

Moss Point - Daily Report

[1964]

Thursday, June 25:

Almost the whole day was spent working with the youth council discussing the registration program and having a workshop on the methods of canvassing. The morning session, which was supposed to start at 10 and finally got under way by 11 (typical perhaps, but not satisfactory) was mainly centered around an explanation and discussion of the regular voter registration, Freedom registration and the Freedom Democratic party. While the discussion began slowly, it gradually livened up until the students were used to talking about the program and started showing some real understanding of the program. After lunch we returned to the Hall to have a workshop in canvassing methods. After a quick review of the points that should be made when talking to someone about voter registration, we had some role plays. Like the earlier discussion, it started off slowly, but when the kids got used to convincing people of the benefits of the program, they did quite well. One group was able to go out before the rain started, the rest of us stayed and worked on role plays and general discussion.

Charles had been out looking for an office as usual, but also as usual was unable to find anything satisfactory. The only prospect in Pascagoula for an office is a small two by four room that all of us wouldn't be able to fit into at one time anyway.

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~~7/6~~
Friday, June 26:

Today was the first day that the local students went out canvassing for the whole day. While it was not as well organized as it might have been, they were successful in contacting people and the day also served to build more interest in going out and canvassing; although it was hot, the kids did say they enjoyed themselves.

While Fred stayed and did the hard work canvassing, Charles and Mermie went in to Pascagoula on various errands. Charles went to find an office for us - although we have been using the Masonic Hall for organizing the canvassing, we still have no office any more permanent than our small filing cabinet with COFO written on it. Mermie went to different places in the town to get some general information about the area. She visited the bank, the Chamber of Commerce and the Registrar at the Court House. The Chamber of Commerce was very eager to give a newcomer some information about the fair city of Pascagoula, including population statistics, lists of all the industries in the town, and other lists with names of people who might prove to be the influential people of the community. At the Court House, Mermie was able to talk to the registrar, Mr. Vertis G. Ramsey (also a member of the Board of Directors of the Pascagoula-Moss Point Bank). He photostated a copy of the numbers of qualified electors in each precinct in Jackson County - although this figure is only those able to vote in the state election rather than the general election. After talking generally about registration, he brought out a map of the city with the precincts marked on it. As this was the only such map in existence, ~~the~~ and the only means of determining which precinct each person lives in, he said it would be all right to copy it on to another city map. As Mermie was copying the map - both of Moss Point and Pascagoula - she talked to him, and it became established that she was here with COFO. He was quite cooperative - this may be the only county in Mississippi where a COFO worker can sit talking to the Registrar and copy // the precinct map. According to the people in the community, he is quite proud of not discriminating against Negroes when they try to register. He definitely thinks that the interpretation of the Constitution is necessary, and he doesn't think that outsiders need bothering coming to Mississippi, but it seems that it might be possible to get some more information from him. We do not know the race distribution of the electors in each precinct. If he is approached properly, he may allow us to study the registration books in order to get this information.

The rest of the evening was spent watching television at a neighbor's house - the news reports - and arguing about Truth and how to solve the problems of the world.

Saturday, June 27:

Saturday was not as active a day as the last few have been. There was some canvassing down in the morning, but we all didn't get together until 4 in the afternoon for a youth council meeting where we discussed the freedom registration again and tried to make some plans for making announcements in the First Baptist Church Sunday morning. We also decided to meet on Sunday afternoons at 4 and Wednesday evenings at 8 so that those who work during the weekdays will not have to keep missing the meetings.

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SSunday, June 28:

Charles, Fred and Mermie are still the only COFO workers here in Moss Point. Fred and Mermie were going to go to the First Baptist Church that morning, but first all of us went to the house where Charles and Fred had been staying at one time to pick up some clothes of Fred's. As we stopped at the house, Mermie, who was driving, noticed that the car that had been following us also stopped and turned out to be a city police car -- Fred and Charles saw it as they got out of the car to go into the house and kept going about their business. The policeman came up to Mermie and asked for her drivers license. He wasn't rude in his manner, but he wasn't exactly pleasant. After checking the license he asked whose car it was. As he probably knew that the car belonged to Ron, Mermie showed him the note Ron had left authorizing her to use the car. The policeman looked at the note, said all right and left. He didn't seem to mind that the car was integrated, except that that was probably the reason he noticed us.

Fred and Mermie went to the First Baptist Church after almost integrating the white First Baptist Church. After the service, we spoke to the pastor, asking him if we could have some time at the service next week to speak about the program, and to pass out leaflets. He was willing to give us this much, but people tell us that he is a very influential man, and that if he gave us his full support (more than he is giving) to our program, everyone in his church would go down to the court house and try to register.

At 4 pm in the afternoon we went to a youth council meeting where we discussed again the various forms and procedures for registering -- both regularly and with the Freedom Party. There was quite a bit of interest among the council for getting out and working - many of them had been out before.

In the evening, three more COFO workers came to Moss Point by way of Gulfport. We met them in town and then went to a home nearby to straighten out where they would spend the night. Ron also returned from Jackson. We met and talked with some of the local people for awhile, then had a short meeting where we talked among ourselves, and Charles talked about this area of Mississippi, especially about the effect of seeing whites and Negroes together on a friendly, equal basis - something people here aren't exactly used to. We finally left to go to our various homes.

read by Jesse Morris

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Monday June 29, 1964:

In the morning, we began setting up the library, which will remain permanently in the Masonic Hall at 609 Bowen St. We also began setting up a temporary office at the back of the library room - hopefully it will become permanent at this address also.

