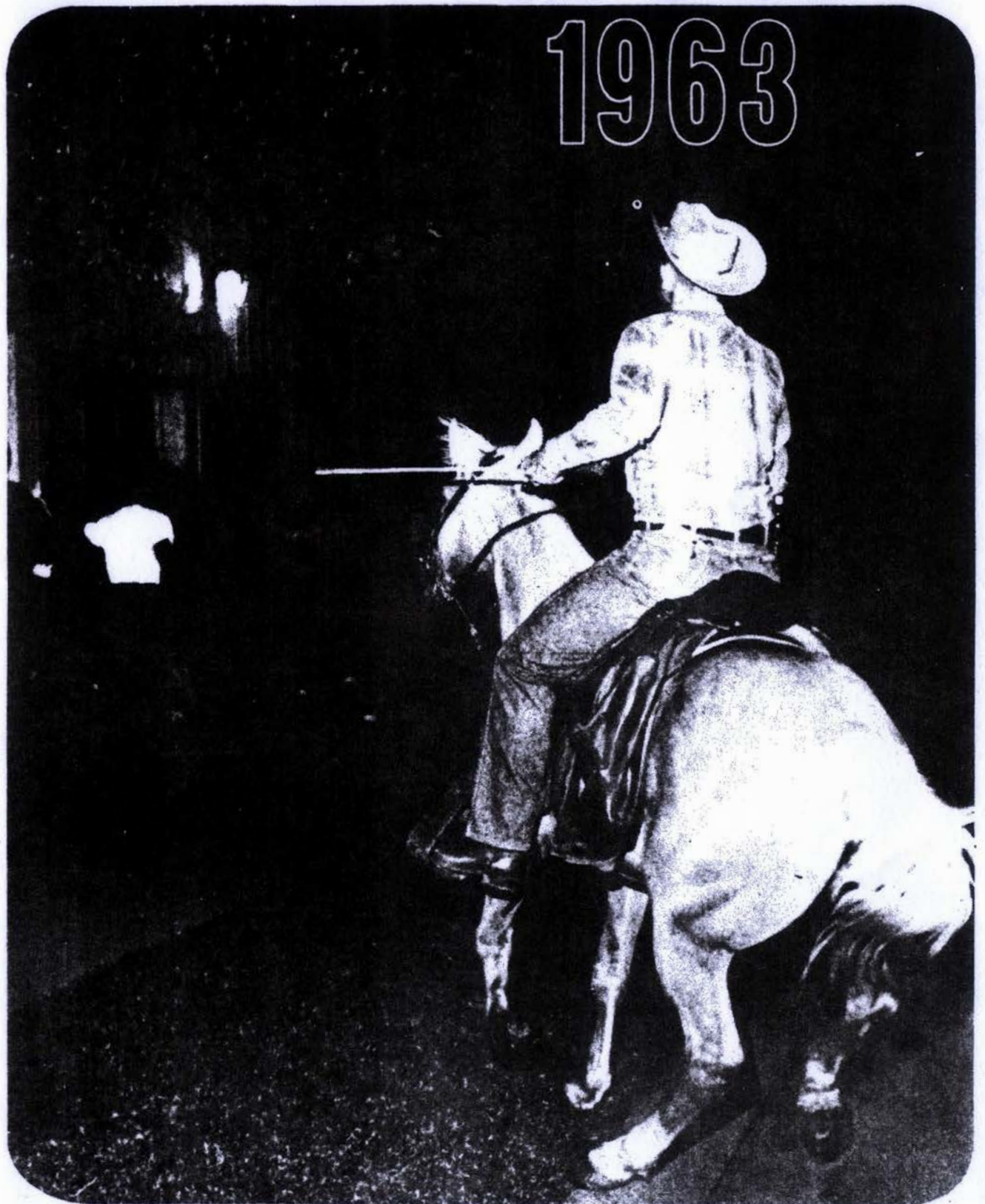


LOUISIANA STORY 1963



by James Farmer

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N OCTOBER 17, 1963, Rev. Joseph Carter became the first Negro to register in West Feliciana parish since 1902. In the photograph below, Rev. Carter is in the center. At left is CORE field secretary Mary Hamilton, and at right, Ronnie Moore.

