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STUDENTS FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN TOUGH SPOTS

Rugged, Ragged 'Snick': What It Is and What It Does

Ex-Chicago Schoolteacher
Leader in Deepest Dixie

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Staff Writer

ATLANTA — In a steady office here, you find the command post of an amazing bluejean army that fights Jim Crow behind cozy lines.

Husky James Forman, 34, sticks out his hand and says hello. This onetime Chicago schoolteacher is executive director of what everyone in the seething "rights" movement calls Snick.

Snick is short for SNCC, which in turn is the initials of the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee.

That long handle offers protective cover for as rugged, and perhaps ragged, a band of individualists as exists in this country.

The boys and girls of Snick risk their lives deep in the South's Hate Belt in sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration drives and other unsafe forms of citizenship.

Most of them are college students or former students, aged 20 or so. High school youngsters also take part. They have been shot, beaten, jailed, hounded or denounced by guardians of the Southern "way of life." Their skin color generally is brown, but some are white.

THEY generally are surprisingly disciplined, but they have their stagey hotheads. SNCC sympathizers were accused of taking part in the boozing of Chicago's Mayor Richard J. Daley at a July 4 rally of the NAACP.

In the South, Snick workers often are on the receiving end of boos, bores and even bullets.

ONE of them, slender Robert Travis, was punctured by a white night rider's rifle bullet. It didn't stop him and he returned to his voter registration campaign in Greenwood, Miss., bastion of white supremacy.

Another SNCC staffer, Lawrence Guyot, removed his overalls and showed newsmen in Jackson, Miss., savage bruises and cuts on his brown skin.

Guyot said deputies in Winona, Miss., beat him while he was protesting against the arrest of five other Negroes. Their crime, he said, was entering a "white" waiting room in a bus terminal.

All this happened while the six were on their way to Jackson for the funeral of Medgar Evers, murdered NAACP official.

The undaunted Guyot, according to Snick, went on to take part in a Negro registration drive that has brought fierce resistance from whites in Greenwood.

He wound up in the county work farm after a courthouse "stand-in" — and led a "sit-down" while in custody.

They Practice Nonviolence

These disciplined young people do not strike back when clubbed by rednecks. The most they may do is

Luther King Jr., apostle of nonviolence, and their constitution states firmly:

"Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate; hope ends despair."

SNICK'S goal, like King's, is to appeal to the white man's conscience—thus setting the stage for equal rights and peaceful co-existence of the races. By any definition, this amounts to virtual revolution, at least in Dixie.

Forman himself has been arrested six times, and this may not even be par for the course. Some Snick workers are in and out of the lockup so often they can't get their laundry done.

To get where they're going, these determined young boys and girls apparently will have to pass through all the hell coils of the racist South.

They will go into towns like McComb, Miss.; Selma, Ala.; Lebanon, Tenn.; and Cairo, Ill., to reach the masses of "degraded, disenfranchised and exploited Negroes," as they put it.

Some friendly farmer may give them a pad to sleep on and dish of chitterlings. Their "uniform" will be overalls or shirt and blue jeans.

They will go up and down the roads—by foot, by jalopy, by bus—talking, explaining, exhorting, trying to get simple rights for brown-skinned citizens living a "slavey" life and buried deep in poverty and despair.

Sometimes, out of this hard and dangerous work, come sit-ins and protests aimed at integrating lunch counters, hospitals and theaters, or at improving jobs and housing for Negroes.

SNCC's campaign to register Negro voters, to end the reign of error and terror that has kept them from Southern polling places, is acutely important. It could help change the South if successful.

That perhaps is why Mississippi officialdom has fought so hard to keep Negroes from voting. Threats, boycotts, economic pressures, jailings and violence all have been used, according to Negroes.

In Greenwood, Miss., a police dog attacked two registration workers. The city's mayor complained that the voters-registration drive followed "the Communist line of fomenting racial violence."

