

December 11, 1964

THE COTTON VOTE IN MISSISSIPPI

"Do you plant cotton? You can vote!" By word of mouth and printed leaflet, COFO spread the word across rural Mississippi. Any farmer, black or white, was eligible. There was no registration, no literacy test, no poll tax. If you were a farm owner, tenant, or sharecropper, you could vote---and for something you could really understand. You were voting for the men in your community who would have a say in what your cotton allotment would be for the coming year.

The concept was startling. Negroes know about the cotton vote, but few ever tried to participate. And now they were being told that they could be candidates, too. With a little organization, they could possibly win, this year.

Cotton is a controlled crop. Each year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture sets a marketing quota for the nation, and all cotton within the quota is eligible for price support. The Federal government sets a national acreage allotment, and appoints a state committee to determine individual county allotments. At the county level, local people take over. Elected committeemen determine the exact acreage allotment for every farm in the county. Fields are measured, and farmers who exceed their acreage allotment are made to plow up the illegal rows. It is a serious business in the cotton states.

Each county normally has a highly sought-after reserve quota of acres at its disposal. The individual farmer makes his application, and the acreage is doled out at the discretion of the county committee. The committee also appoints the surveyors who measure the fields. These are lush patronage jobs, particularly when a few dollars paid to have your fields pre-measured can save you money and heartache when the cotton is fruiting. The cotton committees have been a white operation. A Negro farmer applies for an extra four acres, and is granted maybe

seven-eighths of one. The big white planter gets an additional twenty with ease, since he is generally on the committee. These and the usual facts of political life, and cotton and politics in Mississippi.

The cotton vote is called the ASC election, named for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service of the Department of Agriculture, which administers the system. Local community elections are scheduled each year. Farmers vote for five committeemen, and the man with the highest number of votes is chairman and delegate to the county convention. The county convention then chooses the county committeeman.

This year the community ASC elections were held on December 3rd. COFO decided to try to run candidates in twelve rural counties. The problems were similar to those any insurgent group faces its first time out. The rights workers found they couldn't get any information on community boundaries. Six signatures were needed on each candidate's petition, and the Negro farmers were reluctant to sign. /Some who did sign were found to live in another community. Many candidates had their petitions disqualified and had to run as write-ins. The candidates themselves were generally those brave citizens who had led the voter registration fights.

In Panola county, Robert Miles, a Negro farmer with a total of 167 acres, 24 in cotton, was among the first to volunteer. He has had his house shot into a number of times, and this summer, when he put up white volunteers in what used to be his master bedroom, he was the victim of two tear gas bombs and nightly threatening phone calls. Miles started a voter registration drive in Panola county back in 1958, two years before the first sit-ins. His case led to the famous U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decision which opened the registration books of Panola county for one year, without the usual requirements dealing with interpretation of the Mississippi constitution. Mr. Miles is a determined man. He says: "I'm not scared. There's no need of running away. This is my home. I'm

here to stay. I think, if I run, what would happen to the rest of the people? Will they all run--and if so--where will they go?" So Robert Miles stays and fights for the day when his two little sons will practice law and medicine in a changed Mississippi.

Panola county borders the Northern portion of the Mississippi Delta, that flat, rich, black soil area of the state where land is highly prized for its productivity. According to U.S. census figures, Negro farm operators outnumber whites in the county by over 500. The COFO team responsible for organizing the ASC vote in Panola was made up of just two workers-- both white. The staff of the Freedom Centers in Mississippi has been reduced drastically since the Summer Project. One volunteer who plans to stay indefinitely is Chris Williams, an incredible 18 year-old with an inexhaustible supply of energy who came from Amherst, Massachusetts. Together with Penny Patch, 20 years old and a three year veteran of SNCC, Chris rode up and down the dirt roads of Panola County, talking to farm owners and sharecroppers and distributing his home-made leaflets. Chris and Penny organized farmers' meetings in the five communities (out of a total of eight) they were working and made daily visits to their key contacts.

