

PROFILES OF TYPICAL FREEDOM SCHOOLS

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COFO
1017 Lynch St.
Jackson, Mississippi

I. Hattiesburg

Hattiesburg, Mississippi is a town of around 30,000—which makes it one of the five or six largest cities in Mississippi. It is near the gulf coast cities which are the “moderate” part of the state, but Hattiesburg itself is a deep-dyed conservative town. It is Governor Paul B. (Stand Tall with Paul) Johnson’s hometown. It is the site of Mississippi Southern University, whose law school faculty has engineered the so-far successful defiance of Ross Barnett in the James Meredith case (also acts as consultants for the State of Miss. In other civil rights cases). Mississippi Southern also is the school where Clyde Kennard, a Negro, applied in the late 1950’s. He was subsequently sent to Parchman penitentiary on a flimsy burglary conspiracy charge, contracted cancer in prison and died. Mississippi Southern has since rejected the application of another Negro, John Frazier, five times. Hattiesburg is the seat of Forrest County. Despite its large (by Mississippi standards) university and a fairly firm economic base in commerce and manufacturing, Hattiesburg “feels” like a small, agrarian-oriented community.

Hattiesburg has had a long, tough history of civil rights activity, primarily centered on the denial of the right to vote. The Circuit Clerk of the County (registrar of voters), one Theron Lynd, has made himself the test case for all recalcitrant Mississippi registrars. As early as 1961, the Department of Justice instituted proceedings against him, charging discrimination against Negroes. After much litigation, the federal government won its case and Lynd was ordered to register 43 persons whose applications a U.S. District Judge had processed and found acceptable. Lynd consistently refused to obey these court orders, was convicted of civil contempt and STILL would not register the persons in question. The Department of Justice then instituted criminal contempt proceedings against him which are still pending. At this point, however, the civil rights groups moved independently. On January 22, designated Freedom Day in Hattiesburg, COFO people from all over the state, national civil rights leaders, but mostly the people of Hattiesburg, started a picket line around the Forrest County courthouse which, with some interruptions, is still going on. This picket line represented a breakthrough for civil rights demonstrations in Mississippi, because it was the first to last more than 10 minutes—the police did not arrest everybody. Later, after the State legislature passed a special statute outlawing picketing of public buildings, the picketers were arrested, but that passed, too, and the picketing has resumed.

The COFO project in Hattiesburg is one of the largest and most active in the state, with a high proportion of adult participation and leadership. The town is organized, with 100 block captains, 15 citizenship teachers, and uncountable canvassers, picketers and ministers from outside the state. Two candidates for national office (one for Congress and one for Senate) have come out of the movement in Hattiesburg. The atmosphere is enthusiastic and the people work very hard.

Because the project is so active, there is a lot of demand for the Freedom Schools, and the Hattiesburg people have, therefore planned a series of Freedom Schools. The facilities are presently planned for Sunday School rooms in churches around town and in surrounding counties. Project leaders in Hattiesburg are especially interested in supplementary classes for local adults and staff members in basic literacy and current issues. The project has found housing for 110 summer workers (all of which will not work in the city of Hattiesburg, however). The project has also laid hands on a movie projector and a tape recorder for the summer project. Since the community is able to support the program better than in other areas of the state, the needs are not proportionately as great, even though it is a large Freedom School project. The main needs are for equipment and transportation to outlying schools and schools in other counties. The total budget is for \$2,000 to pay for food, transportation, equipment, and inescapable expenses such as phone bills.

II. Meridian

Meridian is a city of 50,000, the second largest in the state. It is the seat of Lauderdale county. It is in the eastern part of the state, near the Alabama border, and has a history of moderation on the racial issue. At the present time, the only Republican in the State Legislature is from Meridian. Registration is as easy as anywhere in the state, and there is an informal (and inactive) "biracial committee", which, if it qualifies, is the only one in the state.

Voter registration work in Meridian began in the summer of 1963 (for COFO staff people, that is), and by autumn, when Aaron Henry ran in the Freedom Vote for Governor campaign, there was a permanent staff of two people in the city. In January, 1964, Mike and Rita Schwerner, a married couple from New York City, started a community center. In Meridian's mild political climate, the community center there has functioned more smoothly than either of the two community centers which COFO has organized in tougher areas. The center has recreation programs for children and teenagers, a sewing class and citizenship classes. It also has a library of slightly over 10,000 volumes, and ambitious plans for expansion if more staff were available. The COFO staff in Meridian uses Meridian as a base for working six other adjoining counties.

The Freedom School planned for Meridian will have a fairly large facility, in contrast to most places in the state. The Baptist Seminary is a large, 3-story building with classroom capacity for 100 students and sleeping accommodations for staff up to about 20. Besides this, there is a ballpark available for recreation. The school has running water, blackboards and a telephone. The center has a movie projector and screen which it probably would lend. The library lends books to anyone for two-week periods. The question of rent has not been decided for the school. Even if there is no rent, however, we can count on a budget of around \$1300, for food for students, utilities, telephone and supplies.

III. Holly Springs

Holly Springs is a small town, the seat of Marshall County. The Methodist Negro College, Rust College, is located in the town. It's a very attractive campus, and the students and faculty have been very active recently (since it's a church-operated school, one can expect somewhat more cooperation of Rust than the state schools). Holly Springs is currently acting as the clearinghouse for all our library books and Freedom School materials. There has been no permanently-based COFO project with a full-time staff worker in Holly Springs; all the action

has been the work of the local people. The roots in this community are somewhat recent, reflecting the fact that in the Northern, hilly part of the state, intensive civil rights work is just beginning.

In Holly Springs there are two houses available for a total of 75 students (and housing for 15 teachers). The rent will be \$400, a major expense. The houses will go if we can't raise the rent money. Besides rent, the normal expenses and food will make the project cost about \$1,000.

IV. Ruleville

Ruleville is a small Delta cotton town in Senator Eastland's home county (Sunflower County). The sheriff in Ruleville is the brother of the man believed to have killed little Emmett Till in 1954—a man with a great reputation in his own right for brutality toward Negroes. By any standard, Ruleville is a tough Delta Town. Its main attraction for us is that it is the home of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's candidate for Congress in the Second Congressional District. Mrs. Hamer's own history is typical of much of the harassment of Negroes in the Miss. Delta: When Mrs. Hamer tried to register to vote in 1962, she was fired from her job. She and her family were run off the plantation where they had worked for years. She persisted, and became one of the great leaders of the Mississippi movement, but in the meantime she was arrested, beaten, her home shot into, her husband fired.

Voter registration activity began in Ruleville in 1962. The project is well established in the community, even though the town is so small. Because it is an area of desperate poverty, even for the Delta, COFO has sponsored a food and clothing project in Ruleville for several months, with Mrs. Hamer and other local ladies in charge of the distribution.

For Freedom School project in Ruleville, the local people have found a house which can serve 40 students, and have housing for 8 teachers. For the rent, and a few necessary supplies, we estimate that this Freedom School needs \$200. Lunches for students would probably be another \$500, but this is a service which is needed in the area.