

COUNCIL OF FEDERATED ORGANIZATIONS
1017 Lynch Street
Jackson, Miss.

On July 7, 1964, a community center constructed more than ten years ago by residents of the Bovina community near Vicksburg, Mississippi, was completely destroyed by fire. The center, a wood frame building located on a hardtop asphalt road six to seven miles outside Vicksburg, was last used for civil rights activity in November 1963 during the mock Freedom Ballot gubernatorial campaign. The following affidavit provides an example of the behavior of local law enforcement officials in Mississippi.

AFFIDAVIT ON BURNING OF BOVINA COMMUNITY CENTER

DAVID RILEY, being duly sworn, deposes and says:

In my capacity as research man for the Vicksburg COFO Project, I have talked with several (five) leaders of the Bovina community whose names, for their protection, will not be used here. I talked with them about the burning of the Bovina Community Center on Tuesday night, July 7, 1964, between 10:30 and 11:30. The building was completely destroyed; no one was in the building at the time; no one was injured.

A small group of people gathered around the burning building between 10:45 and 11:45 on Tuesday night. Many were Negro leaders of the Bovina community; some were whites from Bovina; others were police officers, including Warren County Sheriff Vernon O. Lockett. At least three Negroes present--two of whom I spoke to--saw firemen pull a torch out from under the front part of the building. The torch, still blazing when the firemen pulled it out, was a three-foot long pole with rags wrapped around the end and wire wrapped around the rags, according to an eyewitness. Also, according to eyewitnesses, policemen took several pictures of the burning building and the torch. One man who saw the torch on Tuesday night said it was not there when he stopped by on his way to work the next morning at 5:00 A.M. Another woman who also saw the torch said she did not see it when she returned to the burned building late Wednesday morning.

Wednesday's Vicksburg Evening Post carried a short article on the burning. There were no direct quotes but one paragraph read: "Sheriff Vernon O. Lockett said the preliminary investigation showed no indications that arson might be involved." The article went on to say that since there was "a mild wind" and since the "fire did start in the rear of the building," it was likely that burning rubbish in a trash can eight feet behind the building started the fire, according to Sheriff Lockett.

This is in complete contradiction to what the Sheriff later told one man whose name will not be used here. He said that he did not believe the fire was set by the burning rubbish, and "no doubt it was set" by someone deliberately.

It is also in contradiction to my personal examination of the ruins of the building. The floor beams at the front of the building were completely destroyed, while several charred ones remained at the rear; one beam, directly opposite the trash can from which the fire supposedly was started, even had a completely uncharred portion of wood on it. The trash can itself was about one-quarter full of rusted and somewhat charred cans; one can still had paper in it, and there was more unburnt paper only slightly below the surface trash which had been burnt. The trash barrel did not have holes in the bottom to allow a draft to build up a large fire. So it seems extremely unlikely that a fire in the trash can could have been or was large enough to set a whole building on fire, especially a building more completely destroyed in the front and one covered on the outside with inflammable asphalt shingles. I have photographs of all of this evidence at the ruins of the building.

The Sheriff's account of the fire in the newspaper article of July 8 is further contradicted by the fact that no one from the Bovina Community Center had been burning trash in the barrel either on Tuesday, July 7, the day of the fire, or for several weeks before the fire. The last time trash had been burnt in the barrel was in the beginning of June, according to officials of the Bovina Community Center. Again, according to officials of the center, the last time a party had been held in the Center was in the third week of June. On Monday night, July 6, a routine meeting was held at the Center, but only cokes and cookies were served; so there was no trash that needed to be burned after the meeting.

What has Sheriff Luckett done to investigate the information recorded here? He had photographs taken of the torch, but there was no mention of either the torch or the photographs in the newspaper article. No official of the Bovina Center has seen the photographs. Sheriff Luckett never contacted the president of the Bovina Center; he did not speak with her the night of the fire although she was there at the burning; he has not spoken with her or contacted her in any way in the three weeks that have passed since the burning. Nor has any of his deputies contacted her. Two deputies did visit Bovina about two weeks after the fire and talked with some officials of the Center, but that is apparently the only effort county officials have made to find out who burned down the Bovina Community Center.

(signed) David Riley

Riley, 21, later informed the COFO office in Jackson that the Monday, July 6 meeting referred to in the affidavit might provide some indication of the cause of the burning. One member of the center came to the meeting in a relative's car which had Ohio license tags, and it is rumored in the Bovina community that passersby might have thought the car belonged to summer volunteers.

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