

RULEVILLE, MISSISSIPPI:

A Background Report

The Summer Project in Ruleville, a cotton-rich plantation town in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, is a high point in two years of organizing a challenge to most aspects of the white supremacy which burderS the town.

Mayor Charles Dorrrough has been at the helm in Ruleville since 1952. Dorrrough summed up the position of the dominant white minority when he told a civil rights worker his opinion of the U. S. Constitution: "That law hasn't come here yet."

Ruleville is located in the northern half of Sunflower County. Six miles to the south on U. S. Highway 49W is Senator James Eastland's huge cotton plantation in Doddsville. Seventeen miles to the north is Parchman State Penitentiary, a federally-subsidized cotton farm considered to be the prototype of the sprawling, ante-bellum plantations which had hundreds of Negro slaves.

Senator Eastland, the powerful chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, lives in Ruleville and has an office on the second floor of the Bank of Ruleville. As Mississippi's senior Senator, Eastland told the Senate in 1945, "I assert that the Negro race is an inferior race. The doctrine of white supremacy is one which, if adhered to, will save America."

The people of Ruleville are represented in the all-white State Legislature by Representatives John Hough, of Indianola, and Fred Jones, of Inverness. Hough is a 64-year-old farmer and ginner who is on the State Executive Committee of the White Citizens' Councils of Mississippi, and is a member of the Sons of the Confederacy and the Sons of the American Revolution. Jones is a 68-year-old farmer who was a member of the White Citizens Council State Executive Committee in 1956. He has been a member of the Mississippi State Democratic Executive Committee for eight years and is a former President of the Sunflower County Board of Supervisors.

The state senator from Sunflower is Ruleville-resident Robert Crook, an owner of a dry-cleaning establishment and member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

The Mississippi Democratic Party dominates the politics of every section of the state, including Ruleville and Sunflower County -- and the White Citizens' Councils dominate the Democratic Party. Thus, the residents of Ruleville, black and white, are represented within the state and to the nation by a party whose platform states, "We believe in the segregation of the races and are unalterably opposed to the repeal or modification of the segregation laws of this State, and we condemn integration and the practices of non-segregation."

The residents of Ruleville have been represented at the Democratic National Convention by the Democratic National Committeeman, Tom P. Brady, who is a Mississippi Supreme Court Justice. Judge Brady, of Brookhaven, Miss., has been on the State Executive Committee of the White Citizens' Councils since its formation in 1954. He was

the Judge who swore in Gov. Paul Johnson at the inauguration ceremonies on January 21, 1964. In 1957 Judge Brady told a San Francisco audience, "As long as we live, so long shall we be segregated, and after death, God willing, thus it will still be!"

The White Citizens' Councils have organized across the Delta to fight Negro registration and voting, using the weapons of economic pressure and symbolic violence against leaders of the voter registration activities.

The national headquarters of the Councils circulates copies of a statement by the Mississippi Governor in 1907, James Vardaman, which clarifies the Councils' present position on Negro voting:

"The Negro should never have been trusted with the ballot. He is different from the white man. He is congenitally unqualified to exercise the most responsible duty of citizenship...We must repeal the Fifteenth and modify the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Then we shall be able in our legislation to recognize the negro's racial peculiarities, and make laws to fit them."

In the face of overwhelming white domination in Ruleville, a movement among Negroes has grown to tackle the principal community problems: food and clothing, jobs, voting, literacy, and the white supremacist political, judicial, and police authorities. The movement developed in spite of the reprisals against initial registration efforts.

On August 31, 1962, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville was fired from her plantation job, where she had worked for 18 years, on the same day she had gone to the county courthouse in Indianola to attempt to register. The plantation owner had informed her that she had to leave if she didn't withdraw her application for registration.

On September 3, 1962, a letter from Mayor Dorrrough notified the Williams Chapel Missionary Baptist Church that tax exemption and free water were being cut off because the property was being used for "purposes other than worship services." The church was a meeting place for voter registration workers.

On September 3, 1962, Mayor Dorrrough told Mr. Leonard Davis, 49, of Ruleville and a sanitation worker for the city: "We're going to let you go. Your wife's been attending that school." Dorrrough was referring to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) registration school in the town.

The movement in Ruleville grew up around persons like Mrs. Hamer and churches like Williams Chapel, which is across the street from Mrs. Hamer's home. Since 1962 the Ruleville movement has developed three kinds of programs to meet community needs: voter registration and education, food and clothing drives, and home industry.

The voter registration and education drive provided the focus for political organization to challenge the all-white political institutions in the town, the county and the state. If Negroes were permitted to vote in large numbers in Ruleville, they could begin to deal with police brutality, unemployment, injustice in the courts, unequal educational opportunities and the very low wages they are paid

for very long hours of work.