In the afternoon we held a youth council meeting (local kids from the NAACP youth council) explaining again the regular registration and freedom registration program, including a workshop on the methods of canvassing and filling out the registration application and the freedom registration forms. The 25 young people there from the community are becoming more and more interested in the voter registration program, and the potential for some good local leadership is developing from this group. We will have to take advantage of their eagerness while we can, as a lot of them have also signed up for the Freedom Schools which will be in session during the time of day that voter registration canvassing is going on.

In the evening Charles and Ron went to Biloxi to meet the New Orleans lawyer, Ben Smith, but couldn't find him. The rest of the evening was spent in finding homes for the new volunteers who had come in during the day. Before dispersing to our various homes, we held a brief staff meeting where different points concerning the summer program were organized and emphasized for the benefit of those who ~~had~~ had ~~the~~ just come. Of course, those of us who have had the long experience of a whole week also needed a review of the program so we can keep our minds on the totality of what is being done here rather than on just our specific part in the program.

Tuesday, June 30:

The day was spent doing canvassing and continuing the organization of the library and the office. By the end of the day, 35 people had been out working in voter registration, and a total of 196 Freedom registration forms were filled out during the day, including those at the NAACP meeting that night.

The library is progressing - shelves were put in to hold the books. They are not completed yet, but we expect they will cover both long walls, as we have about 5000 books to put on them. Having so much space taken up by the bookshelves doesn't leave much room for our office organization (what there is of it) but it's worth it to see how wonderful all those books look, and how many people have come in already, interested in reading them, and helping to set it up.

The office is coming slowly, as we have a lot of catching up to do because of our lack of an office all last week, but we are working first on getting the registration records straightened, and then trying to write up the reports of last week.

The Freedom School workers are still trying to find a place to set up the school; there are several prospects. The Second Baptist Church will probably be used. Several local people have said they will be able to help & teach.

In the ~~evening~~ evening there was a large - about 90 people - NAACP meeting. We are sure that the reason it was so large is that the people there were very interested in the voter registration program. After the meeting, we were able to get many people to sign the Freedom registration forms and Freedom School applications. Many adults are interested in a Freedom School type program for themselves. We are holding a class for teaching people how to fill out the registration applications at 10 AM on Friday, July 3. At the meeting, the International Paper Co. Union de

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nated \$50 to the registration program.

While the meeting was going on, a known "past" informer to the police on civil rights activities filled out an affidavit with us concerning a threat by Sheriff Cecil Byrd to close his business (a cfe) if he supported any of the voter registration program. This man has also just joined the NAACP. He may either be changing from his former activities as an informer, or he may be trying to get an "in" with us so he can find out about our activities. He is not well-liked at all in the community, and even if he is his activities, it may hurt our program to have him associated with us. There is an increasing apprehension among the local Negroes that several people whose activities are not quite clear might be other "informers", but this might be just a hypersensitivity to the as yet small problem posed by the man who filled out the affidavit.

As it becomes known that we are establishing ourselves here on Bowen St., the office is becoming quite a center of activity with both positive and negative results. It is good that people - mostly high school kids - are interested, especially since a lot of them will go out and canvass and do a real good job. But many are hanging around because we are somewhat of a "curiosity" still. If we could give them something productive to do, it would be great to have them all here, but the interest in canvassing may wear off soon, and at the present, we have little else to offer. There have also been white people in unmarked cars driving by somewhat regularly - some of them taking license numbers of the cars parked in front of the building. A record of their license numbers is being kept by us. As usual,, cars, both police and others, still drive around the homes where we are staying. We are also keeping those numbers.

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Wednesday, July 1:

The morning activities began as usual with the canvassers going out to work, and the Freedom School and other people staying at the library-office to continue the setting up of these two areas. Several young people from the area stayed to help with this work.

Charles, Ron and Tony left at 5 am to go to Jackson for the COFO staff meeting. The Freedom School will definitely be held in the Second Baptist Church, and will begin classes tomorrow. We were going to try to get a phone today, but we were advised by one of the members of the Mason's staff to wait until the whole staff said we could put the phone in. The staff came by in the evening and after some discussion as to what we wanted in the way of an office and such, decided that we could have a phone put in temporarily, even if we didn't stay here all summer. One man who has considerable influence with the Mason's is very much in favor of our staying here, and says that the staff will probably decide it is all right.

We have run out of Freedom Registration forms, so the canvassers will have to work just on encouraging people to register at the court house. We will have more forms tomorrow, but this delay means the canvassers will have to go twice to a lot of houses they ordinarily wouldn't have had to. The canvassers moved from Jackson Park, where we had been concentrating our efforts in registration, to another area near the COFO office. We are making enlargements of the city map in order to make our canvassing more organized and effective. The total number of Freedom registration forms filled out today was 139.

Around 5 pm we held a short staff meeting concerning the possibility of negative reactions in the white community. Because the racial atmosphere here is not so obviously tense as it is in other areas, we tend to forget that no one is used to seeing racially mixed groups, especially when they include white girls and Negro boys. We have to be especially careful that we are always in a group large enough to show that we are together for the business of voter registration rather than for any friendships.

Tonight we held a mass meeting at KP Park for the purpose of presenting the Summer Project program to the community. Each of us spoke about his specific role in the project. The meeting and the project as a whole were very well received. The emphasis of all of us working together for freedom ~~is~~ for all of us, black and white, rather than some helping others was an important part of the meeting. We had been told before the meeting that the police would be patrolling the area in order to protect us. It seemed that their motive was a sincere one, but we can't tell. We were visited by the Deputy Sheriff of the county, Thomas Palmer, who, along with his portable tape recorder, seemed rather uncomfortable in our midst. City police were at the door, while others outside took the license numbers of cars that passed by during the meeting. *There were 300 people at the meeting.*