

SEGREGATION AND BRUTALITY
IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA - SUNFLOWER COUNTY

James Dann; 24 year old
white SMOCC worker from
Warwick, R.I.

Since mid-September 1964, Negroes from Indianola have been trying to use the all-white Seymour Public Library. The tactics used to keep the Negroes out varied from Police Chief Alexander and his boys bodily throwing out prospective applicants to a lengthy delaying process of application. A Negro trying to use the library was told to fill out an application, (if he had a job he was fired the next day. This happened several times) bring it back and wait until the "board meets", usually one or two months hence. After the board met they were told they were "not approved".

After the city opened a "colored" library in the Negro section of town in January, impatience grew and a picket line was set up first at the "colored" library and then at the "white" library. February 19 was set by the Mississippi Student Union, a Negro student organization, as the date for a sit-in at the "white" library. This is the story of what happened in the words of the participants themselves.

Friday afternoon

Otis Brown; 19 year old
Negro COFCO worker from
Indianola, Miss.

On February 19, 1965 about sixty-five people and I left the freedom school to go to the Seymour Public Library. About five left in a car and the rest kept walking to the library. When we reached the Seymour Public Library, the five who went by car were already inside sitting down. Then about six more went inside to sit down and I went to the car and gathered together the picket signs that were in the car. I passed them out to the people who were standing outside in order to keep them moving around instead of standing around. About five minutes later about three policemen went into the library and about seven minutes later I saw them force out the ones who were inside sitting down. Then the librarian locked the door to the library. After that the police chief came over and told us that there could not be any singing, so I decided that we should march in twos instead of a single line. Seven seconds later, Chief Alexander and two other policemen came over and told us that we could not have two lines, but we kept on marching. The police pushed us back into a single line. So after a while I asked the people if they would like to sing and everyone said yes. But before I could say four words, Captain Steed pushed me out of line and told me that I was under arrest. Chief Alexander really was not giving the orders. It seemed like he was following the other policemen. They also arrested seven more after me and the chief told one of the policemen to take us to the other side of the street until the police bus came. At that time one of the policemen said that he would like to put a bullet through our heads and cursed us. We were out on the bus and after a while they arrested two or three more, until there were about twelve of us, and we were taken down to the city hall. First they called Jim Dann into the office and later they called me. After they were through asking me questions they told me to go over to the jail house and when I reached for the door, Sheriff Hollowell choked me and pushed me out the door. About twenty minutes later they put McKinley Mack into the cell with me. Later I found out that Herschel Kaminsky, Linda Jenkins, McKinley, Mrs. Goree and I were in jail. The jail had an odor and the food is very poor. Later on that evening two lawyers came to see us and sked us questions. They told us that Mrs. Goree would be halled out at that time, but our bond would be paid the next day. (Mrs. Goree is an old lady - 69 years old)

About 10:30 a.m. Saturday, another picket line passed by the jailhouse going to the library. They were arrested about 11:25 a.m. About 1 p.m. another picket line went to the library and they came back to the courthouse. About 2 p.m. eighteen of us were put on a bus and taken to the county farm. They did not feed us Saturday. We were put into a barn where there was one heater and wind coming through the wall. We were given one blanket each and nine beds with about seventeen filthy mattresses. The next morning we were given three biscuits with a piece of butter and some syrup. Later on, some food was brought out to the farm by some local people, but they did not let us have it. On Sunday evening, we were given beans and cornbread. On Monday morning we were given one more biscuit and that evening we received some food someone had sent us. That evening we received the same thing we had the last evening. Also that morning we told the sheriff that Everard Cole was sick but he got funny instead. He acted like he didn't care. The next evening they sent a doctor to see Reverend Cole. The doctor gave him some aspirins. That night it was very cold. That barn is not a good place for anyone to stay in.

Saturday Morning

John Harris; 21 year old
Negro SNCC worker from
Birmingham, Ala.

Twenty-six people had been arrested yesterday for picketing the library. At a special mass meeting last night we decided to return to the library regardless of the circumstances. We started picketing the segregated (all-white) library at 10:15. We were told not to sing because we would be disturbing the peace. So we did not sing as of 11:25.

Around 11 o'clock as sixty-two of us were picketing, the police brought up reinforcements with riot helmets, night sticks and the county bus, used for carrying off large groups of people. (ie. civil rights demonstrators) They blocked off the streets on four sides. There were around fifteen cops in the area. (Mostly auxiliary force) They all stood around with hatred in their eyes.

At 11:25 Mayor Pitts came up to the sight of the demonstration. The pickets were proceeding quietly and orderly. We had agreed around 40 minutes before to end the picket at 11:30, just five minutes after the mayor arrived. When Pitts came up, he immediately called Captain Steed over to him and they talked for about two minutes. At that time the bus was pulled up closer to us right up on the curb of the sidewalk. We all knew something was up, but we proceeded with the march. No one thought of leaving. Some people shook their heads because they were expecting trouble. All that came were prepared to go to the end.

