

[Oct. 9, 1965] Viol. of Harass

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NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI - SIX WEEKS OF CRISIS

It's been six weeks since NAACP president in Natchez, George Metcalfe, 55, ~~turned~~ turned the key in the ignition switch of his car and set off a bomb hidden beneath the hood. His leg and arm were broken and his face and legs were cut and burned.

Hours after the bombing Negro leaders filed a petition to Mayor John Nossier, 64, demanding that the city government publicly denounced the Ku Klux Klan, the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, and the Citizens Council. In addition, they demanded that the city council order an end to police brutality and require police to stop Klan harassment, desegregate public schools, hire more Negroes on the police force, and have officials address Negroes with courtesy titles. These were only a few of the 12 detailed demands which, in effect, specified the major complaints of black people in Natchez.

So far not one of the demands has been met. Mayor Nossier, who was elected in a close contest with the help of Negro votes, is a frightened man, especially since his home was bombed last September. The town's leading newspaper, the police force, the sheriff's deputies, and every one of the leading industries in the county are infiltrated with Klan members. The only white voice of moderation is Forrest Johnson, an attorney, who edits a weekly tabloid circulated almost exclusively in the Negro neighborhoods. Johnson has lost half of his law practice and most of his friends. How long he will stay around is anybody's guess.

The night of the Metcalfe bombing, Negroes held a mass meeting and leaders announced a boycott of all the stores in the downtown area. A Catholic priest who is vice president of the local NAACP, Father J.J. Morrissey, and Charles Evers, field secretary for the state NAACP, warned that unless the city agreed to some of the people's demands their frustration might lead to violence.

A few days later Governor Paul B. Johnson ordered the National Guard to Natchez, imposed a 10 P.M. to 5 A.M. curfew, and forbade the sale of beer. (State law forbids the sale of other alcoholic beverages.) The Guardsmen, all white, left Natchez Labor Day weekend.

On September 9, Negroes held their first mass demonstration - a night march through the downtown area to City Hall. Over 200 people knelt and prayed on the steps then broke up and went home on foot. Although at first Police Chief J.T. Robinson stopped them at a busy intersection and told them they were violating a city ordinance and asked them to turn around, he let them proceed.

Nightly meetings continued and hot arguments erupted between those people who wanted to march and those who were against it. Relations between the NAACP and the FDP reached a low point. Charles Evers invited S.C.L.C. and Delta Ministry leaders and volunteers to come to the city.

On September 27, Rev. Albert Sampson, 27, of Boston, Massachusetts, a student of Saul Alinsky in Chicago and a worker for SCLC, announced plans to break the curfew. He said he would lead thousands of Negroes in a march if the curfew was not lifted.

On September 28 Evers said that the NAACP would not march and added that people who were arrested would have to find their own bond contacts. Rev. Sampson said he would go along with the decision but privately complained about the NAACP's position. For the next few days Sampson boycotted the mass meetings. During all this time several sources reported that Evers had been fired from his job as field secretary. Two weeks before, Hosea Williams of SCLC, appealed to people at a mass meeting in Natchez to support Evers "because some persons on the NAACP Executive Committee want to get rid of him for personal reasons."

The KKK's newspaper, the Fiery Cross, was passed out through the streets of Natchez on the 28th. The same day Evers led 300 people to City Hall. Before the marchers arrived 400 more people joined them, according to a UPI report. Other observers estimated that over 1,000 people were there.

Meanwhile the economic boycott was taking its effect. Despite an AP report (September 4) that Negroes appeared not to be observing the boycott, by September 29 the boycott was well under way. Official observers for the NAACP announced the names of Negroes seen shopping at downtown stores. The embarrassment of having one's name announced at a mass meeting persuaded many people to stay away. One wealthy funeral director humbly apologized for disobeying the boycott, after his actions were mentioned at a meeting. He

promised he wouldn't repeat his error. On September 30, downtown merchants announced a \$1,000 annual contest drawing. The Miss-Lou Observer, Forrest Johnson's paper, said that the drawing was "a means to break the Negro Boycott." The paper emphasized that the boycott had caused "considerable damage to the financial position of many downtown merchants."

The curfew was being unfairly applied to Negroes. No whites were held in the city jail on curfew charges but many Negroes and two white civil rights workers were kept in jail pending bond for up to five days. In at least one case, arrests were made of FDP workers who were just a dozen paces from home.

The state law permitting the curfew order for adults was passed in the summer of 1964. It was criticized at the time for allowing police to restrict freedom of movement without formally declaring martial law. Federal as well as state courts have held similar curfews unconstitutional. An admitted White Citizens Council member from Humphreys County, Iroy Turner, introduced the bill in the Mississippi legislature.

On September 15, six days after the curfew was ordered, it was modified so that adults could stay on the streets until midnight, instead of 10 P.M. At the trial of several FDP volunteers on September 22 Judge James Keyer dropped charges against the defendants on the grounds that the curfew ordinance failed to meet some technical requirements of the state law. Finally, October first the city council voted to lift the curfew altogether.

