to get out in a smaller place and see what I could do. I resisted, but doubted.

Then at orientation, when the community people from all over Mississippi were sizing up the Northern ~~resource~~ resource staff who were to be parceled out one or two to a CDGM Center (most of them just off the plane from New York), the committee chairman from Hollendale, Annie Mae Jones, approached me with the nicest compliment I had received in my two weeks of being told to slow down my speech and/or shut up and listen to the Mississippians. She said, "You talk slow enough so that the people here can understand you." Everything fell into place shortly thereafter and I decided to accept here invitation to come here. My original fright had worn off, and besides, Hollendale hasn't had any "trouble," i.e. bombings or burnings, nor is the Klan active at the moment in Washington county. I've been to Greenville twice, and am very glad I decided not to go there.

So here I am at the Sherrod's, where the roosters crow piercingly at four in the mornig and the geese wander around the back yard.. It's not the country, but a regular street--unpaved, like the streets in almost all Negro sections of Southern towns--full of wooden frame houses with yards. M's. Sherrod grows beans, peaches, tomatoes, and goodness knows what else. (With my nonagricultural eye, I didn't even know a cotton plant when I saw one). M. SHerrod is one of the few local ~~men~~ men unafraid to take an open stand in the Freedom Movement, and also in a position to board teachers in his house. They have eleven children, but all except the youngest (14) are off somewhere--married, at college, or in the army. One daughter-in-law, Corajeau, is here temporarily with her two little kids till here husband finds work in Hammond, Indiana, and sends for here. Another daughter just arrived today after a summer school NSF seminar at Tougaloo college and will be here the rest of the summer. Two days ago a white boy, an undergraduate from Oberlin, who will work with us at the Center, joined the household.. Room for One More is the prevailing philosophy. I share a big room with Corajeau and the kids, who will sleep together, and am very glad, considering the crowded conditions in the Hollendale Negro community. I'm fortunate to have a bed to myself. Who else will arrive in the course of the summer I don't know. They're all wonderful, hospitable people.

The other Northern resource teacher here is a Negro girl from New York Vivian Hooks--very sophisticated and well-educated. raised in Westchester County and a product of predominately white schools and communities. Mississippi Negroes find her#, and others like her#--according to a Negro Harvard undergrad I met in Greenville who is organizing the cotton-choppers for the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union--an even stranger phenomenon than they do me. She gets particularly upset by a huge ambiling, big-bellied man named Mr. Saul, a Mississippian, who is also one of our resource teachers. (He was indispensable when we needed some carpentry finished, but unfortunately has no idea what to do with little kids, and just sits lazily and fans.) As she# puts it, he keeps reminding her of a background which she does not have. When the time came to hammer down the linoleum ("Rugs, as they are called here) over the cardboard which had been used to smopth out the wood floor, she asked him how to do it. "Jes' hammer it lak' you do at home," was his slow-smiling reply. He then wondered aloud if there weren't hammers in New York City also. She is also much more vulnerable than I, because I am white. Reluctantly I have agreed with her observation that the committee chairman, a very authoritarian lady, will talk back to Vivian, ignore her recommendations, tell her to mind her own business etc. in a way that she never does to me. The whole recial thing is so tremendously complicated that I can't even reflect on it intelligently at this point. so I'll just drop that situation for the moment.

There are exciting possibilities for the program here in Hollendale but also lots of problems. Disorganizaed is a mild word to describe our opening week. There was the morning the two station-wagon drivers were supposed to pick up all the kids, but had no route and no complete list of addresses, so they just cruised around hunting. Then there was the first day the kitchen was ready for hot-lunch preparation and we discovered fifteen minutes before mealtime that Annie Mae would never get back from Greenville with the plastic dishes for our 90-100 children in time. So Vivian raced to the supermarket and got paper plates and little wooden utensils. Then there was the problem of getting kids home who didn't know their names or where they lived. Thank God for small town life: staff members stood around, cocked their heads reflectively at the few unidentified children, and said "I think that there's a Bowdre," or "This here's a Carter." They all go home.

But these are they easy problems. For one thing, the community sees them as problems just as clearly as Vivian and I do, and for another, as Mr. Sherrod says, they're "gittin' straighter and straighter" every day. More subtle and more difficult are the problems in getting a good classroom program established for these preschool kids, once we have figured out how to get them back and forth and feed them.

Let me tell you a little about the kids first. They're very relaxed usually well behaved, responsive to new materials but not yet very willing to explore on their own, and very nonverbal. Many of the four year olds hardly talk distinctly at all; some say nothing. Some of the fives and sixes speak in one-word sentences. It's hard to tell how accurate these observations are because it's only the first week though. Take for instance the blocks.--I can't imagine children taking more quickly to blocks--as soon as we started unpacking them each child ran over and took a bunch and began guilding away, some singly, some in twos or threes. Fine. But the blocks had been sitting right there all week and no child had looked in the box or taken out a block to see what could be done with it.

