

BACKGROUND

When you discuss or write about COFO, the Summer Project and civil rights activity in Mississippi, it helps to have some historical view of that state and civil rights activity there.

Important points to remember:

When SNCC began its voter registration drive in McComb, Mississippi in 1961, it was the first time workers had lived and worked directly with local people, and the first time integration workers had worked for subsistence wages. (Other groups have since adopted these techniques.)

After a year of working across the state, but primarily in the Delta, SNCC drew together plans for the Council of Federated Organizations, staffed it, funded it, and made it a viable group. Other organizations are also assisting COFO now.

You may define COFO within the state as: an alliance of local civic groups aided by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the State Branches of the NAACP.

Outside the state, individual organizations are to be allowed to project their own organizational identities.

Major SNCC emphasis will be and has been in the Delta, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th congressional districts. CORE will promote the 4th. The NAACP will project Clarksdale, possibly Jackson, and perhaps a Gulf Coast section.

You should always remember SNCC's historic involvement in Mississippi, which dates from 1961, the Freedom Rides and the McComb project, and that this history had a dominant role in the Summer Project and COFO.

No one should ever deprecate the work of any organization or individual, in Mississippi or elsewhere.

Some events in SNCC's Mississippi history:

SNCC began a vote project in McComb the summer of 1961 and quickly expanded it to include a three county area - Pike, Amite and Walthall counties.

The drive set a pattern which later drives followed: preliminary exploration and canvassing for potential applicants, conducting workshops on Mississippi's tortuous registration test, and finally, the often dangerous trip to the courthouse.

Legal and extra-legal harassment set a pattern there also. SNCC worker John Hardy was pistol-whipped by the Liberty, Mississippi voting registrar. SNCC worker Robert Moses (who began the project in the notorious southwest region of the state - stronghold of white terrorist groups) was beaten by the cousin of the sheriff when he accompanied two farmers to the Liberty courthouse.

And Herbert Lee, a 52-year-old farmer, the father of four, was gunned down outside a Liberty cotton gin by a man who sat in the State Legislature, E.H.Hurst.

Two years later, one of the witnesses to that killing, Louis Allen, was slain by shotgun in his front yard. Both had participated in the vote drive. No arrests or indictments have ever been made.

Once in the Delta, SNCC workers found themselves met by fires and shootings.

Four SNCC workers were forced to jump from the second story of the Greenwood SNCC office in August 1962 to escape a mob of white men carrying chains and pipes. The next February SNCC workers James Travis and Robert Moses were machine-gunned by two white men seven miles from Greenwood. And the SNCC office was set on fire the following month.

1963 also saw SNCC workers bring COFO into its present stage, with a mock ballot campaign offering an integrated slate.

Freedom Days in Hattiesburg (January 1964) and Greenwood (March 1964) spurred vote drives in the 5th and 2nd congressional districts, respectively. (The idea for a day of concentrated vote activity dramatizing the right to vote in areas with high Negro disenfranchisement, was developed by SNCC in Selma, Alabama, October 1963.)

The Freedom Days laid a base from which the campaigns of four Negro candidates for U.S.Congress were launched in the spring of 1964.

The Hattiesburg Freedom Day was also the site of a strategy meeting which initiated plans for the Mississippi Summer Project.