

WEST POINT, MISSISSIPPI

August 20, 1965

Today, the Negroes of Pheba, Mississippi, a rural area in the West of Clay County, are wondering when the next out break of violence against them will occur and whether they will ever receive protection from the law. There has been no apparent protection since the first incident, about 2PM, Sunday morning, August 8th, when two volleys of rifle and shot gun fires perforated the freedom house containing four FDP volunteer workers and two lawyers. After it became light, fifty one bullet holes were counted in the front wall of the freedom house and about ten holes in a neighbor's house. Later Sheriff Strickland, a couple of County Investigators, and several FBI agents from the Columbus office, inspected the area, took testimony and made an impression of some tire tracks in front of the freedom house. The FBI agents returned, once later in the week, to ask more questions about a car involved in an earlier minor incident, whose license number was known.

The following Friday, after midnight, a car load of whites drove to the freedom house. One worker and two local youths were in the house. One of the white men they recognized, Bert Blanchett, was permitted to enter the house. After some conversation, he pulled a pistol and held it at the neck of one of the youths. Subsequently, the youths and the worker were chased and overtaken when they started to drive to town. The whites pulled up in front of them when they stopped to get help. A youth who had left the car fired a shot gun over the head of the pursuing white who had turned back to the FDP car. A man known as Jimmy Wyatt, jumped on the car and broke the windshield with his heel. No one was injured that night, but the freedom house was fired into after the cars had left.

FBI agents came again from Columbus early Saturday morning after the workers called the Jackson FBI office. They interrogated them rudely and would not let one of the youths speak.

That night, Saturday August 14, 1965, after a precinct meeting at the Mount Zion Church in Pheba, adjacent to the freedom house, some people remained with guns to protect the house and the church. Some time later before midnight, three shots were fired at a house from a car known to belong to a white named John Thomas. The next morning the sheriff returned with two of the three men who had driven by and shot at the house the previous night. He and they explained that they had not shot at the house, but at a rabbit that had crossed the road in front of their car as they were passing the freedom house. In the afternoon, three of the workers attempted to swear out warrants against Bert Blanchett and Jimmy Wyatt. The local Justice of the Peace, Bob White, refused to allow them to swear out the warrant. A worker, Burt Halperin, was permitted to swear out the warrants against Blanchett and Wyatt, the next day, Monday August 16. When Bill Kopit, LCDC lawyer, arrived the next day, he learned that the warrants were invalid because the Justice of the Peace's jurisdiction was for another district.

Meanwhile five more shots had been fired near the freedom house at 9PM on Monday while no one was in it. A Negro at a nearby house heard the shots and drove immediately to investigate. He said a car full of whites was leaving the scene when he came up. Minutes later the

sheriff arrived saying he had been called about a disturbance by the Blanchetts who lived nearby. He stopped He stopped the Negro, looked in the car and said that it was the car from the shots had been fired the previous Saturday night. He told the Negro to stay off the road, and that two car loads of armed whites were waiting down the road.

Tuesday, when a FDP worker, Jay Lockard, called the FBI in Columbus, no one answered as had consistently been the case before. When she called the Jackson FBI office, they refused to speak to her and cut off another worker, John Buffington, who wanted to tell them about recent violence. They said that instead of talking over the phone they would send an agent from Columbus to talk with them. When no agent had arrived by Thursday, Jay called again and was told that someone would come Friday morning. An agent from Columbus, Len Smith, did come to the FDP office in West Point about 10AM Friday, saying that he had to hurry to investigate some complaint in another county. When questioned insistently by Jay Lockard while he was trying to leave the office, the agents said that he knew the names of the night riders and Jay didn't. When asked how soon arrests could be made, Smith said that it was nothing he could do. Another worker, Andrew Silver, mentioned the fact that John Thomas had been involved in the shooting and Smith did not write down or acknowledge. When Silver said that there was a good chance of the shooting after the Pheba precinct meeting the next Saturday night, as after the two previous meetings, and that it would be a good idea for the F.B.I. to be there when it happened. Smith replied that he could not offer protection, that the F.B.I. could only investigate and that he would continue to investigate. The previous day when officials from the Justice Department had visited the office to ask about voting registration, they had said that pursuit of the case of violence involving civil rights were left up to the F.B.I. When Silver told Smith what the Justice Department official had said, Smith said that it was right and left.

As we approach another weekend in Clay County, we have clear knowledge as does the F.B.I. that neither local law enforcement officials nor Justice Department agents are going to investigate the crimes perpetrated against us or make any arrests of the white people involved. We hope that the F.B.I. is more interested in our problem than they appear to be. If they do not come to Pheba Saturday night and if violence does reoccur then, we cannot predict the extent of any further break downs of law and order in the area.