

November 19, 1962

MEMORANDUM FROM: Charles Cobb and Charles McLaurin

RE: Preliminary survey on the condition of the Negro farmers in Ruleville, Mississippi, at the close of the cotton season

(Note: This report is based on a few hours spent talking with people in Ruleville.)

Settlement

The cotton picking season in the Mississippi Delta lasts from the middle of August until the middle of December. At the end of the season, all of the debts incurred by the Negro sharecropper during the year are totaled up by the plantation owner and deducted from the money that the sharecropper has made during the cotton picking season. The sharecropper plays no part in the totaling up of debts which include: cost of raising cotton crop, rent, food, and miscellaneous bills such as doctor's bills, cost of buying a car, etc.

The agreement between sharecropper and plantation owner is that the sharecropper will raise a crop of cotton, and split it 50-50 with the plantation owner. But the cost of raising the cotton crop is paid entirely by the sharecropper. All of the cotton is sold by the plantation owner, who in turn tells the sharecropper how much the cotton was sold for. The fact that all finance is handled by the plantation owner makes the sharecropper subject to all sorts of financial chicanery from the plantation owner. In fact, several sharecroppers and day workers have reported that they have had to pay out social security even though they have no social security number. Mrs. Irene Johnson of Ruleville, who is active in the voter registration drive there, reports that even her ten-year-old son has had social security taken from him.

Mrs. Willie Mae Robinson, who sharecrops on a plantation near Ruleville, picked twenty (20) bales of cotton this season; yet she only cleared three dollars (\$3.00) for the entire year. (There are approximately 550 lbs. in a bale of cotton; and the current selling price per pound of picked cotton is \$.34. Simple arithmetic shows that before deductions, Mrs. Robinson should have made \$3,740.00.) It is true that she had to split her gross with the plantation owner, and pay for her yearly expenses, but as one man told us in reference to the plight of this lady, "I know that she hasn't eaten what would have come out of ten bales."

We cannot report in much detail on settlements, because most won't be made until after Christmas.

The average amount of money made by sharecroppers for the year is between \$300-400. The average amount of money made by day laborers for the year is between \$150-160.

The general opinion among the Negro community in Ruleville is that they "won't make anything much" and will need commodities.

Commodities

Commodities are surplus government foods, given out to people on welfare, and farming people in need of them. The commodities are usually meal, rice, flour and dry milk. Last year it was announced in Ruleville's paper that butter, peanut butter, and canned meat would be given out; but several people have told us that they never get any.

(continued)

Before this year, all one had to do in order to receive commodities was to go to City Hall, and sign up. This year, however, there is a registration form to be filled out before anyone becomes eligible. This form has to be signed by the applicant and countersigned by his boss, or a responsible person (which usually means a white person). Due to the voter registration drive that has been and is being carried on in Ruleville, the "responsible people" are not particularly inclined to favors for the Negro.

Mrs. Mary Burris of Ruleville went to City Hall to sign up to receive commodities. As she approached City Hall, she met several Negro citizens coming out. They told her that all persons with their own homes now had to go to the Welfare Department in Indianola (county seat) to sign up for commodities. When she got there, the lady in charge asked her why she hadn't signed up in Ruleville. Mrs. Burris explained that she was told to come to Indianola. She was then told to take a seat. After about two hours, another lady came out and told Mrs. Burris that her papers (registration for commodities) were not filled out properly. Mrs. Burris was told that she would have to go to every person she had picked for, and bring back something showing how much she had earned from each of them. She was given until 9 a.m. the next morning to do this. Mrs. Burris has been receiving commodities for the past three years, and she says that this is the first time this has happened. She said that this is also the first time that she has had to fill out papers to get food.

Mrs. Gertrude Rogers of Ruleville went to City Hall to sign up to receive commodities. She was given a card. She heard the Mayor of Ruleville, C. M. Dorrough, say "most of them with cards ain't going to get any food." Mrs. Rogers reports that the Mayor also said that those who went down to register were not going to get anything, "that he was going to mess up all of them."

At this point, I would like to bring to your attention something Mayor Dorrough said a month or two ago in reference to Negro participation in the voter registration drive in Ruleville: "We gonna see how tight we can make it -- gonna make it just as tight as we can -- gonna be rougher, rougher than you think it is."

When Mrs. Leona McClendon, a day laborer, went to sign up to receive commodities, she was told that she could not get the food because she had a job, and had earned \$15.00 per week. Mrs. McClendon says, "I did not earn \$15.00 the whole year."

Mrs. Bessie Lee Greene was told the same thing as Mrs. Mary Burris. In addition, Mrs. Greene was told she would have to bring in what her son-in-law had earned. Both Mrs. Greene and Mrs. Burris have stated that they do not believe that the various bosses they worked for kept records of that sort.

Mrs. Lucy Sadies, a day worker, went to the Ruleville City Hall to apply for receipt of commodities. She was told that she received a check and was not eligible to get the food. When Mrs. Sadies told him that she did not receive a check, she was told to go and talk with the social security agent, and that he would apply for her.

Grocers in Ruleville have always objected to commodities being issued there.

Commodities are the only way many Negroes make it from cotton season to cotton season. If this is taken from them, they have nothing at all; and the success of our voter registration program depends on the protection we can offer the individual while he is waiting for his one small vote to become a part of a strong Negro vote. It doesn't take much to tide over the rural Mississippi Negro, but the commodities are vital.

(continued)

The Mechanical Cotton Picker

The mechanical cotton picker is still imperfect; but it is being used more and more. Essentially what makes the mechanical picked disliked by the plantation owner is that it chops the cotton as it picks, giving a shorter fiber, and thereby lowering the value of the cotton.

Still, Negroes tell us that the machines were used with increasing frequency this year: "cotton picking machines used all the way this year." Where cotton grew in greatest quantity this year, the machines were used. More cotton was picked by machine than by hand.

One Woman's View

Mrs. Anderson runs a small grocery store, and is full of ideas and gossip. She had something to say on where Ruleville stands economically. "People haven't made anything this year...Folks don't have any money now."

Mrs. Anderson told of how the "soda pop man" came to her store, and told her that the reason he was there so early was because he had been driving all over town, and hadn't sold a single soda...to either Negro or white store owners.

Mrs. Anderson said that the children hadn't been buying their nickel cookies like they used to. "And when the kids aren't buying their cookies, you know things are bad."

- - - - -

Background on SNCC and Sunflower County: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee began voter registration programs in Mississippi during the summer of 1961, and in Sunflower County -- Sen. Eastland's own -- in August, 1962. The following are two samples of things which took place some weeks after the program began:

* In Ruleville, nightriders shot into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Sisson, Ruleville Negro citizens who had tried to register and vote, and injured two young girls, both students at Jackson State College. Both girls were hospitalized, one with serious head injuries.

* In Indianola (Sunflower County seat) Robert Moses, director of the SNCC Mississippi voting project, and others were arrested for "distributing handbills without a license." The handbills advertised a registration meeting that evening. This memorandum from Charles Cobb and Charles McLaurin demands action.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- 1) Write Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman demanding that people in Sunflower County receive surplus food. (Send a copy to SNCC, 6 Raymond St., Atlanta, Ga.)
- 2) Contact your local congressmen and senators informing them of this situation and demanding that they bring this on the floor of the U. S. Congress.
- 3) Send letters to newspapers, magazines, columnists.
- 4) Notify your local protest group, church, civic, fraternal, and labor organization about this denial of justice.
- 5) Organize a demonstration at your local courthouse and/or federal building protesting this economic pressure against American citizens because they tried to fulfill their obligations as citizens.