Police officers have killed three Negroes in Mississippi



SNICK leader James Forman, former Chicago teacher, in Fort Payne (Ala.) jail.

counties where the U.S. Justice Dept. has brought voting suits, according to SNCC.

"You're just never sure what the police will do," said a white Chicagoan who had worked with SNCC gaffles in Greenwood. "You never really feel safe."

"And when you sit in the Snick office and see cars filled with white men drive by slowly, you're always wondering what they're going to do."

Tests Keep Them Out of the Booth

Negroes who manage to overcome all these barriers find still another when they seek to register in Greenwood and many other cities—unusually stiff "qualification" tests aimed at keeping them voteless. About three out of four are turned down by the Greenwood registrar.

"And on top of that," Forman says, "Negroes throughout the South have been brain-washed into thinking that voting is none of their business. Our goal is to change their thinking."

SNCC works in this kind of civil rights battleground—and at the rugged Forman puts it matter-of-factly:

"It's dangerous. We know we're risking our lives."

LIKE most of the young people he directs, he takes violence as it comes.

"There was that time in Selma, Ala., when a mob of 150 white people surrounded some of us in a church," he said.

"We had to get on the phone and call the Justice Department and the FBI in Washington in order to get the local police to take action. After Washington got in touch with them, they dispersed the mob."

"Oh, yes, there also was that time in Monroe, N.C., when a fellow pointed a shotgun at me. Fortunately, it didn't go off."

Forman has been arrested

for things like trying to integrate a "white" waiting room. Once, he recalls, all that the police seemed to have against him was that he was riding in a car.

In Greenwood, he said, police grabbed him because he took a picture of a police dog biting a protest marcher. Forman's wife Mildred took over his duties while he lingered in jail. Despite all the arrests, Forman added, he never has been convicted of anything.

BLOND Sandra (Casey) Hayden of Austin, Tex., confided that she is the only staffer in SNCC's Atlanta office who never has been arrested.

"Texas is such a big place that they just never got around to it," explained this blue-eyed beauty of 25.

Like many SNCC volunteers, she came to the work through religious and ethical beliefs. A number of the staffers are clergymen's sons. Most are Southern born. About 10 per cent are white.

They usually are paid about \$35 a week. Most of their peers in the commercial rat race would not even consider that petty cash.

THE cool, poised Forman came out of Chicago's densely packed South Side, where Negroes live jammed together.

He was born in Chicago but spent part of his youth in northern Mississippi. He got his first taste of race prejudice when, as a 6-year-old, he went into a Memphis (Tenn.) soda fountain to buy a soft drink.

"Even at that age, the porters made me go to the back," said Forman with a shake of his head.

"That really shook me up. I guess I learned early that you have to do something about segregation."

"There has to be some form of mass agitation to get freedom. And you don't have to

be ashamed of the word 'agitation.'"

Receives Diploma At Roosevelt

In Chicago, Forman was graduated from Engelwood High School and Roosevelt University. He became a specialist in public administration, served in the Army and worked for a while for the Institute for Juvenile Research on Chicago's West Side. His mother, Mrs. Octavia Rufus, lives at 7437 South Park.

In 1960-61, he said, he was a substitute teacher at Kenwood School, 49th St. and Blackstone. The Negro protest movement in the South already was in swing with sit-in lunch-counter sit-ins, voter drives and mass action, influencing Forman.

He heard about sharecroppers in Fayette County, Tenn., near the Mississippi line, who were being evicted in a battle over voting rights.

"I knew that if they could be driven off the land it would be doomsday for Mississippi," he said.

THE young teacher took leave and went to Tennessee to organize help for the farmers, some of whom were living in tents and dodging bullets.

His work there drew so much attention that he was drafted to head SNCC, which had been formed in 1960 as an outgrowth of student "sit-ins."

That was the fall of 1961, and SNCC at the time occupied a hole-in-the-wall cubicle on Atlanta's Auburn Av.

Its present-day offices on Raymond St., while roomier, barely qualify as dilapidated.