This is not too surprising when one considers that none of the local staff had noticed the blocks either. The general problem is this: how can a program for these preschool kids be run by local people, on their own initiative, for the benefit of their own community's children, when these people were raised in the same fashion, and with the same disadvantages, as the kids they are trying to help? In many ways, of course, they are much closer to the kids and more aware of their needs than Northern middle-class teachers could be. But in other ways it's harder. How, for instance, to persuade or show people of the need for three adults for each fifteen children (standard Headstart proportions)--so that they won't call a meeting of the five-member menu committee for an hour right in the middle of instruction time, and be content with the thought that someone is minding each class, or send people down-down to buy some item for the lunch menu during class time--when many of the first grade classes here in Mississippi have fifty or sixty children, and some of the staff have raised nine or eleven children on their own? How to show them that it's not enough to hand out the materials and stand around pleasantly overseeing, not saying anything to individual children?

It's not that I lack confidence in the potential of many of ~~the~~ the young staff (ages 17 to 22) and older women who are working in the Center--on the contrary, listening to people from all over Mississippi talking at orientation about how they had worked out their problems gave me great confidence in their ability to work things out for themselves. A few of the 17-to-22 year olds we have are really sharp and interested, too. But it takes time, lots of time. Eight weeks isn't enough, especially when Vivian and I seem to have to spend a good chunk of our time helping to iron out administrative snafus (like the food problem) which we are not supposed to need to have anything to do with. Eight weeks is also far too short with a Center that runs from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. in this hot weather, because people are pretty tired at the end of the day, even those who only work half-time, and are understandably not about to spend all their evenings planning program or organizing parent meetings. I don't know how much we can accomplish during this summer. We'll just have to wait and see.

It's also hard to tell how much you are accomplishing. One of the trainees, a girl of 22 who is separated and has two infant children, has been kind of sullen and inactive since school began. Friday I tried to "have a talk" with her with apparent zero success. That afternoon she came running into the room where I was with an elated "Harriet, come and see!" I hadn't seen her show any pleasure about anything in the program before that.. There was one of the kids singing over to herself one of the songs we had been trying to teach them, "Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes," and trying to touch the appropriate places at the right time with moderate success.. So I guess the best answer is to get people excited about the kids, and what they are able to learn. How to do this in our little four-classroom building, each room about the size of a middle-sized bedroom, with six classes of about 18-20 kids each, rotating with two always outdoors and four indoors, and the noise of fans and kitchen equipment, is another problem. Actually our Center has a better physical plant than many, and (unfortunately) the kids are used to being in a cramped space, so those aspects are gradually working out.

Headstart is not the only activity in Hollendale. There is also some early-stage union organization for the cotton-choppers, the same union that has produced the strike north of Greenville. They calculate they wouldn't be ready to strike here for about a year, yet. The going rate for

cotton=chopping, ten hours a day, is \$3.00 to \$4.00 per day. Needless to say, no side benefits, job security, or year-round employment. The situation is so bad one can scarcely comment upon it. Mechanization will apparently put most of these people out of work in a few years anyway. At the moment there is little else Negroes in Hollendale can do to make money. If you want an incongruous picture, imagine the Sherrod's daughter Jesse, just back from the NSF Institute I mentioned earlier at Tougaloo College, filled full of high school ~~biology and chemistry~~ biology and chemistry and finding it "very challenging", getting up at 4:30 the very next morning to go out to the field. She got back about 6:30 p.m. having earned her \$4.00, and settled down for the evening with one of those awful, thick tomes that are supposed to prepare kids for the College Entrance Exams. I took one look at those familiar arrays of analogies, prefixes and suffixes, esoteric reading comprehension exercises, etc., and almost flipped with the sheer inappropriateness of it all, and the drop-in-the-bucket nature of NSF summer institutes for the gifted students they are designed to benefit if the students have to go out and chop cotton when they get home instead of having some time to continue learning. Or if they go, as Jesse does, to a Negro high school which is not accredited, making it very hard for her to get into any kind of decent college.