On September 30 the city attorney successfully petitioned a local judge to enjoin the NAACP, FDP, JCLC, and KKK leaders from marching, picketing, and a whole series of acts which severely restricted both freedom of speech and assembly. One injunction named Evers, Aaron Henry (who hadn't been in Natchez during all this time), James Jackson, Rev. Shead Baldwin, Rev. Robert Howard, James Parker, William Ware, Rev. W.J. Morrissey, James Roddy, Otis Flemings, Archie Jones, Miss Posy Lombard, Louis Easton, Eddie Williams, Ervin Martin, Rudolph Shields, and Rev. Sampson. Curiously, the names of FDP leaders, Miss Dorie Ladner and Miss Alberta Watkins, who had been working in Natchez for over a year, were omitted.

The next day, 19 people, mainly teenagers, were arrested for picketing white stores and charged with blocking the sidewalks. The group timed their arrests so that only one or two people were picked up at a time. A large crowd of people watched the picketers as they left from a cafe in the Negro side of Franklin Street for the white stores farther down the street. Several other Negroes were arrested when they watched the pickets. They complained that they weren't given a warning to move. One man said, "The cops told me, 'We're arresting you and every damn nigger in sight and if you don't like it I'll blow your god damn brains out.'"

The next day, October 2, 271 people marched in protest against the previous day's arrests and in support of the 12 demands. Police Chief Robinson stopped them as they approached the first corner and loaded them into police buses. A handful of people were taken to the city jail, but almost all were transferred to the state penitentiary at Parchman, 250 miles away.

The reason given for taking persons not yet convicted of any crime to a state prison was that there was not enough room to hold them at the county and city jails. At Parchman, the ugly face of Mississippi's vicious sadism erupted. What happened can only be described by the people who suffered through it. The following statements are excerpted from affidavits filed with the Justice Department:

Samuel Carter, 33, a high school physical education teacher:

We got out of the buses and they lined us up in groups of 12. I was in front of the second line. One highway patrolman looked at me and said, 'I wish one of those s.o.b.'s would look at me (so I could beat him up).' A few moments later he slapped me as hard as he could on the right side of my face and cursed me out. I didn't say a word to him.

They ordered us to strip and spread our checks. One of them pulled on the hair below my lower lip. I saw him pull hair out of one boy's beard. They wouldn't let us wear anything. When they put us in the cells (in the maximum security section) there was six of us with cots for only two. There was no mattresses or covers, just an iron cot. (The weather bureau recorded temperatures in the 40's that night.)

They opened all the windows and turned on the air conditioning. We sat kneeling; it was too cold to sit on the cot. We exercised, did knee bends to keep warm.

My jaw was so cold I couldn't eat hard food. On Sunday night (October 3) some fellows hollered for the guards because they was so sick. The guards didn't bring the doctor till the next day.

Miss Helen Louise Session, 24, Natchez Junior College student:

He (a prison official) turned the air conditioner on us (women were not forced to disrobe except for their sweaters, shoes, and outer garments) and we asked him to turn it off but he wouldn't.

They made us drink something that was a laxative.... One lady in our cell had to tear her panties up to use for sanitary napkin and toilet tissue.

Miss Posy Lombard of Weston, Massachusetts:

We had eight or nine people in our cell. They continually threatened us all the time. They forced some of the women to take more than one cup of that medicine. Later on, they came down to the cells - about five o'clock in the morning - and picked out girls and made them drink more, another cup or two of (the laxative). And they they scarcely gave us any toilet paper, so we were using bread and biscuits to wipe ourselves with. One girl in my cell got very sick and when the doctor came by he ordered her to come up to the front of the cell. When she didn't say 'yes, sir,' 'no, sir' to all his questions, he got very angry. She had very bad cramps and couldn't stand up straight. He left her there for six hours before they took her to the hospital.

The doctor came by and took blood tests of all the women and they told one person it was for a syphilis test. They didn't tell most people, so they didn't know why they were taking the blood. And they were very hasty and careless about shooting the needle into the person's arm, so they stuck an average, each person, maybe two or three times. I know one girl they stuck five times.

Sander Parkman - he said he was head of the prisons - asked me a lot of questions. He told me the Negroes on his plantation were his best friends and as proof of it he told me that if I was ever on his plantation and he told his Negroes to kill me, they would do it.

The Natchez Democrat responded to the demonstrations and mass arrests with the editorial suggestion to build larger jail facilities and hire more police.

The marches continued. A hundred six people were arrested October 4 and 22 more the following day. Violence almost broke out on the fourth when E.L. McDaniel, grand dragon of the United Klans

of America (one of the three KKK organizations in the state) and about 150 whites heckled demonstrators a half block from the Negro church where the march started. NAACP leaders made sure that Negroes avoided the challenge to fight the white toughs.

