

BACKGROUND REPORT ON NATCHEZ

"The Old South still lives in Natchez," thus begins the Adams County Industrial Council pamphlet. And so it does. Within a week, since October 2, over 400 persons have been arrested as they protested the injunction which was handed down on September 30 against SNCC workers, Dorie Ladner, Bill Ware and Percy Lombard; SCLC staffer Rev Richard Sampson and NAACP official Charles Evers. The injunction enjoined them from participating or encouraging others to participate in demonstrations of any kind. The arrested were taken to Parchman State Penitentiary, some 200 miles away, where they were subjected to the most abject form of police brutality and harassment. This type of treatment of Negro citizens is not unusual in Natchez.

Natchez, a city of 24,000 (12,300 Negroes; 11,400 whites) is the home of the Grand Dragon of the United Klans of Mississippi, truck driver E.L. McDaniel. It is also the home of International Paper Company, Armstrong Tire and Rubber Company and the Johns-Manville Corporation, all of which have remained silent as the bombs exploded and the Negro citizens of Natchez were brutalized.

Natchez has been the center of stepped-up Klan activity in Mississippi within the past year and a half. The following are just some of the accounts of violence which have taken place there in the past two years:

October 31, 1963 - Bruce Payne, Yale University freedom vote worker, was attacked and beaten by four white youths as he was transporting two Negro vote workers through the Negro section of town. The white youths trailed Payne's car until he stopped at a gas station, at which time they assaulted him. The FBI and JD were notified. Charges against the white youth of assault with intent to kill were dismissed on January 5, 1965.

August 20, 1963 - Bill Ware, SNCC worker, was arrested while returning home from the March on Washington. He had been refused use of the "white" restroom and had therefore demanded that the attendant stop fueling his tank. He was soon after arrested. During the trip to the jail he was "blasted by a policeman across the mouth with a night stick, resulting in shattered front teeth, one of which was crushed to pieces." The resulting slash in his lips required more than 30 stitches. The FBI and JD were notified.

November 1, 1963 - As Bruce Payned stopped to buy gas, a car containing 4 white men pulled up alongside him. The men told him to come with them. Bruce jumped back into his car and sped away. In his flight, 3 shots were fired at him by the whites.

November 2, 1963 - George Green, SNCC worker, and Bruce Payne were approaching Natchez when the 4 men who had beaten Bruce were observed following them. Green failed to out-race them and was forced off the road at which time Green was ordered out of the car at pistol point. Green deftly swerved the car back onto the highway and escaped. Three shots were fired after him, entering the rear of the car and the left tire which caused a slow leak in the tire. Through Green's skillful manipulation of the car, they entered a side road and fixed the tire unnoticed. The matter was reported to the FBI and JD.

February 15, 1964 - Archie Curtis, 60 year old Negro undertaker of Natchez, was called at night concerning a woman reported to be dying of a heart attack. He was then given directions to a deserted road where the caller said he would be waiting to direct Curtis to the woman's house. Curtis also operates an ambulance service and drove with a friend in the ambulance to the specified place. Upon arrival, he and his companion were ordered by hooded men to leave their car at pistol point. They were blindfolded and taken to another spot where they were asked for their NAACP membership cards and lists. They had neither. Both Negroes were then forced to strip and were beaten with straps. The matter was reported to the FBI and JD.

February 28, 1964 - 14 year old Leona Sills was shot at 3 times by two white teenagers. Leona, who had been active in the Movement, was not injured. The FBI and JD were notified.

March, 1964 - It was reported that Clifford Walker, a Negro, had been found dead and half his face was torn away by a shotgun blast.

July 12, 1964 - Two rural churches outside Natchez were destroyed by a fire set in the early morning. The arsonists were not found. A molotov cocktail was thrown at the home of Negro contractor, Willie Washington, but didn't explode. The FBI and JD were notified.

August 15, 1964 - At approximately 3:30 am, a bomb and resulting fire completely destroyed a tavern directly next door to the private residence which housed the Natchez staff. Dorie Ladner, SNCC worker, spoke with one of the firemen who apparently thought she was a local person rather than one of the workers. He told her "Those outside agitators are in that house. The bomb was set for that house."

September 25, 1964 - The homes of Mayor Nossier and Negro contractor, Willie Washington were bombed. No one was injured but a major beam and several windows in Nossier's house were smashed.

December 16, 1964 - SNCC workers, Eugene Rouse and George Bess, were shot at while coming to Natchez after some exploratory work in nearby Fayette.

November 27, 1964 - At about 7 p.m. the freedom house was shot at by the occupant of a pickup truck which had been parked outside the Freedom house for the five minutes previous to the shooting. The shot missed the house.

August 27, 1965 - George Metcalfe, local NAACP president, was seriously injured by a bomb which went off when he turned on the ignition of his car.* Metcalfe suffered a broken arm and ankle and multiple cuts and burns about the face and neck. His eye was also injured. The bomb ripped the car apart and damaged four surrounding cars. Metcalfe was one of the first local Negroes in years to speak out in favor of the Movement. The head of the FBI operation in Mississippi, Roy Moore, headed the investigation. No one has yet been arrested for the bombing.

It was the bombing of Metcalfe's car which precipitated the level of tension which has since reigned in Natchez. Soon after the bombing a reporter stated that "with the exception of military posts and hunting resorts, this city probably has been more heavily armed, man for man, than almost any other city in the country during recent weeks." Following the bombing, some white citizens called for a bi-racial committee, but the city council didn't agree with this proposal. On August 28, 12 demands of the Negro community were presented to the mayor and the city council. The Negroes stated that they would march on September 2 if they were not granted their demands. On that day 650 units of national guardsmen arrived in the city. Evers called the march off (although over 500 people were waiting to march) and a boycott of the whole downtown area was called for. With the entrance of the guardsmen a 10:00 p.m. curfew was enacted. On the 9th over 200 people marched to city hall under heavy guard. On the 7th of that month a desegregation suit against Adams County was filed (Adams County decided to remain segregated and forego some federal funds). On September 17, a march of 200 was held and then on the 26th, 700 people participated in a march to city hall.

These were the events leading up to the arrests which took place this past week. In this account, however, we have not recorded the many "smaller" attempts at harassment and intimidation -- arrests of workers on charges of auto theft or speeding, etc., the threats to those local people who attempted to register or attended mass meetings, and innumerable other forms of intimidation. Also unrecorded are the many other killings and maimings which must be kept secret by those whose mouths have been sealed by fear.

* Metcalfe's car was parked in the lot of Armstrong Tires, the company at which he works.