

Ga., S.W.

STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE  
360 Nelson Street, S.W.  
Atlanta, Georgia 30313

FACT SHEET  
AMERICUS, GEORGIA

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) has been working in Americus and Sumter County since January, 1963.

SNCC Field Secretaries Donald Harris and John Churchville were detained for an hour on March 18, 1963 by Sumter County Sheriff Fred Chappell and threatened with arrest on 'vagrancy' or 'loitering' charges. The FBI was notified.

On April 25, 1963, white SNCC Field Secretary Ralph Allen was beaten on an Americus street by two white men after he accompanied a Negro woman to the registrar's office. The FBI was notified.

On July 12, 1963, eleven Negroes were arrested for trying to purchase tickets at the 'white' window of a local movie theatre. Seven days later, 55 others were arrested at a theatre demonstration.

On August 8, 1963, SNCC Field Secretaries Harris, Allen and John Perdue were arrested and beaten during a night-time demonstration. The three SNCC workers - and CORE worker Zev Aelony - were charged with 'attempting to incite insurrection', 'inciting to riot', 'unlawful assembly', 'assault and battery', and 'obstructing arrest.' Two local Negroes, Sallie Mae Durham and Thomas McDaniel, were also charged with 'inciting insurrection', 'assault and battery' and 'obstructing arrest.'

McDaniel and Miss Durham were held under \$20,000 bonds each. Twenty-four peace bonds totaling \$120,000 were lodged against the SNCC workers. Since the insurrection charge carries the death penalty in Georgia, no bond could be set on that count. All six remained in jail for 85 days until a three-judge federal panel set them free.

On August 9, 1963, a group of 75 demonstrating Negroes was dispersed by state troopers and cattle-prod wielding city and county officers. Most of that group was arrested. Three people required stitches to close their wounds and one man charged police broke his leg with a baseball bat and then jumped on the broken leg. Georgia Governor Carl Sanders was asked to investigate.

Americus Negroes - under the leadership of the Sumter County Movement - asked for the formation of a bi-racial committee. Mayor T. Griffin Walker and City Engineer Charles Wheatley refused. On August 20, Police Chief Ross Chambliss, Sheriff Chappell and other lawmen forced an Atlanta Journal reporter from a commitment hearing for the jailed civil rights workers, despite a Georgia law requiring open hearings.

In October, Stephen Pace, the Americus Solicitor General, admitted he placed the insurrection charge against the rights workers "to deny, or ask the courts to deny these defendants bond. Until we can be assured that we can maintain peace," Pace said, "we will continue to hold them."

On November 1, 1963, a three-judge federal panel ruled Georgia's insurrection law was unconstitutional and set the rights workers free.

All were re-indicted on charges of assault, and SNCC worker Ralph Allen was tried, convicted and sentenced by an all-white jury on December 11, 1963.

On July 9, 1964, the Georgia Court of Appeals overturned his conviction because of "systematic exclusion of Negroes" from service on Sumter County juries.

(more)

On March 24, 1964, SNCC worker Donald Harris was beaten by an Americus policeman and deputy sheriff outside a segregated Americus polling place. SNCC protested to Senator Richard Russell.

On July 4, 1964, SNCC worker John Perdew was beaten four times by white mobs attacking Negroes trying to eat at Americus restaurants under the then two-day old 1964 Civil Rights Act. Perdew was beaten again on July 24, 1964 at the county courthouse as he was leaving after registering to vote. The FBI was notified.

SNCC workers Harris, Roy Shoilds and Dale Smith and nine other Negroes were arrested July 5, 1964 for trying to enter a public, all-white swimming pool.

(In August, 1964, officials in nearby Albany, Georgia placed insurrection charges against SNCC worker Harris and the Rev. Samuel Wells, despite a ruling nearly a year earlier that the law was unconstitutional.)

In October, 1964, an Americus Negro businessman ran - and was defeated - for a seat on the city council.

In November, 1964, SNCC worker Donald Harris was charged with 'assault with intent to murder' an Americus policeman, charges growing out of his arrest nearly a year before. The charges were dropped in December.

In May, 1965, two local teenagers, Robertina Freeman and Alex Brown, both 15, were arrested and charged with 'fornication'. The two passed a lie detector test, but were sentenced in a closed door hearing to an indefinite term in the Georgia Training School. Miss Freeman had been a participant in the 1963 demonstrations and spent a month in the Leesburg, Georgia stockade and was one of three Negro girls who integrated Americus High School in September, 1964.

On February 14, 1964, three Americus Negro women were attacked by Sheriff Chappell in the 'white' restroom for women in the county courthouse while they were waiting to take a voter test. Later the same day SNCC worker Sammy Mahone was beaten by J. W. Southwell, who was later appointed Justice of the Peace, while Mahone was waiting with fifty other Negroes to take the voting test. Southwell, while Justice of the Peace, assaulted SNCC worker Graham Wiggins in the county courthouse as he accompanied prospective voters to the registration office in the spring of 1964. Before his appointment, Southwell had been an agent for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

As Justice of the Peace, Southwell refused to prosecute white Americus grocer Cleveland Hancock who had beaten SNCC worker Willie Ricks when Ricks refused to say "Yes Sir" in Hancock's grocery. Ricks was arrested the next day while picketing the grocery.

When four Negro students integrated Americus High School in the fall of 1964, they were greeted by white students with a hail of rocks and bottles while ten state troopers and Sheriff Chappell watched.

During the weeks following the passage and signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, whites rode through the Negro community shooting into homes and throwing rocks and bottles.

On July 20, 1965, four Negro women - including a candidate for JP Southwell's seat - were arrested when they stood in the "white female" voting line. They refused to leave jail or post bond until the charges against them were dropped.

Demonstrations began and continued daily following their arrest. On the night of July 27, 350 Negroes gathered at the Sumter County courthouse for an all-night vigil to protest the four women's arrest. A group of angry whites rode through the Negro community shooting into homes. SNCC workers Bill and Emory Harris were fired at 17 times. Two Negro men were beaten. At 12:30 that evening, a young white youth was shot and killed. Two Negro youths were arrested.

Demonstrations were called off following the shooting but resumed a day later.