

July 29, 1965

Dear People,

After awhile we got tired of waking up in the morning with our minds stayed on the ten-year old kid bouncing on our bed; we got irritated at walking into the bathroom at one of those rare times when it is comparatively "free" and stumbling over little Willy stomping on our pet roaches; we got tired of trying to sleep at night to the sound of raucous pre-adolescents raising a joyful noise unto just about everything (mostly the rotting rafters). So we made a Rule: When I start cooking in the evening, all but pre-registered and properly credentialed freedom workers must leave, and they must not return until we are all bathed and stirring in the morning. (It's a regretful ruling, because so many of these kids have so little to go home to. A four-room house is heaven to run around through; an indoor bathroom is a museum of modern functional art; and they know that they are free from whippings here, no matter what the crime.)

Having sowed the wind, we quite biblically reaped the whirlwind. These kids are no fools: They have heard our talk, sat by in our meetings, and learned our lesson. Tonight they came at our door, about thirty of them, marching up onto our porch singing "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn me 'Round." And we did what every assaulted power structure does under similar pressure - we compromised. The freedom rally inside is finally over, and the last laughing screams of innocently butchered freedom songs are gone from the air of East Franklin. If only their parents . . .

This is probably my last report from Natchez, and I honestly don't know quite what to talk about. Not that there's so little, and not that there's so much, it's just that so many things are beginning to move together and intertwine like paramecia under a microscope, and if I start incautiously this letter will turn into a twelve-page staff report.

But there was the old man Edie and Rick and I spoke to in his room, who passed a white church one Sunday morning. A white lady rushed up to him and pressed his hand and gushed at him, "Oh, we are all brothers under Christ, the children of God." We asked Mr. Moore what he replied, and he said that he answered the white lady, "Yass, ma'am."

In Ferriday, Louisiana, just across the river, there is a CORE project of six fellows. Last week they had to move out when their host's house was nearly fire-bombed. (The gasoline failed to ignite by the railroad flares). They took refuge here, and two of them were picked up for vagrancy. A couple of nights ago they were back with a thirteen year old boy who had been shot in the hand. The boy's father had got into an argument with his brother-in-law, and had shot and wounded him. The Ferriday police came to the man's house when he was alone with his two children, the younger one a girl, and tore the house into splinters with heavy fire. (I saw one of the shells. I don't know calibers, but the damned thing was about two inches long). The man, of course, was killed; the son was wounded, and the daughter managed to get away somehow. That was in Ferriday; the fellows say that every time they cross the bridge into Mississippi they sigh with relief and say, "Freedom!" Natchez is quietly sending out feelers to set up a Deacons for Defense and Justice chapter, I believe. I'm really not too sure about that at all, but there is discussion.

Yesterday, in a freedom school session (wherein we had all kinds of workshops, and I was type-cast as a surly grocer) we started talking about the personal relevance and the spontaneity of freedom songs (not in those words, naturally). I threw in some words I'd jotted down from my jailing in Jackson; three kids took them into the back room and came out with a new freedom song.

Remind me sometime, I'll sing it for you. Here are the words, in case you'll want to join in. "Sister, go on home tonight / Tell Mama I've joined the freedom fight. // Tell her, Send on down my bail / They're taking me off to the city jail. // Tell my teacher at the school / I'm learning my numbers by the freedom rule. // Tell the preacher on Sunday next / I'm reading my lesson from a freedom text." (One of the young kids who was jailed with us in the Jackson demonstrations had turned to his sister as the police took him off, saying, "Tell Mama I won't be home tonight; I'm going off to jail").

We're getting a telephone tomorrow, and we'll need it. For instance, George and Bob and Rick haven't been back since they went out to Jefferson County this morning. They're probably over across town, but it's late, and we can't help worrying.

The NAACP held a meeting last night. They always meet on Wednesdays. It was, as the local folk say, something else. Literally, A mimeographed program, from which no one would dare deviate. A freedom choir, to which everyone listened reverently, and without thought of joining in the songs. A fellow from California gave the Natchez progress report, and another day-in visitor from New York was a main speaker. Admittedly, vote registration is soaring in Natchez, and admittedly thanks to everyone, NAACP, MFDP, and individual initiative. (About a thousand registered in the county thus far). But, except for registration, nothing of direct interest to Natchez was mentioned last night at the meeting. Charles Evers was good - He remarked that he didn't care what organization was behind him or ahead of him, he supported the challenge. But then, he never explained what challenge, and a lot of people listening still don't know.

I'm not sure we have any answers, but at least we know the questions that the people of Natchez have. In the first precinct meeting of "our" (Eddie, Rick, and I) area, they were passionately brought out Tuesday night: The "charity" hospital charges everyone a minimum of ten dollars a day. If it's a maternity case, they hold the baby until the mother can pay - and some people don't earn ten dollars a week! Dismissed patients are often compelled to work off their debts in the hospital kitchen or corridors. And no one cares about the housing problems, and the landlords certainly won't listen.

"Eddie (who has lived in Harlem): Do you have rats?

Lady: Rats! We got 'em as big as cats!" And no plumbing, no gas, no paint, no care, no interest at all. The Zerkowsky family own one third of Natchez. Housing was tabled until this Tuesday's meeting, but a committee was formed to investigate the condition and ownership of the three hospitals in town. How is a committee formed? Like this:

"Jim: Can we find out who owns and runs the hospital at the library?"

First Lady: Which library, the colored one on Franklin Street?

Second Lady: They're letting us into the big library on State and Commerce now, we could go there. I want to find out about this.

Jim: Who's going down to the library then?

First Lady: I want to go. This is something I want to find out for myself.

Second Lady: Wait for me; I get off from work around two.

Third Lady: I'll go, I want to find out, too.

Jim: Do you want one of us to go with you?

Second Lady: Yeah. You come, too."

Volunteer committee by indignation, not by embarrassment. Well, we never did get to the library, but we did discover that the Natchez Charity Hospital is supported by state funds, and has been charging ten dollars a day ever since Barnett exhausted the state treasury trying to keep James Meredith out of Ole Miss. I'm sorry I won't be here this coming Tuesday, when people will try

to figure out what they can do about all this.

COFO is dissolving in Mississippi, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party has taken over project direction, since it is totally Mississippi organized and run. But COFO is leaving behind two wings of the freedom movement. One is state-named - MOFO, which, as well as being a pun around COFO, is a Mississippi Negro dialect form of mother-fucker. This is the goof-off, beer-drinking wing, small but annoying, mostly old-line workers who have become fatigued and disillusioned. The other is not termed, except for our terminology here in Natchez - LOFO. LOFO stands for local folks, and is the strongly moving operative force in the freedom movement. LOFO is the Natchez people and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; LOFO is the Freedom Labor Union, and area people griping out parliamentary anger at precinct meetings. When LOFO and MOFO conflict, MOFO sits back and laughs at the futility of it all (having forgotten Camus) and LOFO (which includes most staff and volunteers as well as the backbone) starts singing "You gotta do what the local folks do." Both positions, at least from my "volunteer" point of view, are exaggerated, because at times we must heed the advice and control of the staff. But in a toss-up, the local folks always come up heads.

Enough for now; I want to write to Mr. Bookman and go to sleep, alone in the Freedom House waiting for George and Bob and Rick. Saturday morning I'm going up to Panola County, and I'll write from there; Rick will be coming up with me. I'll definitely be back in White Plains by the eighth, and possibly a couple of days before. Would that I could stay here all summer; the work is just beginning. (But it seems that every place I ever leave, the work is always just beginning. Is this what it means to be an agitator?)

Yours for freedom, and Love  
Jim