On October 6 Federal Judge Harold Cox modified the county court injunction prohibiting marching. He allowed marchers to move two abreast down city streets as long as they did not interfere with traffic. Over 1250 people (1,000 according to the AP count) marched that night to the county building. Groups of whites lingered on the corners staring and mildly provoking the demonstrators. During civil rights marches police in other towns shoo away potential trouble makers, but in Natchez they didn't dare. On the other hand, members of the Natchez Deacons for Defense and Justice, a Negro group, were not bothered either as they coolly eyed the proceedings to and from the courthouse. One tall, husky Deacon in overalls and white shirt, the unofficial uniform of his organization, leaned up against a building across from the courthouse. Police were nearby. It looked for sure that he might get arrested because he wasn't in line. But nothing happened.

People sang Freedom Songs and one old man cried out: "God, you brought us this far. Please don't leave us." A woman repeated the same words, then the leaders spoke and people marched back to the church where they started.

On October 9 police told NAACP leaders that city officials wanted to negotiate.

A short meeting was held and an attorney for the city indicated that some action might be taken on the 12 demands. Some of the demands were rephrased, a television report from Jackson announced, to make it possible for the white officials to negotiate. For example, the report noted that the denunciation of the KKK was changed to a request that the city take action against "groups which advocated racial or religious hatred and bigotry." A moratorium on further marches was agreed to until Tuesday, October 12.

Nothing much can be expected from the city right now. Time, though, is on the Negroes' side. There are about 3,200 Negroes registered to vote in the county out of an eligible 9,340. (In 1961 only 1,050 Negroes were registered, according to the U.S. Com-

mission on Civil Rights.) There are only about 5,500 white voters. When the next elections come around this spring, the gap between the two races will be much narrower.

There are more people working on voter registration in Adams County now than ever before. The FDP has two full-time paid workers and about four almost-full-time volunteers. SCLC, headed by Rev. Sampson and Mrs. Septima Clark, has five full-time paid workers and about 20 or 30 local people who will be receiving \$30. a month subsistence. The NAACP has several people who may work full-time on voter registration, and Evers has promised 29 women who went on strike recently that he will pay them subsistence to work on voter registration until they get their jobs back. (They left their jobs at a laundry when one woman was fired when she returned from Parchman on October 5.) The Delta Ministry has sent down eight volunteers, mainly clergymen, for an indefinite period.

Voter registration may be slowed down because of the friction between the NAACP and the other organizations (SCLC, FDP, DM). There exists now a fragile working coalition. The natural conservatism and more elitist organization of Evers group makes affiliation with the more radical, poor-oriented FDP almost impossible. Evers' personal prestige and influence in Natchez per its him to run the show. He enjoys the support of influential Negro ministers in town. So far the mass meetings have turned down requests by FDP members like William Ware to speak. Rev. Sampson has been given secondary status by Evers in planning and strategy sessions so far. Mrs. Clark has not tried to play a major role in the direct action phase of the Movement in Natchez. The Delta Ministry, led by Rev. Harry Bowie, has worked hard toward keeping the shaky coalition together.

It wouldn't be surprising, though, if Natchez became the first fairly large-sized city in the state to see more Negroes than whites registered. If the momentum can continue for the next few weeks the spring elections will undoubtedly be different than at any time since Reconstruction. White politicians have traditionally, in the words of a September 29 Miss-Lou Observer editorial, sneaked "into St. Catherine and Franklin Streets with wild promises of great things for the Negro population. The Negro didn't believe all these

wild visions of the great hereafter but they were effective." Next time undoubtedly there will be Negroes on the ballot.

Hopefully, some kind of concensus can be reached between the NAACP and the FDP to support one candidate. In Greenville, an NAACP treasurer recently filed and got his name on the ballot for mayor before an FDP candidate was announced. The FDP has declined to run another Negro candidate against him. In most parts of the state, however, FDP candidates will probably not have to face the threat of splitting the black vote. The NAACP is not a political organization and has not shown signs so far of becoming one in the state. This is true despite Evers' role in forming a group called the Mississippi Democratic Conference. The head of the state AFL-CIO, Claude Ramsey, is "co-partners" with Evers in this venture to forge a Democratic party in the state which can attract moderate white and conservative Negro votes. FDP has taken no official position on the MDC, but important FDP officials have criticized Negro members of the organization because of their "Uncle Tom" conservative reputations. No FDP members, or for that matter, any active civil rights leaders in the state besides Evers, were invited to the MDC's founding meeting last July.

Meanwhile, George Metcalfe is still in the hospital. He may be paralyzed for life.

The hoodlum who planted the bomb in Metcalfe's car set off an explosion whose tremors are still being felt. It has mobilized the Negro community more than any of the other 17 or more terroristic acts against Negroes in Adams County (recorded by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission) in recent months. It has brought Charles Evers to a position of greater influence than at any time in his career, despite rumors that he has already been fired by the national office of the NAACP. Most important, it has put the KKK and the white power structure on the defensive and has served warning on them that Black people want their Freedom Now. And that Now better not be delayed for too many tomorrows.

Charles Horwitz
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