

[June 1964]

MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM SCHOOLS:
New Houses of Liberty

I asked for your churches, and you turned me down,
But I'll do my work if I have to do it on the ground,
You will not speak for fear of being heard,
So you crawl in your shell and say, "Do not disturb,"
You think because you've turned me away,
You've protected yourself for another day.

But tomorrow surely will come,
And your enemy will still be there with the rising sun,
He'll be there tomorrow as all tomorrows in the past,
And he'll follow you into the future if you let him pass.

-- from a poem by Joyce Brown, 16
Freedom School pupil in McComb, Mississippi

This poem was written by a 16-year old Negro girl in McComb, Mississippi. She and approximately 1, 825 other Negroes -- children, teen-agers and adults -- are attending the 39 Freedom Schools of the Mississippi Summer Project, sponsored by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a statewide organization of local groups aided by field secretaries of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), CORE, NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

These students -- going to "school" in churches, private homes, and backyards -- are learning Negro history, civics, American history, arts and crafts, drama, music, English, arithmetic, algebra and chemistry. They are being taught by 250 Negro and white summer volunteers from 40 states in schools which have been set up in every Mississippi city or town of considerable size, as well as in rural counties where Negroes have been shot to death for attempting to register to vote.

Project coordinators state that the Freedom School program is an unqualified success. Rev. Thomas Wahman, a coordinator of religious activities at New York University, and a Freedom School coordinator, terms the project a "completely unexpected phenomenon." Despite the fear which prevails in most Negro communities throughout the state, "several are demanding that COFO come in and set up schools," says Wahman.

Ralph Featherstone, a 25-year old Negro speech teacher from Washington, D.C., is director of the McComb Freedom School. Featherstone explains that the opening of the school was delayed for two weeks after three civil rights workers disappeared in Philadelphia, Miss. and advance scouts prepared the way in the dangerous Southwest area of Mississippi.

But Featherstone found the students ready and waiting. In fact,

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Featherstone says, "They'd heard about the school and they felt left out because we didn't arrive on time."

Now the registration in McComb is up to 105, with a daily attendance of 75. Many of the students are the younger brothers and sisters of the 110 high school students who walked out of school when four of their number were arrested on a sit-in charge at the Greyhound bus station in 1961.

"I think the Freedom School is inspiring the people to lend a hand in the fight," Featherstone reports. "The older people are looking to the young people, and their courage is rubbing off. The school makes the kids feel they haven't been forgotten. It makes them feel that at last something is coming down to help them. They feel the school is for them."

The McComb school started in the backyard of the SNCC Freedom House a week after it was bombed. For one week, students conducted classes in the blistering heat only yards away from the spot where three explosions ripped away one wall. Now they are in a church.

The Hattiesburg Freedom School system (there are five) has the highest registration and the most varied curricula in the state. Some 575 young people and adults attend morning and evening classes in the usual academic subjects, plus music programs, discussion groups, slide exhibitions, and art classes. Three of the five schools are putting out a newspaper, and Mrs. Carolyn Reese, a Negro Detroit school teacher and administrator of the Hattiesburg Freedom Schools, reports that the other two will begin putting theirs out soon.

To understand what the Freedom Schools mean to those attending them, it is first necessary to understand several facts about the regular system of education in Mississippi.

The Mississippi educational system is geared to teach the Mississippi Educational Way of Life: Dissent is heresy. Ignorance is safer than inquiry. Fear pervades the academic atmosphere.

Example: in the spring of 1961, a number of Negro students in Jackson were expelled from (Negro) high school because they stood up in their classrooms and inquired pointedly about the Freedom Rides and their significance.

Example: More than 800 students at Alcorn A & M College (Negro) in Southwest Mississippi were tossed out of school in the spring of 1964 by the college president because they protested social conditions on the campus. The President enlisted the aid of the much-feared Mississippi Highway Patrol to load the students into buses so that they could be sent home without even the opportunity to collect their belongings.

Example: also during this spring, an issue of the student newspaper at the University of Southern Mississippi (white) was confiscated by campus police under the direction of school president W. D. McCain because it carried an article about the school admin-

istration's refusal to grant admission to a Negro applicant. (McCain is a strong supporter of the White Citizen's Council, and an advisory board member of the Patriotic American Youth, a campus youth organization which shares space with the John Birch Society in a Jackson bookstore. He also received a special commendation from the state legislature for refusing admittance for the fifth time to John Frazier, a student at predominantly Negro Tougaloo College.

There are many other such examples of suppression of student rights, and even of faculty rights, e.g., the constant persecution of Ole Miss Professor James W. Silver. However, what is even more chilling is the economy of school segregation in Mississippi.

Despite the fact that Alabama spends less per pupil, black and white, than any state in the nation, the expenditure in the Mississippi Delta is even less. More important, the disparity between funds spent per white student and funds spent per black student is even greater.

In Mississippi, the county appropriates funds for education -- according to its own budget -- in addition to the funds contributed by the state. The following is the county appropriation, above the state minimum, for instruction per pupil in 1960-61:

North Pike County (43.% non-white)*
(McComb)

white.....	\$30.89
Negro.....	.76

South Pike County
(Magnolia)

white.....	\$59.55
Negro.....	1.35

Forrest County (28% non-white)*

white.....	\$67.76
Negro.....	34.19

Hattiesburg Separate

white.....	\$115.96
Negro.....	61.69

Whites who control Mississippi have little respect for education, but use it unscrupulously to prevent Negroes from obtaining the basic democratic right, the right to vote.