Morale among the candidates had to be boosted regularly. In the Sardis community, where a full slate of five Negro candidates was put up, farmer Felix Webb told this story: "Our candidacy got into the paper, the Southern Reporter. Three of the white candidates came out to see me. They came right out into the fields where I was working. Asked me, did I know what I was doing? They talked might nice about it-- just told me to withdraw my name as it would save me a lot of embarrassment." COFO called the Department of Agriculture and the FBI. Action was prompt. The white chairman of the Sardis community ASC made a trip to see Mr. Webb and said it was okay with him that he was running. Says Mr. Webb, "So we decided to stay on."

Chris Williams found a lot of support for the ASC vote among the Negro

Roland Nelson on the Hays plantation was a key activist. Carlin Hays is a white planter with 3,000 acres in the Crenshaw community. Eight hundred are in cotton. Hays is chairman of the Crenshaw community AOC committee. Forty sharecropping families live on his land, raise his crops for him, and receive the profits from half of what they produce, minus operating, hauling, and fertilizer expenses which Hays determines. Some years a sharecropper can make nothing at all. His wife usually works as a day laborer, for 30¢ an hour, ten hours a day. Mr. Nelson didn't feel it would be too wise to run directly against his boss man Hays (who could throw him off the land at any time), but he actively supported the candidacy of Melrow Curtis, a Negro farmer running as a write-in. Chris and Penny made frequent visits to the unpainted wood shack belonging to the Nelson family, which, luckily for the COFO people, sits right along side of the country road which runs through the Hays plantation. A plantation is private property, and COFO workers are run off whenever they are spotted. They have found it best to travel at night when a strange car is less visible.

The interior of the Nelson shack is unadorned except for two large campaign posters. One is of President Johnson, and the other shows the smiling black face of Fannie Lou Hamer, Freedom Democratic Party candidate for Congress. Mrs. Hamer was herself a sharecropper, before she was thrown off the land for her rights activity. Nelson and his wife are registered voters. Chris and Penny paid a last-minute visit to Roland Nelson the day before the AOC vote. Nelson is confident he can round up a large group of sharecroppers for the voting. Something is on his mind. "We had a little meeting since we saw you last, Chris," he smiled. "We have some demands here for the boss man." He shows Chris a painfully hand-lettered list: an eight-hour day for the hands, at \$1 an hour; regular pay-off Saturday at 12 noon, instead of when Mr. Hays gets around to it; payment by compress bail weight, instead of gin weight. Chris struggles to understand the weight payment problem. The learning

weight payment problem. The learning process takes place on both sides.

AGC election day in Panola County is cold and wet. This is good-- it's not a day to pick the last of the cotton. There is no excuse not to vote, except for that fear which Robert Miles says "keeps the Negro down so he'll work for cheap labor." The vote in the Serda community takes place in the courthouse. By 10 A.M. it's very clear: the Negroes are voting. They walk into the courtroom with their hats in their hands, but they do walk in. They sit quietly down in one of the side seats and wait to be noticed. But they do vote. They act apologetic and diffident, but they mark their own ballots, away from the eyes of the surprised white constables. A group of white planters sits in the rear of the courtroom. They have checklists and runners. The runners are kept busy making telephone calls. The white community responds. "You know, in past years," one planter says, "we could never get enough votes out to make this thing legal." There is no problem this year. The law states that only farm owners, but farm operators, tenants, and sharecroppers can vote. But Negroes are strictly questioned and asked to present proof. Any white who presents himself is given a ballot. Three nurses appear from the Batesville Hospital, each insisting that her mother had left her some land and the dead was in her name. Two Coca-Cola drivers in green uniforms are permitted to vote. A crippled, mentally-retarded boy states he operates his father's farm. He votes, but they have to help him mark his ballot. At 2 P.M. a planter puts away his lists. "I'm satisfied," he announces. Whites had outvoted Negroes almost two to one. In Panola County not one Negro has secured a place on the commandry committees. The election was stolen by strictly political methods.

Back in the Jackson office, Jane Adams, a 21-year old volunteer from Carbondale, Illinois, who has coordinated the AGC elections for COFO, takes the incident reports over a special telephone. Canton: three poll watchers arrested, some beaten. Florida: one poll watcher arrested, Holly Springs:

one poll watcher arrested. Victories: one Negro community committee chairman elected in Madison County; one Negro chairman and two alternates elected in Holmes. Results of mail balloting in ^{/eight} other counties will be known next week.