

JULY 22, 1964

## WHITE COMMUNITY PROJECT REPORT

### 1 INTRODUCTION:

Since this is the first report to be sent out, we hope that the loose organizational structure will not be overly distressing. Rather than a detailed report we shall attempt to set down happenings in rather general terms. A better organized and more detailed report is in the early preparation stage. Much of the information - and particularly, names - should be kept with access given only to COFO workers. It is requested that where it seems unreasonable to keep a given item of information in a confidential file that Ed Hamlett be contacted before publication of the given item in any of the news media whether within or without COFO, which may be open to the general public.

### 11 ROOMING & HARASSMENT

As has already been reported, we were turned away from an apartment which had been negotiated for us before we arrived by some members of our group who had gone ahead of the main body of members. Ostensibly, it was because some people had unexpectedly failed to move out in time but we suspect that the landlady had learned that we were part of the COFO project.

We finally obtained an apartment on the third floor of a somewhat "ancient" hotel on the beachfront about two blocks from downtown Biloxi. It is somewhat misleadingly called "Hôtel Riviera". Here we set up headquarters for our group, excepting the contingent which operates in the Jackson community.

We had no trouble at all until the past week when the manager began to get suggestions from various people to move out the civil rights workers. To date, it is our understanding that he has received telephone calls from both the mayor and the chief of police suggesting that it would be a good thing for him to urge us to leave. It is further our understanding that the sheriff paid a personal visit to the manager to suggest the same. To add to this, the state KKK leader, Bailey, also paid a visit delivering the same request. (Bailey lives about a block from the hotel and has known where we are from the very first day of our arrival. I suppose his patience is just now wearing thin). The manager has also received calls by people who threatened to bomb the hotel if we were not moved out. He himself has had his life threatened. It is believed that most of these threats are empty, but even in this "liberal" coast area one cannot entirely dismiss the real likelihood of violence.

## 111 RECEPTION IN THE COMMUNITY

**A. Hotel** It should be evident that the manager of the hotel is not unduly antagonistic, if his position may be given some understatement. The first day we moved into the hotel, he came up out of curiosity and was highly impressed to discover that Sam Shirah played the guitar. ( the manager played also ) The next night we invited him for dinner. In short, we all became good friends. The fact that we were COFO workers made no difference when he finally did learn our identity. He has not asked us to leave even in the face of much harassment, but he told us that the owners were also putting pressure on him. Our major difficulty in that respect might be a forced hike in the price of our apartment if we want to stay for the month of August.

Most of the people who room here regularly have known for a long time that we are COFO workers and they have still shown us no hostility. A couple of the little old ladies rocking on the porch seem a little frightened but they still manage to smile and return a friendly greeting.

### **B. Newspaper Contact**

Hardly had we got settled in the hotel when we received a call from the newsroom of the local office of the Gulfport-Biloxi Daily Herald. They wanted to have a story on us. Ed Hamlett and one other member of the group went down to the office and talked with Catherine Campbell who wrote the article dealing with our project. We got a relatively decent write-up, one which gave a summary of the overall program of COFO and the relationship of our particular project to the program as a whole. Ed stressed our interpretive role and employed a few circumlocutions when asked what we expected to accomplish. The masthead to the article read, "Rights leader vague about aims". Naturally they also played up the COFO decision to avoid demonstrations for public accommodations during the summer program. During the interview she made it clear that she was writing what would most interest her readers.

### **C. The Ministry**

Our reception by the local ministry has, to the extent to which they have been contacted, been generally " non-committal sympathy", which however much anticipated is get a highly disappointing response. One of the more conservatively inclined members of our group, one whose job it has been to contact ministers, is rapidly losing his conservative leanings and with each day he becomes a little more militant. Today he declared that his dialogue with the president of the local Rotary Club had been more fruitful than his contacts with the clergy. A somewhat exaggerated but nonetheless significant remark. ( within a conservative context).

Many of the ministers here - it has been reported to me - have given sermons which might be termed strong on civil rights. However, it has also been reported that many of the ministers are wary of their congregations; consequently, it is difficult to make a blanket statement about the response of the ministry.

The local Unitarian minister has been highly responsive to our group. We were invited by the minister to present our program to his congregation. The response was polite although somewhat reserved. The minister made a recording of our program and is sending it to the Unitarian office in Boston for distribution in the northern Unitarian churches.