As Steed and Pitts finished talking, Steed called me over and said that we would have to leave. I asked why. He said the mayor had said the library was closed and it is private property. The day before thirty people were told they could picket if they wanted to but couldn't sing. Now as we were peacefully picketing a segregated public facility, we were told to leave because it was private property. Told by the mayor of the town, not by the person who owned the building if it was private property. I told the mayor we would not leave. So he ordered me arrested. He didn't want to arrest everyone so he tried to tell the people to leave. They refused, saying that if one was arrested, everyone would be arrested. He again tried to get them to leave. They again refused, so everyone was ordered on the bus. The cops started waving their clubs and cursing the people as they went for the bus. As I was headed for the bus I saw a disturbance about thirty yards away. As I started in that direction a cop grabbed my arm and twisted it as he shoved me on the bus. I was the first one on but I could still see what was going on as the other people were being rushed on the bus. About five cops were trying to get Charles Scattergood, a white SNCC worker, from the ground where he had gone limp. They finally dragged him thirty yards on the pavement when he could easily have been lifted by the five cops. When they got him to the bus, he was pushed in on the floor with his head hitting the metal seats and floor. I was pushed by the back door of the bus as I was still near them. One deputized cop, Earl Collins,

was being especially brutal. He kept punching Scattergood with his night stick as he was being thrown in the bus. I said to Collins, "Don't hit him anymore." As I said that, Collins reached up to the bus and punched me in the nose with his night stick. The blow busted my nose, and cause it to bleed for several hours.

After approximately forty people were loaded on the bus, the door was closed and we were driven off to city hall. (Just two blocks away) The police left about twenty more people standing at the library. They didn't want to arrest so many people. Facilities weren't available to so many people. After the bus drove us away the people who were left behind did not leave. They were determined not to desert those who were in the struggle with them. After we were at city hall for ten minutes, the cops decided to pick the other people up if they were still there. They went back so the people were picked up. They were still at the library waiting.

Everyone was booked on refusing to obey an officer, and disturbing the peace. My bond and Scattergood's was set at \$200. No one else was told their bond, to my knowledge.

When we were in city hall, I learned that another person, fifteen year old, Willie Sims had been hurt. He was hit on the elbow with a club. His arm was swollen and in pain. After a while at city hall, Scattergood, Sims and I were taken to a local white doctor who is described as being a butcher when treating Negroes in this town. He told me my nose needed a couple of stitches. When he wasn't sure whether he would use an anesthetic or not, I decided not to let him treat me. He responded by referring to me as a "black son-of-a-bitch". Scattergood and Sims received treatment.

We were all taken to the county jail, after being in for about thirty minutes, we saw a wave of people headed to the library to continue the demonstration. The group ranged from young students to old women. After about five minutes, the group headed back toward the courthouse and county jail. They (about thirty in all) paraded around the courthouse carrying the American flag and singing freedom songs, daring to be arrested. We were singing back to them from our cells. After about ten minutes of this, the sheriff came in the jail and removed all the males from the jail onto the street. There were seventeen of us. There must have been about 15 - 20 women. The women were left in the county jail and we were taken to the county farm seven miles away.

Brutality

Charles Scattergood; 23 year old white SNCC worker from Seaside, Washington.

When Eddie Collins, volunteer policeman, grabbed me, I fell to the ground and put my hands behind my head for protection. Too many people had been and were being hit in the head. I didn't want to be one of them. About four policemen gathered around me and made a quick decision. I felt a wrenching pain in my ankle and realized a hand cuff was being placed and tightened there. Eddie Collins began to drag me to the bus while another policeman walked along side of me. The bus was about 200 feet away. The rough pavement tore at my shirt and sweater until they gathered over my head. At first the pavement just burned my back but soon it began to tear away the skin. It felt as though a sanding machine was being applied. The pain on my ankle and back were almost unbearable by the time I reached the bus. They lifted me up and shoved me into the back of the bus, head first. My shoulder caught on a chair leg. They kept shoving me and prodding me with their billy clubs. Finally someone caught hold of me and pulled me away from the chair leg.

After waiting at the police station for about half an hour, a policeman brought John Harris, Willy Sims and I to a doctor's office. The doctor called John a "black son-of-a-bitch" and came into the room where I was. He had a needle in his trembling hand and said that he wanted to give me a tetanus shot. Although I felt that I needed one, I couldn't trust him. I refused. Two civil rights workers were removed from the white cell of the Indianola jail. The sheriff brought me up to the cell and said to the white men "these boys, here's another one of those civil rights workers." The next day...

called me down for questioning. Although I had repeatedly asked the sheriff and the police chief to make a phone call, they had refused. When I told the F.B.I. agent about this, he had no comment. I asked him to tell the sheriff to let me make a phone call. Again he said nothing. As I was leaving the office, the sheriff called me a son-of-a-bitch. I asked the F.B.I. agent to kindly ask the sheriff to refrain from using such language. The F.B.I. agent nonchalantly replied, "It's his jail."

