

COFO

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Oct. 29, 1964

NIGHT RAIDERS STRIKE TWICE IN SUNFLOWER COUNTY

Indianola, Oct. 28 Within twenty minutes, night-riding vigilantes threw a bomb into the Freedom House at Sunflower, 8 miles north of here, and set fire to the Freedom School in Indianola. There was one injury; 14-year old Ernest Smith received a severe cut in the leg as he jumped through the window to escape from the gas in the Freedom House in Sunflower.

At about 1:00 am a tear gas cannister was thrown into the house of Mrs. Annie Mae King through the front plate glass window. James Dann, 24-year old white SMOCC worker from Warwick R.I., and Ernest Smith, 14-year old Sunflower Negro volunteer were sleeping inside. They were awakened by the crash and upon discovering the bomb tried to get out. The front and back doors were blocked by the fumes and they were forced to break a window to get out. Jumping through the window Smith received a cut on his leg that subsequently required 10 stitches.

Dann drove Smith to Indianola, to the home where project director John Harris 20-year old Negro from Birmingham, Ala. was staying. Harris and Dann drove to the Freedom School to get a first-aid kit for Smith. There they noticed smoke and flames coming from the building. When Dann and Harris arrived, the front doors, usually locked, were wide open, the lock pried off. Dann and Harris fought the flames with a fire extinguisher, putting out most of the fire. Then they returned home and called the fire department. The girl at the fire department made Dann spell his name three times before she would take down the message. When the fire engines arrived they stood around until prodded by the civil rights to do something. The fire was quickly extinguished (with an excess of water). Afterwards the volunteer firemen wandered in and out of the building in a festive mood, one of them remarking to the COFO workers that he wished the building had been completely destroyed.

The dual raids climaxed a week of increasing violence in the county. The freedom school had been the target of an aerial bombing last Thursday, and someone had already tried to break into the Freedom House in Sunflower. Two COFO workers were beaten in broad daylight last week in Indianola, one of them on the courthouse steps.

EVIDENCE OF ARSON FOUND

Indianola, Oct. 28, FBI agents found rags and bottles used to set the fire in the Freedom School last night. These were found in the office of the school where the fire started. Damage to the office; the library and meeting hall suffered slight water damage.

FBI agents described the tear gas cannister thrown into the Freedom House as a "military type."

NEGROES TOLD TO GET OFF THE STREET

Sunflower, Oct. 29, Nine Negro teenagers who were attempting to guard the tear-gassed Freedom House were told by police to get off the streets or they would be killed. The Negroes, members of the Sunflower Youth Movement, saw a man trying to break into the house. They also reported several suspicious cars cruising around the house and a church used for voter registration meetings. They volunteered to watch the two buildings, but the police told them to get home or they would be shot. W.L. Smith, 20, of Sunflower, President of the Sunflower Youth Movement, contacted COFO headquarters in Indianola. COFO workers called the sheriff and the police. Sunflower policeman Billy Wood denied that he threatened to shoot the Negroes and promised to protect the Freedom House. He asserted that the man who tried to break into the Freedom House was drunk and "meant no harm."