#### D. Contacts with Labour

Some of the group made attempts to contact labour leaders in the area to feel out the possibilities of working within the framework of organizing laborers. Although there was a good response from Claude Ramsey, most of the labour leaders were so beset with the difficulties of getting even a nascent organization underway that they were extremely reluctant to confront the issue of an inter-racial movement, even if they themselves were sympathetic to the ideal.

#### E. Contacts with Keesler Air Force Base

A hootenany was arranged and scheduled for last Tuesday night under the sponsorship of the local U.S.O. As part of this program some members of the group made a twelve minute T.V. spot appearance on a regular program given by Keesler. There were some complaints among the TV station engineers about the state of dress of some of the group. ( I believe Sam Shirah was wearing blue jeans - apparently, they expected a hootenany to be an imitation of the limelighters) Later the group gave a twenty minute preview performance at the U.S.O. to advertize the hootenany. As a consequence, several of the airmen ( no doubt the best dressed cadets) complained about the dress of the group after the spot performance. ( I believe Sam Shirah was still wearing blue jeans. But no one had a beard and everyone had a fresh haircut. Apparently they were accustomed to a rule which demanded coat and tie. The group was unaware that this was customary dress for performers at the U.S.O.) There were other complaints - some people really can't sing on key. But this is a failure to understand the essence of a hootenany. If there were objections other than these, they remained unexpressed. Sid Sicotte, director of the U.S.O. cancelled the hootenany but suggested that we might hold it at a later date.

Other members of the group have made friends with some of the students at Keesler. One evening an Indian student came to talk with us about the racial problems which confront both the U.S. and his country. As a resident of Kashmir, he had some interesting observations to make about caste systems and their abolition. However, it should be stated that we got this information by asking him questions for he is required by military code not to give political speeches.

#### E. An Incident

A rather unpleasant incident developed as a result of a trip to the base by three members of our group, Mike Waddell, Bob Bailey and Margie Henderson. They went out to Keesler to talk to two Indians whom they had met at the U.S.O. They checked at the guard post and were permitted to enter the base to talk to their two friends. Unable to find them, they decided to visit the Information Officer to get some general information about the base. They asked him about the number of men stationed at the base, which one would imagine is not a military secret. But he became very suspicious and called the Air Police. The Air Police interrogated them for some time before releasing them. Margie had been working at Barney's Drive In Restaurant so she had to call to let them know she would be late for work. The Air Police called for her and explained that she and two other civil rights workers were being questioned at the base and therefore would be detained for a short while. Margie Henderson and Bruce Maxwell had both got jobs at Barney's drive in. When they went to work, July 6th, they were told by Barney that their employment was severed, that they were to leave, that if they returned he would arrest them for trespassing on private property. He had not known they were COFO workers before this time.

#### F. Another Incident

The incident related above was followed up, so to speak, resulting in the arrest of one member of the group. Below is an account written by Bruce Maxwell.

"Margie and I were fired from Barney's on July 6th. One week later, I came back to Barney's late at night because no other store around had cigarettes. Barney saw me and told me he didn't want me around his place. On July 21st, I returned to Barney's but didn't go in. I talked to the cook, my friend, Clarence Johnson about the arrest of his brother the night before at Barney's for two minutes. I did not go inside. Barney flagged down a police car and had me taken in for trespassing. He told the police that I was in the kitchen. Who in Mississippi would believe the testimony of a white agitator and a negro that I was outside when the white owner says I was inside? I pleaded guilty and was fined \$25. My alternative was to fight the case and be fined \$150."

G. Bob Williams, 25(?)

Born in Bailey, North Carolina of strongly opinionated Democratic stock. The question mark following his age is due to his account of the rift between him and his father over the fact that Bob voted Republican. In his account, and here the doubt, he said that he voted for Eisenhower, which would make him at least twenty-nine; however, he may have made a mistake. Nonetheless, his father refused to speak to him for a considerable length of time.

Bob defines himself as a segregationist. Why? He reports that as a boy in North Carolina, he wanted to see a movie at the Negro theatre in his home town, but he was refused admission. Later in his life he asked a negro girl for a date and she laughed at him. Bob says that he has been discriminated against - that's why he is a segregationist.