When a Negro trustee led me up to my cell, I refused to go in, saying that the jail was segregated. The trustee went downstairs to tell the sheriff and I went to the other end of the jailhouse. The sheriff came up and dragged me to the other side again. During the night the bandages that had been placed on my back had fallen off. The floor of the jail tore at my wounded back. When the sheriff had dragged me to the cell door, he went down and called up about five deputies. While they carried me inside, one of them beat on the back of my head with his knees. They threw me with tremendous force and I fell half on the floor and half against a bed. At about 4:30 Sunday afternoon (Sunday is visiting day) one of the guys in my cell received a visitor. His name was Jessie Melton. He was the same person who had chased me with a knife a few months earlier. He whispered something to the two white men and left. I think that it is significant that out of all the visitors that tried to get inside the jail, Jessie Melton and a Catholic priest were the only ones who succeeded. However, the white men in my cell remained friendly and apparently had not taken heed of any advice to beat me up or kill me, if in fact that was what Jessie Melton had told them to do.

That night I slept very little because my back had become infected. The next day a doctor was allowed in my cell and I received a tetanus shot and my back was bandaged.

Finally, on Tuesday, I was taken to the county farm. There an F.B.I. agent interviewed me. When I told him what had happened to me he shouted, "I don't call that being beaten," and left.

After Saturday's Arrests

Janell Glass; 17 year old
Negro COFO worker from
Moorhead, Miss.

Saturday after the people were arrested, an emergency mass meeting was called and about 35 people marched down to the library and city hall and then returned to the Negro section of town. They wanted to show that the arrests were not going to stop people from attempting to integrate the library. The library was closed.

Another mass meeting was held that evening. A suggestion was made for a prayer vigil in front of the county jail where some of the people were being held. That night as F.L. Smith was driving Karen Koonan home from the freedom school, they were stopped by the police and taken to city hall. They were informed that someone had thrown bricks through the windows of the "colored" library and since their car had been "looming around" all night, they were suspected. (The car had previously traveled downtown one time.) They were questioned for about twenty minutes and then released.

The next morning (Sunday) over 100 people met and marched through the town to the jail. People got on their knees and prayed silently for ten minutes. After the prayer, for about an hour, different people read scriptures from the Bible and then started singing. This was to show the people in jail that they were not alone and in fact, they joined in the singing. Then we marched around the courthouse twice and marched back down Church Street singing. We were followed by the police and when we started to turn the corner at Jefferson Street, a police car with four officers inside tried to run us over, but they missed and hit the ditch. We then went over to the freedom school where discussion was held.

Sunday afternoon the F.B.I. agents came to interview Willie Sims, Mrs. Lela Mae Brooks and I complained to the F.B.I. about the officer trying to run over

the people. He told us that we would have to go down to the police station to file the complaint; he wouldn't accept the complaint. We knew that it would be useless to file a complaint against the police department at the police station, so we decided not to go. The F.B.I. agents left. That afternoon we carried food down to the county jail and Sheriff Hollowell was waiting at the jail door. He told us we could not visit the people in jail but that he would give them the food. He wanted to know what was in a yellow envelope that was supposed to be given to Linda Jenkins. (She later reported that she received only the open note.) There was a trunk load of food in a car ready to be carried out to the county farm to the other workers arrested, but when P.L. Smith and three more people got to the farm they were told that no visitors were allowed. (Everybody else on the farm, except civil rights workers is allowed visitors on Sundays.) They would not even accept the food. Smith then came back to the freedom school and gave his report. Fifty people had been ready to visit the people on the county farm.

Monday at 4:00 p.m. we left the freedom school and marched through town to the county jail. Over 100 people marched and sang and then came back to the freedom school and had a rally.

The support from the community all weekend was tremendous. Over 500 people were at the freedom school on Tuesday to welcome back the people who were arrested. They brought food ready to eat and the people who didn't bring food brought money. People who were unable to come or who were afraid to come to the school openly sent money and food by friends to show that they were supporting the people who suffered in jail. Everyone was saying that if any more brutality and harassment happened like this again, the police would be sorry oh, so very, very sorry.

The foregoing stories do not merely tell of a segregated public facility and what happens when Negroes in Mississippi believe in the Civil Rights Law, but underlying the library issue is the story of people struggling to escape a system that imprisons their minds and bodies. What happened at the library is a mere speck of what will happen in the future. People here are becoming fed up with the myths of justice and freedom spouted by Mississippi and federal officials. They cannot understand why things are the same now as they were before the Civil Rights Act was signed. Negroes are at the point where they realize there can be no turning back. The song, "We'll Never Turn Back" has never been more appropriate. Mississippi Negroes have nothing to turn back to but fear and death.