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I guess I got off the subject of organizing the Freedom Labor Union and back onto schools. This digression points out something about my relation to the Freedom Movement and my experience in Mississippi this summer. I don't consider myself a part of the Movement in the same way that the people working for COFO, SNCC, Delta Ministry, or the Freedom Democratic Party are--those people, that is, who are working on voter registration and organizing adults, who demonstrate and go to jail when necessary to achieve some goal, etc. There are a number of reasons for this, ranging from the ideological to the mildly humorous and individual, so I'll mention just a few. Because I'm working with small children, largely in one place, on a government project, I am not (at least not so far) subject to the same kind of daily insults, curses, and studied avoidance from the white community that greets a member of one of the above organizations when they become known in a town. The Delta ministry worker in Hollendale, for instance, a minister-in-training from the Midwest, has acquired a real hatred of Southern whites from his encounters with them in a few months in Mississippi. So far, by contrast, the salespeople and other whites I have briefly encountered have been quite normally cordial, just somewhat reserved. Some may not yet know who I am; others may feel Headstart is non-threatening. So, on the whole, CDGM workers do not get to see the ugly face of race hatred in the South or the face of police brutality the same way as others. With my cowardly nature, I certainly have no desire to trade places, but on the other hand I wouldn't want to represent my Mississippi experience as anything like that of the Jackson demonstrators, many of whom I met, who were beaten with billyclubs, made to sit upright and motionless for three and four hours on the concrete, kept awake at night by continual ringing bells, and so forth. Headstart Centers have had little episodes of trouble too; a few in the worst counties have a guard in them all night because cars cruise around full of mean-looking white men, but in most places things have been quite peaceful.

Because of my situation, then, I don't feel all the time as if I am living in a police state--which is apparently the feeling one acquires from working within the Movement any considerable length of time. I can go shopping in the five and ten in downtown Jackson, or even in the drugstore in Hollendale where I get a chocolate ice cream soda most afternoons and cool off, and feel quite normal. But friends of mine who are with

SNCC, COFO etc. usually find that they can't forget the violence, ugliness, and systematic degradation of one human being by another that lies behind this like-every-other-American-city facade one can feel in Woolworth's, in Jackson. One can then go further, as many do, to say that the North is not so very different, and find all the conventional places of business and pastimes distasteful for the same reason. But either I am not very imaginative, or very empathetic, or else I haven't been down here long enough for it to seep into everything I do, or else it's because I'm doing the job I'm doing, or because I don't have a well-articulated ideology of social reform to hitch onto my perceptions. But to go into all the discussions about social change, and all the mixed feelings on that subject, would add another five pages to an already wordy letter, so I guess I won't go into that either. Suffice it to say that I feel more relaxed, more hopeful, and happier and less cynical with my work (though of course every day has its depressing moments) than many of the more deeply involved and committed workers down here who are actually the people I've learned the most from. It's a pretty odd situation and maybe it will change radically by the end of the summer.

A more lightweight reason why I would find it hard to work really within the Movement is that I don't really dig Negro cafes--in which it seems one has to sit for hours and hours "making contacts" with the community. The real trouble is that I wasn't raised to like rock and roll places back home. The food is good and the people very friendly, but the noise from the jukebox is overpowering. I dig that music when driving, back home, late at night, or occasionally when I feel in a party mood. But as an accompaniment to eating after a day talking to millions of people, it would really drive me up the wall. Ah, the shortcomings of being a Permanent Square. I wonder if all the integrated eating-groups---local people along with Northern lawyers, ####, people from the Medical Committee for Human Rights, and other such groups who hang out at Steven's Kitchen, in the Negro section two blocks from Jackson's downtown, go there rather than to the many officially integrated eating places within a stone's throw because they like the overpowering jukebox and everyone-knows-everyone atmosphere, or because they dislike the possibility of unfriendly stares and curt service at the "white" places. Though I realize "hamburger equality" is not really a fundamental aspect of the Movement, seems to me it would make more sense to frequent some of these "white" places very often' because what happens this way is that they are just as "white" as before, while all the whites and Negroes eating together do so in Negro places, invisibly to the white community. Vivian agrees with me, but then I guess we still don't really understand what it's all about.

Well I have wandered on and on, trying to say enough to give you some feeling for what's going on down here. I could have written a letter just as long and longer about the ten-day pre-planning and the orientation, and all the people I met then and found puzzling and/or exciting and/or any number of other things. Or I could go on and on about this past week at the Center and what problems are getting solved and what problems seem very difficult, but I'll stop here just saying that there is a great deal more to tell. I may not get off another letter, for which I hope you'll excuse me, but life is really pretty busy. It's a relief to be at Edwards this weekend (Central Office, where I was the first ten days,) just relaxing and seeing everybody and getting the news from all over the state. Please do write if you get a chance--I'm sorry I couldn't write personally to everybody but I hope you'll understand. Have a good summer.

Sincerely,

Harriet

See you in the fall unless you're in Germany, in which case, see you when you get back! Hope you will like to