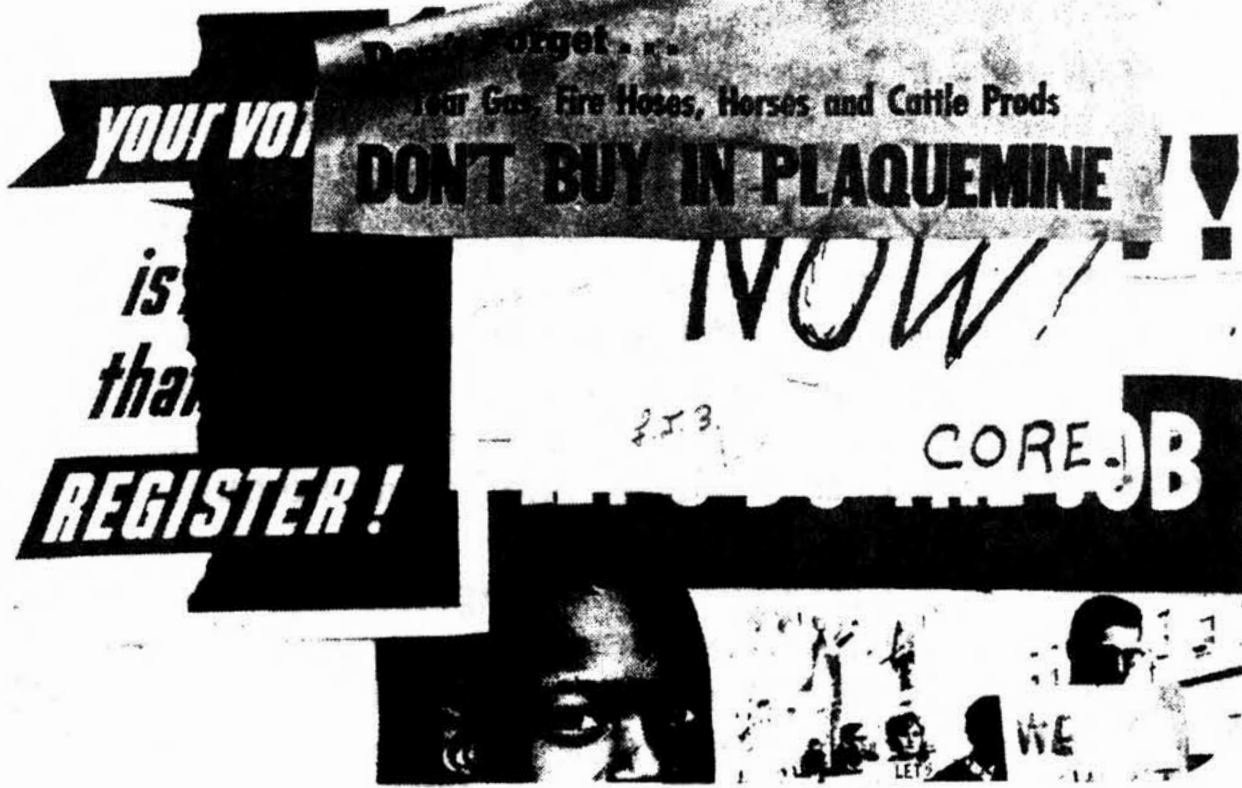


West Feliciana is one of eight southeastern parishes in Louisiana's 6th Congressional district where CORE, since the fall of 1962, has been conducting a voter registration campaign. Leading the campaign is CORE Field Secretary Ronnie Moore, who in 1961 was expelled from Southern University and jailed on a "criminal anarchy" charge as a consequence of his leadership in mass demonstrations to desegregate lunch counters in Baton Rouge (A campaign which ended successfully on August 6, 1963). Over the summer his staff was augmented by a group of 50 CORE Task Force workers from all over the country as well as Rudy Lombard and Gordon Carey from national CORE. Over 450 Negroes were registered during the drive. In the same period over 200 discrimination complaints were filed with the Department of Justice.



Above: CORE task force worker Daniel Mitchell interviews a prospective registrant. Below: CORE Vice-chairman Rudy Lombard (at left) speaks to another potential voter.





drive starts in Iberville parish

Iberville parish was the initial target of the voter registration drive. Its success is indicated by the fact that for the 1963 Democratic primaries, a full slate of 12 Negroes qualified for public office. Among the candidates are Spiver Gordon, a CORE Task Force worker, and Dr. Bertrand Tyson and W. W. Harleaux, community leaders.

A year earlier, shortly after the drive started and voter-bias complaints began to be filed with the Department of Justice, the registrar, Milton Dardenne, resigned because of "ill-health." In reporting his resignation, TV Station WDSU in New Orleans stated that friends of Dardenne had attributed his "ill health" to the Negro registration drive.

