

Oct. 6, 1964

Dear Mom, Dad, & Jeff,

Well, we're pretty well wiped out right now. My car hit and not functioning and the offices & library building a shambles.

When Mrs. G—at the house I'm staying at called through my door at 8:00 Sunday morning that the "Academy" has been bombed, I couldn't believe it. It was still just as hard to take in when I got to 1016 Mossley St. an hour later. Standing up on the hill in the mist and rain, there was no more than the gutted shell of a building. The safe & secure wooden frame building housing a library, classroom, family's apartment and upstairs offices was gone.

Sunday morning & early afternoon the Vicksburg police, detectives & the F.B.I. swarmed over the debris in varying numbers. But the rain, which didn't let up until mid-afternoon, greatly hampered their movements.

An F.B.I. agent tried to take pictures of the wreckage but his lens got all fogged up & his film stuck together jelling into an amorphous blob. And the agents quite noticeably wanted to keep out of the rain. The morning was not without its humorous side. What paragons of investigators!

The F.B.I. hauled all of us down to the Federal Building to get testimonies—but mysteriously only wanted to talk to all the white northerners (even me who wasn't there, so to speak)——"had to get all the background information," etc., but weren't interested at all in talking to the 2 local Negro boys who were in the building during the blast, & to the project director. Only when, with puzzled looks, we questioned them about this oversight did they decide to talk to everybody involved.

I think the police & mayor were almost as "shaken" by the blast as we were. Mayor Holland tramped up the hill through the rain & mud at about 11:00.

When he saw the interior of the building—& the clear signs of near-death-misses (14 people in the building) in every room he was visibly upset. He saw the gaping hole where the large kitchen once stood (if any one had been having a snack—instant death), he saw the family's bedroom a shambles with the back wall blown in, the crib filled with plaster & walling where the baby was buried except for his head. Four children, age 11 on down, were asleep in that bedroom. He saw the debris littered hole where the 2 bathrooms & shower room had been, and he saw the upstairs bedroom that three, sometimes four COFO boys used—with the wall adjoining the kitchen & half the floor gone, only a gaping abyss & the double bed hanging precariously through the opening dangling wildly over the rubble below. One of the Negro boys had been lying on the bed when the blast went off and the entire room started to move. Bryan, a white volunteer, was just about to walk over & sit down at a desk up against the now missing wall to finish up a letter on my typewriter—all meaning serious injury. (When half the room collapsed, Henry literally flew off the bed & was saved). Mayor Holland, looking with four of us at the half demolished upper room could only say, "Those bastards, how could any one do it!" And he made the plea that out-of-city rural people could have been behind the bombing just as easily as any local Vicksburgites.

One of the F.B.I. agents, a man just down to Miss. from N.Y.C., told me after their investigation (they found where the bomb had been placed, but no fuses, dynamite caps, or other remnants) that the explosives had not been put on the back porch as originally thought, but way under the center of the building & to the left hand side. The blast should have brought the entire structure down, but for some big, heavy beams that ran under the library floor. These beams forced the blast out the back of the building & not up—(to bring down both floors & the roof on top of it all). In short, he said, they were trying to bring down the entire building.

The police have been fully cooperative & very polite in the face of the catastrophe. I've gotten to know the station house very well between talking to the captain & officers about the bombing and my accident. The order was obviously given by Chief Sills to cooperate in every way with COFO on the bombing (which is bit of a change from previous policy, of course).

Sunday at 4:00 a mass meeting was held in one of the churches. About 100 people attended. They collected some money for the Brown family & decided to start a drive to rebuild the "Academy." But the attendance was poor. A much better meeting took place last night in a church basement with the indigenous Negro civil rights group—the Warren County Improvement League. Plans were made for getting a new office as fast as possible, finding the Brown Family a home, and pulling the project back together again.

Right now the work is at a standstill. My car being wrecked was a catastrophe in itself, but the bombing was really a blow to the solar plexus & the project is still on its knees & gasping for breath. It became clear about Oct 1 that Jackson couldn't supply the projects with nearly enough funds or automobiles—both absolute necessities. So the events of Saturday afternoon & early Sunday morning have really hurt the Vicksburg project. Right now there is no office (except that we still can use the intact rooms at 1016 up until dark by agreement with the police) & no cars, except one old rattletrap Ford.

It's clear that we'll have to do the immediate organization rebuilding with money from the North. At least two new cars are needed. If we can raise \$100 we'll get one auto that has already been offered.