When Bob was 18 he spent a year in jail for breaking a man's neck. After this he served in the Marine Corps in Viet Nam. According to him, he went to Viet Nam as the only white man in an all negro outfit. He requested the transfer to this group. He had one very close friend in southeast Asia - a negro. Bob says that he felt more remorse over the death of this friend than anyone in his life including his father who died when he was overseas.

At one point or another he was a fishing boat captain, operating out of Wilmington, N.C. From this he turned to tug boat work and became captain of a boat owned by the Nebel Towing Company of New Orleans. Somehow or other he managed to marry Mr. Nebel's daughter, Lois, about five months ago. Lois is fifteen and as Bob says, a "segregationist from the word grandfather". Lois has definitely been influenced for the better by her association with us. She has, for the first time, met negroes on a basis of equality. The rally which she and Bob attended, was undoubtedly a moving experience for her.

Bob has a brother and sister-in-law here (Owen and Joan Williams). Owen is a civilian employee at Keesler. Joan is supposedly pro civil rights for negroes. Bob and Owen's mother lives with Owen.

After Lois was taken back to N.O. by her mother last week, Bob moved over with Owen. Yesterday, July 21, Mayor Danny Guice sent a policeman over to get Bob to bring him to the mayor's office. Bob was kept waiting over an hour and when the mayor finally agreed to see him, it was to warn him that he had heard Bob was mixed up with the civil rights workers and he hoped Bob realized that we would all be going home at the end of the summer and he would be at the head of the list - he'd have to try to integrate this town all by himself.....

Bob has since arranged to live with Jeff Powers, Sam Shirah and Liz Krohne in a house they have rented on the Point in order to live and work among poor white people. Lois may join them.

## IV Re-organization of the White Community Project

### A. Some changes.

Howard Romane whose role in this project has been to travel around the state making contacts and acting as a liason with groups all over the white community, suggested that we should spread out over the state putting some members of the W.C.P. into places where other COFO projects are located in order to do some interpretive work for the group there. In several instances, members of the white community had expressed an open interest in contacting members of the COFO project either out of curiosity or out of a desire to 'convert' the COFO workers. (e.g. the ATAC group). Regular members of the COFO project had already sufficient tasks without serving as interpreters or auditors or spokesmen to these visiting individuals or groups. As a consequence, three members of the group in Biloxi have been dispatched to other parts of the state. Bob Bailey has gone to Vicksburg, Mike Waddell to Ruleville, Margie Henderson to Meridian.

### B. Present Structure and new plans

At present the largest group of the White Community Project is located in Biloxi. There are sixteen members at: Ed Hamlett (project director), Rev. Jim Guinan (NCC), Nelson Blackstock, Diane Burrows, Gene Guerrero, Liz Krohne, Bruce Maxwell, Robert Pardun, Jeff Powers, Judy Schiffer, Sam Shirah, Charles Smith, Soren Sorenson, John Strickland, Douglas Tiberis, Grenville Whitman. There are also four members working in Jackson: Lon Clay Hill, Micki Mathews, Hojm Parkman, Sue Thrasher.

The group working in Jackson has been working primarily with white moderates in an attempt to get them moving at least in a direction of action at the level of human relations councils. The group working in Biloxi has tried a number of approaches with about an equal number of frustrations. At present we are planning to divide into smaller groups working at various points along the coast. The way we are living right now as a group presents a community versus community situation which has proved to seriously inhibit activity.

As plans stand now by next Wednesday we will be working in the following areas:

Sam Shirah, Jeff Powers, Liz Krohne and Bob and Lois Williams will be living together at the Point, a poorer section of the white community in Biloxi concentrating their attention on finding out the needs and difficulties of poor whites in this area.

Ed Hamlett will stay in the Riviera to coordinate the work in different areas, establishing a headquarters and office. Diane Burrows and perhaps Sue Thrasher will work in the office and work with the contacts made so far by the group.

*Biloxi**Jackson*

Doug Tiberiis and Soren Sorenson will be working in ~~Bay St. Louis~~ probably with moderates.

Judy Schiffer and Robert Perdun will be ~~in Bay St. Louis~~ *leaving to get married*  
*return in Sept.*

Gene Guerrero will work in ~~Gulfport~~. *Biloxi*

Bruce Maxwell will be in North Biloxi and John Strickland and Gren Whitman are both working in Freedom Schools here.

This weekend ( July 26-27) the entire White Community Project will meet with Myles Horton and ~~Bob Meese~~ to assess the work that has been done thus far and plan for the new orientation of the project