SNCC now consists of representatives from some of the student protest groups that have helped to spark today's massive Negro revolt. The budget is about \$75,000 a year, with much of it coming from Northern students. They flood in as volunteers during summertime, when as many as 40 per cent of the workers may be white.

SNCC quickly won a name as a major Negro freedom group.

Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, gave it his blessing and aid. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund took over the job of getting these young people out of jail.

YOU find SNCC workers on hand wherever the Negro mass movement bursts into action—be it Jackson, Miss.; Birmingham, Ala.; or Albany, Ga.

What these tough-minded young folk call the "white power structure" (downtown businessmen, bankers, politicians) has become used to the idea of negotiating with them.

"Start your action against things these guys own," is a Snick byword.

In Little Rock, Ark., site of the famous school integration crisis of 1957, sit-ins began in late 1962.

Students from Philander Smith College and Shorter Junior College sat at segregated downtown lunch counters under direction of Bill Hansen, a Snick "veteran." He himself was a student.

A White Citizens Council threatened violence. But the city had suffered a black eye and economic chills since 1957, and some of the prominent people in town indicated readiness to talk.

"At first the city was not willing to yield," according to a SNCC version, "and so renewed sit-ins began in December."

Hansen and a Snick buddy, Worth Long, were arrested. They chose to stay in jail.

After continuing uproar, SNCC reported, the white community agreed to work out a plan to increase jobs for Negroes and integrate lunch counters and other facilities.

In return, the two crusaders had to agree to leave jail.

Agitation Pays Off

They did. Hansen, in fact, moved on to Pine Bluff, Ark. He met there with students at Arkansas A.M.&N. University, a Negro state school.

Sit-ins began in Pine Bluff Feb. 1 at a chain variety store. Eight days later, an SNCC report says, 15 students were expelled from the college.

Eight of these undaunted young rebels, with Hansen and another SNCC worker, then launched a communitywide attack on segregation in Pine Bluff. They zeroed in on restaurants, theaters, hotels. A wave of arrests got under way.

These young people "live cooperatively in two houses in Pine Bluff," a staff report says. They hope to develop a voter registration program and voters' leagues in surrounding counties.

SNICK'S daring young folk also penetrate into southwest Georgia, heart of the Black Belt and still a very unsafe place for civil rights advocates.

Twelve field secretaries operate out of an Albany (Ga.) GHQ—a cramped cold-water house with a kerosene stove.

Carver Neblett, 19, is a Negro, student from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Joyce Barrett, 24, hails from Philadelphia and is white. Jack Chatfield, 20, is a white student from Bradford, Vt.

They and others conduct mass meetings in churches or tents, stirring up hope and belief, battling deep fear. They canvass from door to door, seeking to build trust.

They try to work with teenagers, teachers, ministers, and encourage people to register.

A lot of their time is spent in documenting stories of threats and firings suffered by voter applicants.

It's hard going, and slow, but these young SNCC workers apparently have banished thoughts of self and pelf. They can be likened to missionaries in a dark and dangerous land, risking their lives for a cause bigger than themselves.

They're Angry And Honest

Are they angry? Of course. Zealous? Undoubtedly. Political radicals? Some of them may be. Honest? Obviously.

The contrast with beatniks, panty-raiders and beach rioters is painful—or refreshing, depending on how you look at it.

Certainly these young people are revolutionaries, tackling "the monster in the backwoods" or the downtown white businessmen who hire Negroes only as porters and segregate the races in separate toilets.

AMONG themselves, SNCC missionaries almost automatically assume that American society is corrupt and commercial. That's the lever they use to pry white bosses into concessions.

"Hit him in the pocketbook; Babbity comes before big-otry."

But, notes a thoughtful Atlanta newspaper columnist, who can deny their assumptions?

"For the goals of their revolution," he writes, "are simply the basic rights guaranteed in the Constitution."

Some day, Forman hopes, SNCC will have done so well that it can put itself out of business. That will be the day.

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