His resignation, however, did not usher-in an era of voting justice in Iberville parish. To replace him, the police jury named Mrs. Ella Billings, who has reportedly said: "Niggers ain't gonna run this parish!" Nevertheless, Negroes continued to register in large numbers and more complaints were filed with the Department of Justice.

Plaquemine is the largest town in Iberville parish. Its Negroes live primarily in two communities, Dupont Annex and Seymourville. Dupont Annex has been gerrymandered so as to be outside the city limits but surrounded by the city. The city provides no sewer facilities and no street lights for these sections.

Negroes in Dupont Annex and Seymourville came to the unshakable conclusion that since their dollars help to support Plaquemine, and their labor helps to build it and to keep its wheels turning, they should be able to enjoy the benefits and fulfill the duties of citizenship by being a part of the city. Dupont Annex petitioned the Plaquemine City Council for annexation several times beginning many years ago. Seymourville has prepared its petition and is getting the required signatures.

city officials adamant

The City Council of Plaquemine has refused to consider annexation, and the Mayor has declined to set up a bi-racial committee to consider these and other grievances. Public accommodations and schools remain segregated. Negroes are largely confined to menial jobs.

The town of Plaquemine and the parish of Iberville refused to believe that "their" Negroes were not happy and satisfied. They had had a "good" relationship all along, with Negroes "staying in their place" and asking no questions.

But the town and parish were wrong. Negro citizens, inspired by the revolutionary freedom movement which has swept the country, took to the streets in peaceful demonstrations, demanding the incorporation of Dupont Annex and Seymourville into the town and establishment of a bi-racial committee to work on employment opportunities and other grievances.

first protest march

On August 19, with Dr. Tyson, Mr. Harleaux, and Rev. J. W. Davis, I led 500 persons on a protest march to City Hall. Upon reaching the building, several of the marchers began singing "We Shall Overcome." The three local leaders and I were arrested. The others were dispersed by a teargas attack.

Returning to the church, they regrouped and marched again into another barrage of the nauseating gas. In the next two days 232 persons were jailed. There was not



enough room in the parish jail, so some of us were sent to adjoining parishes, while others were placed in an improvised stockade.

I had planned to be in Louisiana only three days on a brief speaking trip, but the town of Plaquemine had other plans for me. I had wanted to join the March on Washington, but instead I was in jail. Many of those jailed with me had planned to make the trek to Washington, but they chose to remain in jail. Their "crime" was the same as mine — asking for Freedom Now, or, as Plaquemine called it, "disturbing the peace." I had no real choice but to remain behind bars with those incarcerated with me. The historic March on Washington would go on beautifully without us; the historic struggle of Plaquemine Negroes might not.

The magnificent demonstration in Washington inspired Plaquemine's freedom fighters to redouble their efforts. They marched and they sat-in. They were tear gassed, stuck with electric prod rods and trampled by state troopers' horses. Children and adults were injured.

police brutality prompts bigger march

With most of us just out of jail—we had been jailed-in for 10 days—even bigger marches were planned. The Negroes had achieved a unity such as never existed before. On September 1, they marched in the largest demonstration of all. The mounted troopers with their prod rods, rode-down the marchers like cowboys on a fearsome round-up. The demonstrators again took refuge in Freedom Rock Baptist Church. Troopers pursued them into the church,





hurling round after round of teargas canisters. The demonstrators were driven from the church, carrying the wounded, the faint and the hysterical. They retreated to the parsonage.

Not content with this desecration of a place of worship, the troopers turned high pressure fire hoses into the church, overturning benches and breaking windows. Bibles and hymnals floated in the pews. The troopers then hurled a volley of teargas canisters into the parsonage, driving the demonstrators into the yard. Further volleys of the gas drove them back into the parsonage. Many were overcome by the gas and artificial respiration was administered.

“we’re going to lynch him!”

Meanwhile, other state troopers rode through the town, pursuing and brutalizing any Negroes in sight. Doors were kicked-in and houses invaded as the troopers loudly proclaimed, “We want Farmer!” Negroes beaten in the streets were told, “We’ll let you go if you’ll tell us where Farmer is.” Two Negro girls heard troopers say, “When we catch Farmer we’re going to lynch him!”

Hearing these bloodthirsty threats, I started to walk over and turn myself in. I was stopped by local citizens who insisted that if I surrendered, I would not be alive in the morning. They persuaded me to take refuge in a hearse. With another hearse as a decoy, I thus escaped from the frenzied lynch mob composed of law enforcement officers.