The food and clothing drives, in which tens of thousands of pounds of food and clothing were shipped to Ruleville from the North, enabled the Ruleville movement to distribute needed commodities to Negroes in and near Ruleville. Federal welfare commodities, on the other hand, are administered by white state and local officials who, in many cases, hold back such goods as butter so that white merchants can sell them commercially at local grocery stores. Another tactic of the white officials is to refuse to distribute the commodities in reprisal against registration activities.

The home industry plan developed in response to the firing of many plantation workers who had become involved in registration work. A group of Ruleville women got together to start a quilt-making industry, using cloth patches they could obtain from the Ruleville Manufacturing Co., a jacket and underwear production plant. Another group of women were using waste stuffing from the Original Charms Toy factory in Ruleville to make hats. The home industries were an effort to provide an economic base in the Negro community which would not be susceptible to pressure from the White Citizens' Councils.

At present there are more than 100 members in the Ruleville Citizenship Club, which was organized after SNCC field secretaries started voter education classes. The Club, which is informally organized, defrays the cost of transporting persons to the Indianola courthouse through collections at the mass meetings.

In February, 1964, the Club carried more than 400 persons to the Indianola Courthouse. Persons from all over Ruleville and surrounding counties came to Mrs. Hamer's home to get either food or clothing after the Boston Friends of SNCC sent 30,000 pounds of goods. Mayor Dorrough, in an effort to upset the program, announced over the radio that everyone should go to Mrs. Hamer's home to get clothing and food. Although hundreds of persons showed up, everyone was able to get some of the goods they needed. While the materials were being distributed, members of the Citizenship Club talked to the people about registering to vote, and set up voter education classes for them. As a result, more than 400 persons went down to the courthouse to attempt to register.

In March, 1964, Mrs. Hamer officially qualified with the Secretary of State in Jackson, the state capitol, to run for Congress in the Second Congressional District, which encompasses the entire Mississippi Delta. Mrs. Hamer became the first Negro woman in Mississippi to run for Congress. The editor of the Greenville (Miss.) Delta-Democrat Times said that Mrs. Hamer was the first candidate in many years to raise issues in her campaign that were important to both Negroes and whites.

There are 29 volunteers now working in Ruleville with the Mississippi Summer Project. The volunteers are canvassing for voter registration in Ruleville and the outlying towns, and teaching and working in the Freedom School and Community Center in Ruleville.

In spite of the national attention on Ruleville at the start of the summer project, numerous incidents have occurred. For example,

an attempt was made to burn down Williams Chapel on June 25 at 2 a.m. A "Molotov Cocktail" charred the steps and entranceway to the church. Mr. Hamer had been awakened by the noise as the fire started and contacted the project's communications volunteer, who in turn called the fire department and the mayor. The attitude taken by local authorities was that the voter registration workers themselves had started the fire.

On Sunday, June 28, Rev. James Corson of the National Council of Churches, attempted to attend a white church in Ruleville. Mayor Dorrrough told Rev. Corson, who is white, that since he is living in the Negro community he would not be allowed to attend the white church.

The Ruleville movement is actively working with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which will challenge the seating of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention in August, 1964. The Freedom Democratic Party will ask to be seated instead of the regular party.

Several Negro women from Ruleville attempted to attend the regular Democratic precinct meeting in Ruleville on June 23 to select delegates to the county convention. Through this process delegates to the national convention are eventually chosen. However, the precinct meeting, traditionally all-white, was not held at the scheduled hour, apparently in anticipation of attendance by the Negro women. Undaunted by this turn of events, the women held their own meeting on the lawn in front of the meeting hall, and submitted the results of the meeting to the local Democratic authorities.

Thus, in only two years of work, the Ruleville movement has organized to challenge the dominant minority which controls the town.

The town of Ruleville derived its name from the first settlers, the Rule brothers, who built the town's first cotton gin in 1886 on land which had been ceded to the "white man" by the Choctaw Indians in 1844.

Although the town's present population is estimated at 2, 100 persons (1, 902 persons in 1960), Ruleville serves as a hub for the 60,000 persons who live within a 15-mile radius of the town. The major agricultural products of the area are cotton, corn, rice, soybeans, small grains and livestock.

Sunflower County has a population of 45,750 (1960), of which more than 30,000 are Negroes. It was in Indianola, the county seat, that the first Citizens' Council was formed by white citizens on July 11, 1964.

Ruleville is administered by a mayor-alderman form of government, with the police force controlled directly by the mayor. Mayor Dorrrough also serves as the judge for arrests on charges of violating city ordinances.

No Negroes work in the city government. No Negroes work for the telephone company or for the utilities which service Ruleville. No Negroes serve as justices of the peace or on the juries. The one Negro policeman is not permitted to arrest white people.