For instance, while the State Penitentiary Reform Bill was still in the Senate, Sen. Howard McDonnell of Biloxi proposed an amendment

* U. S. Civil Rights Commission Report on Voting, 1960.

which would require that the Superintendent of the penitentiary have two years of college education. Foes of the amendment said the requirement would force the ouster of the present superintendent, C. E. Breazeale. The amendment failed. McDonnell then asked that the Superintendent be required to have a high school education. That amendment was also defeated.

In April, 1964 a bill was introduced into the Senate Education Committee which would have required a high school education for the members of the county boards of education. The bill was eventually sent back to committee where lobbying took place to exclude certain counties from the provisions of the bill.

Yet, the Mississippi legislature has established voter registration requirements which lawyers contend would be extremely difficult for anyone without a law degree to pass, if the tests are honestly administered.

The Freedom Schools are a war against this academic poverty. It is not just the courses provided, but the fact that the schools are a focal point for personal expression against the oppression, on the one hand, and for personal growth and creativity, on the other. The regular Mississippi schools are fundamentally opposed to this approach.

Mrs. Reese says, "The Freedom Schools mean an exposure to a totally new field of learning, new attitudes about people, new attitudes about self, and about the right to be dissatisfied with the status quo. The children have had no conception that Mississippi is a part of the United States; their view of American history is history with no Negroes in it. It's like making a cake with no butter."

Mrs. Reese explains that "Mississippi has sold itself short. There are many good minds here which are being used as sacrificial lambs. The children are alert and eager to learn. If they had something to learn, they'd be happy to learn it."

Both Mrs. Reese and Featherstone find themselves faced with the unexpected problem of a pupil-teacher ratio which is growing too large. Mrs. Reese tells of one teacher who is so popular that her class has increased from 15 to 27 students -- who come every day. Wahman is now recruiting an additional 100 teachers for the month of August, and expects that schools in five new communities will be opened then.

Both Featherstone and Wahman point to the Negro history curriculum as possibly the most valuable legacy of the Freedom Schools this summer. "The only thing our kids knew about Negro history," Featherstone says, "is about Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver and his peanuts."

But subjects like chemistry and algebra are also popular. Featherstone was told by pupils in the McComb school that Negro

children are taught algebra in high school, but white children begin the subject in the sixth grade. Wahman says that when the chemistry teacher left the Gulfport Freedom School, his 15 students also left in protest, and returned only when another was sent into the school.

Mrs. Reese gives an idea what the Hattiesburg schools are accomplishing: "The children are learning that somebody is supposed to listen to them. They are writing letters to the editor of Hattiesburg newspapers, and learning where to direct their complaints. At first, the children were somewhat awe-stricken with the white teachers, at their whiteness, their hair, but many are learning to appreciate them as human beings. When you get an appreciation of yourself, then you can put the other individual into his proper focus."

But maybe Joyce Brown sums it up best:

THE HOUSE OF LIBERTY

I come not for fortune, nor for fame,
I seek not to add glory to an unknown name,
I did not come under the shadow of night,
I came by day to fight for what's right.
I shan't let fear, my monstrous foe,
Conquer my soul with threat and woe,
Here I have come and here I will stay,
And no amount of fear my determination can sway,

I asked for your churches, and you turned me down,
But I'll do my work if I have to do it on the ground,
You will not speak for fear of being heard,
So you crawl in your shell and say, "Do not disturb,"
You think because you've turned me away,
You've protected yourself for another day.

But tomorrow surely will come,
And your enemy will still be there with the rising sun,
He'll be there tomorrow as all tomorrows in the past,
And he'll follow you into the future if you let him pass.

You've turned me down to humor him,
Ah! your fate is sad and grim.
For even though your help I ask,
Even without it, I'll finish my task.

In a bombed house I have to teach my school
Because I believe all men should live by the Golden Rule.
To a bombed house your children must come,
Because of your fear of a bomb,
And because you've let your fear conquer your soul,
In this bombed house these minds I must try to mold.
I must try to teach them to stand tall and be a man,
When you their parents have cowered down and refused to
take a stand.

Current status of Freedom Schools (July 27, 1964)

There are now 39 Freedom Schools operating in the state with more opening every day. In August the number should be well over 50.

First District (Northeast Mississippi)

West Point
Columbus

Second District (Northwest Mississippi -- the Delta)

Greenwood (two)
Greenville
Holly Springs (and one in rural Marshall County)
Clarksdale (four)
Ruleville
Shaw
Holmes County (Mileston
(Mount Olive
(Pilgrim's Rest

Third District (Southwest Mississippi)

McComb
Vicksburg

Fourth District (East central Mississippi)

Canton (three)
Meridian
Carthage (Cedar Grove
Madison County (Valley View
(Gluckstock
(Mt. Zion

Fifth District (Southeast Mississippi)

Hattiesburg (five)
Gulfport (three)
Biloxi
Moss Point
Laurel
Ocean City

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