In New Orleans next day I called a press conference and described what had transpired in Plaquemine. I announced I would return on the morrow for trial of my “disturbing the peace” charge.

Back in Plaquemine I was tried and convicted on earlier charges. The sentence on each charge was \$100 fine or 30 days in jail. Through my lawyers, Murphy, Bell, Collins, Douglas and Elie, I immediately served notice of appeal.

Curiously, there was no warrant for my arrest awaiting me. The frenzied house-to-house manhunt two days before had been without warrant and without charges.

the struggle goes on

The Plaquemine struggle goes on. Negroes have launched a tight economic boycott of local stores. They have arranged to buy their food and clothing elsewhere on weekends. The school principal, Mr. Harleaux, has been threatened with his job. A worker in the Negro school lunchroom has been fired because her children were in the demonstration. The school's students are replying with a lunchroom boycott. Instead of eating lunch they sing freedom songs.

On October 7, the Negro students went on strike forcing a four-day shutdown of the high school. In addition to demanding reinstatement of the fired lunchroom worker, they sought reinstatement of 35 of their fellow-students who had been suspended, desegregation of Iberville parish schools by 1964 and equal job opportunities for Negroes in Plaquemine.

Police teargassed the striking students, first as they marched in groups of 10 to the white high schools, which they were picketing and again as they assembled in Freedom Rock Baptist Church.

It was on this occasion that Police Chief Dennis Songy threatened to destroy the church asserting: "If they want to use that church to serve God, that's OK, but they're not going to use it as a fort." The word "fort" was ill-chosen for the student protest action remained peaceful throughout. Evidently the police chief does not believe the parishioners have the right to use their church as they see fit.

Two of the student leaders—Kenneth Johnson and Willie Mellien—have been committed to the State Industrial Detention House for Juvenile Delinquents for an indefinite period. This means up to five years for Johnson, who is only 16 and was a CORE Task Force member. Attorneys are seeking a habeas corpus writ to secure their release.

in other communities

In Hammond, following a student demonstration, Mayor John Morrison agreed to set up a 16-man bi-racial committee patterned after the one in Baton Rouge, which was the first Louisiana city to establish such a body. After meeting with two CORE representatives, the mayor told the Baton Rouge State-Times he was convinced that the CORE men "were sincere in their desire to see that Hammond doesn't turn into another Plaquemine."

In Clinton, the start of picketing in the downtown business section on October 14 resulted in the arrest of 38 pickets and a CORE field worker. Attempts by the state to enjoin all CORE activity were halted pending a ruling

register first negro since reconstruction

It was at St. Francisville, that Rev. Joseph Carter finally succeeded in registering on October 17. He is the first Negro since 1902 to register in West Feliciana parish, which has a population of 12,000 of which 68% is Negro.

Circumventing a line of white men, one of whom threatened to emasculate him, Rev. Carter entered the courthouse by a side door. The charred remains of a KKK burned cross were still in evidence in front of the nearby office of Aldero Stevenson, a Negro businessman.

Rev. Carter, along with 43 Negroes arrived by bus. They were accompanied by Ronnie Moore, leader of the CORE voter registration drive. Frank Dunbar of the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division was present as well as a number of FBI men.

After waiting several hours, Rev. Carter entered the office and emerged 35 minutes later waving his registration form. When he first tried to register on August 10, he was arrested and jailed overnight. As a consequence, he filed a \$100,000 damage suit in federal court. A federal suit has been filed to stop the registrar from continuing discriminatory practices.



more negroes register

The day after Rev. Carter registered, three more Negroes registered: Nathaniel Smith and Ernest Morgan—both farmers—and Handy Berry, an unemployed hod carrier. As Smith came out of the office, Ronnie Moore pinned on him a button saying: "I Am A Registered Voter: Are You?"

But the threat of violence demonstrated on the day Rev. Carter registered continues. James Payne, a prospective Negro registrant, was without provocation assaulted by three white men. Payne reports that another prospective registrant, Johnnie Hamilton, was told by a white man: "You're enrolled to be killed."

Despite such threats, our voter registration drive will continue unabated—not just in West Feliciana, but in the other parishes in which we have become involved. At the same time, though we have been hampered by court injunctions, we plan to resume our massive protest demonstrations for desegregation of public facilities and equal job opportunities in the towns of these parishes. It may be a long struggle, but we shall certainly overcome.



The photograph on the opposite page shows the remains of the burning cross in St. Francisville. Above: Nathaniel Smith leaves the St. Francisville courthouse after becoming the second Negro to vote there. Behind him is Ernest Morgan, who became the third.

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