Have you any ideas about any New York people who could help rebuild the project over the next few weeks. We're going to need about \$500 just to begin with.

The state of the car repair seems uncertain right now. A very vague estimate on the work is \$200 - 300. All-State Insurance is checking out the policy through their Jackson and Dallas offices, but their claims adjustor told me that people often hold cards on invalid (not current) policies. They said they would notify me Wed. or Thurs. Meanwhile, today their estimator is supposed to look at the car. I also have to fill my accident report today & get down to the police office to see if the officer present at the accident can act as a witness. At any rate, even if the policy is good, they won't go handing any money out before a thorough & time consuming set of check-ups.

I received the money order without difficulties yesterday (except that I had no way of getting downtown to get it).

The mail man is sticking our delivery in the house across the street (as no one but us is allowed up the hill) but 1016 Hossley Street is still the address to use—until we find a new place.

I'm keeping Gramps' Birthday in mind.

It would be good if you could show some of this material around—as the situation is a bit desperate right now, organizationally that is—and everyone feels that it is important that we bounce up & get functioning again as soon as possible—to show something to the white community as well as the Negro.

Both the accident & the bombing were somewhat sobering events, to say the least, and I've become doubly cautious about everything we're doing down here—especially movements and activities after dark.

But the sun is also out now, the sky is a cloudless, blazing blue and it's deliciously cool—a real fall day even in Vicksburg, Miss.!

Lots of love,

B i l l

William B. Helish
1016 Hossley Street,
Vicksburg, Mississippi

BOMBING AT THE VICKSBURG FREEDOM HOUSE

At about 3:00 A.M., Sunday, Oct. 4, the COFO office, library, and Freedom School at 1016 Hossley St. was largely destroyed by what is believed to have been a dynamite bomb. The bomb had been placed on the south side of the building, about halfway back, under the rear portion of the library.

None of the fourteen people in the building at the time of the blast, was seriously injured, though several members of Mrs. Bessie Brown's family, which occupied part of the first floor, were slightly hurt. Mrs. Brown herself received minor cuts and scratches. Her daughter, Sandra, was similarly cut, and Hank, her two month old grandson, was bruised. The other five children, ranging in age from three to eleven, suffered from shock.

Upstairs, the six COFO workers were unhurt. When the blast occurred, Henry Coleman, a local volunteer, was standing in the office, another Vicksburg volunteer, J. C. Hayes, was talking with Elaine Singer, COFO worker from Endicott, N. Y. in the north-front room. Meanwhile, in the south-front bedroom, Henry Hunter, a local boy participating in SNCC's work-study program, was lying in bed, having a conversation with Bryan Dunlap, COFO volunteer from Leonia, N.J. Standing in the hall between the two rooms was Emily Gordon, COFO, of Ann Arbor, Mich.

A loud, prolonged explosion and flash of light was followed by the sounds of the house falling in toward the rear. Clouds of dust and acrid smoke filled the house. The first sounds in the silence were the cries of the awakened Brown children.

In the darkness which followed the explosion, J. C., Bryan and Emily helped clear debris from the first-floor hall and, with Mrs. Brown, took the six frightened younger children out to the front porch. In the rain and the rising wind which swept Vicksburg in advance of hurricane Hilda, the survivors took shelter on the porch under an unharmed portion of the roof, and searched the wreckage for clothing. Jackie, Mrs. Brown's youngest (2 year-old) daughter had been buried up to the neck in debris, after having been thrown from her bed by the concussion of the blast. She had to be dug out. The Brown living quarters were filled with overturned furniture and broken glass.

Total damage has been estimated at \$10,000. The rear part of the house (back porch, kitchen, toilets, library) was completely demolished, and the blast tore away nearly all the library ceiling, blowing out more than half of the floor of the room in which Henry and Bryan had been standing. Henry's bed was tilted through the hole, balanced on several broken floor planks.

Pieces of the wreckage were blown backwards in a radius of about 60 feet. A metal folding chair was found on Grove Street, to the south of the house, 50 feet away.

Only two rooms in the house escaped damage—the office and the north-front room. The files were undamaged, but one desk and work area were blown through the floor. About 9,000 volumes in the Freedom library were buried by the blast. Most were rained on for several hours; many were broken up and soiled by dust from the explosion, thrown around and stepped on by officials investigating the site.

The F.B.I. have done a thorough job of looking around. Local police, though, are more concerned with controlling our actions. They have tried repeatedly to evict us from our only office space.