

## SUNFLOWER COUNTY ELECTIONS

By Bob Fletcher, SNCC Photographer, AFRAMERICAN NEWS FOR YOU,  
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"We have been raped," said Lawrence Guyot, state chairman of the Mississippi Freedom Party (MFDP). "Now we know what the people in Lowndes County, Alabama know," said a cat from the Jackson FDP. "The crackers have done it again," said the outside agitators. "What we need to do, is some ass kickin'," said some of the angry young people.

The almost absurd little white power structure of Sunflower City had indeed weathered the impending political storm. With what amounted to little more than a half-hearted attempt at maintaining control of their tawdry (but to local Black Folk -- deadly) political power, they intimidated their way into a fraudulent victory that shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone, though to many it was nevertheless a real disappointment.

For over eight months, a small, militant and determined force of local residents canvassed the black community of Sunflower City (population 662) building a slate, campaigning for it, setting up block captains, holding meetings, explaining the action of the Fifth Circuit Federal Court in setting aside the 1966 municipal elections because black people had not been allowed sufficient time to exercise their voting rights, recently clarified by the 1965 Voting Rights Bill, by registering, in time for that election. The town's 55% registered black voters (out of a potential voting age majority of 75%) were urged to select their own candidates; which they did, with a slate of six people: 20 year old Otis Brown for Mayor, and for the five aldermanic positions, Elvin Gipson, Mose Griffin, Mrs. Annie Mae King, Mrs. Willie Mae Smith and the fiery Mrs. Lela Mae Brooks, who was so outspoken in her contempt for the mayor and chief of police that they tried to circulate a rumor that she was "not right in the head."

A group of Northern liberals called the National Committee for Free Elections in Sunflower (headed by Congressman Wm. Fitz Ryan and Bayard Rustin) formed themselves and began to apply pressure on the Justice Department to send in federal officials. In an apparent effort to discourage such a likelihood, the local election commission agreed to let Joseph Harris, one of the leading local black organizers, serve as an election official, which would have meant that he would be available to go behind the curtain with any illiterates who requested his help.

On May 1, the day before the election, the Justice Department announced that it would be sending federal observers to Sunflower. That evening, less than twelve hours before the election, the election commission held a special meeting, at which it decided not to let Joe Harris give help after all. The strategy of the crackers was brilliant in its simple deception. The news of this reversal was brought to the pre-election mass meeting just as the lawyers were confidently explaining that there was nothing to worry about; that all people had to do was to "ask for Joe." "Oh well," said the lawyers, "you still don't have to worry about a thing; just demand that you and whoever helps you be accompanied by a federal observer." But many poor black people in the Delta are not yet used to demanding anything, and besides, the federal observer was just another white

"Yes," replied Bronstein, "it is my privelege to be associated with him."

"Then you're a commie too!"

As it turned out, the baliff was also the chief of police, who, throughout the day, did not hesitate to utilize his position at the polls' entrance to do considerable electioneering, while intimidating Negroes. And so the day began.

Outside and across the street from the Town Hall, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer was circulating through the gathering crowd, generating that spirit of determination with which she infects people wherever she travels. This particular day, she and her husband had only to travel 20 minutes from her home in Ruleville, just north of Senator Eastland's 6,000 acre Doddsville Plantation. Mrs. Hamer was the MFDP plaintiff in the court action responsible for this special election.

When I went over to say hi to her, she said, "You remember that part of that song we been singing so long, that goes:

"If you miss me in the cotton fields  
And you can't find me nowhere,  
Just come on over to the city hall  
And I'll be votin' right there," etc.

"Well," she said when the people finished singing, "that day done finally come."

Kitty-cornered to this group was a service station where about 15-20 crackers had gathered, one with a Brownie camera with which he attempted to intimidate black people on their way to vote. Although reporters and photographers were warned to stay at least 30 feet away from the polling place, nothing was said to the heckling whites, sitting on a pickup truck, less than fifteen feet from the exit door, nor to the mayor's wife sitting in a parked car just outside the door, very visibly "taking down names." Inside, things were reported to be very tense, with officials discourteous and uncooperative. Percy Sutton, Manhattan Borough President, arrived and somehow wangled his way inside.

Soon, he was arguing with the city accountant, who, in calling the names, would refer to black people by their first name. Though there were threats of putting Sutton out of the polling place, he persisted until a compromise was reached, where Joe Harris was asked to call the names.

Meanwhile, many of the local black teenagers assisted at the headquarters, keeping records, keeing the vote count, instructing voters, taking and referring complaints to the lawyers, etc. By 9:00, over 50% of the black vote was in.

Around 10:00, a group of about 10 whites arrives. A cracker in a pick-up truck with a scoped rifle and police dog began circling around the block. Some of the young people began singing rather defiantly. Joe Harris came out and asked them to stop singing, which he was worried might provoke violence. He told them they were