Summer in Mississippi

Jerry DeMuth

"Freedom Moves In To Stay"

"Miss. Summer Project to End Aug. 24, 700 Students to Abandon This State," the Jackson Clarion-Ledger headlined on August 8. But there were no signs of it at the more than twenty project locations. About 200 volunteers have elected to stay for at least six months and three aspects of the summer project—the Freedom Schools, the community centers, and the voter-registration activities—will be continued.

By late August there were fourteen Freedom Schools, with 2,500 pupils, in more than two dozen counties. Plans before the summer began were for fourteen such schools. "We're going to continue the winter," explains Dr. Staughton Lynd of Yale University, Freee Director of school directors. The schools will meet primarily at night because you are attending public school during the day. And new schools are being planned. Two panels, for example, are being staffed and equipped to serve as schools in Neshoba County, where the three civil rights workers were killed last June.

The seventeen community centers will continue with the help of local adults and volunteers who are staying at the buildings. The centers are being constructed in two rural settlements, Mileston and New Harmony, and one is planned for the large town of Greenville.

Voter-registration activities will be renewed. In the weeks just before the Democratic National Convention, enormous wholesalers were initiated from regular registration to gaining support for the Freedom Democratic Party. Voter-registration workers spent most of their time explaining the plan to Negroes as entreating those who supported it, and were without funds to "Freedom registers." By early August one or more of the three programs existed in about twenty towns. As workers from these projects made closer contact with other communities in their county, additional centers began to spring permenantly into these areas, and new projects were born. In Marshall County, for example, the project has headquarters in Holly Springs. Its workers began reaching into adjoining counties as they went canvassing outside that town. Volunteers from Holly Springs were soon working in six counties, with plans for expansion into two more.

Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, and Negro history. In the afternoon, after the Negro public school lets out, teen-agers meet for classes. The Negro schools in the delta are open in July and August, so they can be closed in September and October, freeing the youngsters to work in the cotton fields.

In mid-July, Ruleville organized a mass rally at Indianola, a town some twenty miles away, James Forman, executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, gave the main address, but perhaps the most important speaker was Oscar Giles, an Indianola Negro. Giles rose from the audience and announced he had with the movement 100 percent and would put all the support he could. This was his first involve ment with the civil rights movement. Giles had been waiting for the Negro rights workers to come to Indianola, having been waiting ever since spring when he returned from freedom school and decided he had to do something about his people in Mississippi. Now he began moving with the civil rights workers and would keep on moving.

Three workers came from Ruleville to set up a project in Indianola. An old house was found and the workers began to fix it up. A group of Baptist ministers donated their old school to the project, a brick building, surrounded on three sides by fields of cotton. Materials began to arrive from the Swazi Friends of the SNCC group—set supplies, books, prints. A library was started and the walls became covered—with maps and photos of the white world, ancient and modern—and with prints by Miro, Dauvillier, Feininger, Gauguin, Kandinsky and others. Even the books in the washroom were covered. A Citizen Band radio was installed and the tall antenna erected. It would be used to keep in touch with Ruleville and with the project's radio-equipped cars. On August 6, the black and white touch was added: a huge black-and-white sign over the doorway with the words "Indianola Freedom School," illustrated by clamped Negro and white hands.

Seventy-five Negro youngsters began attending classes in the afternoon and about thirty adults in the evening. A number of the children returned in the evening to help the adults with literacy training. One of those who come to the Freedom School at night is a woman whose legs are paralyzed. She also cannot move her arms freely. Sitting on her bed at home, she tells volunteer Fred Winne of how she has heard about the Freedom Democratic Party, and proudly explains why she fully understands it. "I went as far as fourth grade," she smiles. This, in Mississippi, where the average number of years completed by Negroes is five.

I got polio when I was 6 months old. I worked in the fields for eighteen years—from when I was 13 to when I was 31, I chopped and picked cotton." Fred expresses amazement since she has never walked a step in her life. "I chopped and picked cotton on my knees." The local students have obtained permission to be placed in voter-registration canvassers and have begun to learn how to improve their local school.

They may join the Ruleville Student Action Group which was formed during the summer, some of many such organizations which the summer project has encouraged.

Gary DeMoss of Kansas City, a volunteer, speaks with amazement about the Ruleville Negro school:

Whole classes go out and pick cotton, though they're never asked by anyone accounting where the money goes. A freshman algebra class has seventy-two students, they sit two to a desk, and have one teacher. Sometimes three and four classes meet at the same time, and the entire library is a couple "free" restaurant sets of encyclopedia. No typing is taught there and almost every student here at the Freedom School wants to take it.

The Student Action Group has passed out leaflets and sent letters to teachers and school children demanding a change in these conditions. They and other students may stage a state-wide school boycott this fall.

"The teenagers can take over after we're gone," explained Don Madison of Columbus, Ohio. "The students here catch on very quickly and really want to do something. They understand what's going on." The older people are more easily "frustrated if it's too high grade. Dave Kendall of Sheridan, Ind., tells of his experiences in trying to canvass in nearby Tate County.

"The sheriff, a deputy, and the constable with a police dog following us wherever we go. We would talk to people about registering and when we left the sheriff would call them over and tell them to ignore us and back up his order with all kinds of threats. We kept calling on people and talking to them. But they wouldn't even look at us. They would just look right past us at those cows. Other times they'd see those police sitting there in their cars, taking notes, and they'd slam the door right in our face.

Four people agreed to go to the Tate County courthouse and register, but because of threats none went. The barn belonging to one of the four was burned. Two youths who helped Dave and
his co-worker, Woody Berry of Day­ton, Ohio, fled to Memphis to avoid a court hearing on lynching. There are 4,326 voting-age Negroes in Tate County; none of them are reg­istered.

But in Panola County, more than 600 Negroes have been registered since the summer project began. In October, 1961, when the Justice Department filed a suit against the registrar, only one Negro was reg­istered; thirty-one more were reg­istered while the suit was going through the courts. Then last week, a one-year injunction was handed down. It ordered that the sections of the state constitution, and a definition of the duties of a citizen, be dropped for one year. Many still are afraid for other ques­tionable reasons, but the injunction is thus a breakthrough in Mississippi, and rights workers are determined to take advantage of it for they are still a long way from getting the county's 7,000 voting-age Negroes registered.

And elsewhere, the young people keep on pushing. A former cafe hand had been up the floor re­paired, grease washed off the walls, everything thrown in two coats of paint — to serve as a community center. "A young Negro in his twenties had joined our literacy program and drove 14 miles to our center," explains volunteer Henry Hazleton, a short, slim redhead from Detroit. "He said he had gone as far as the third grade but had dropped out be­cause he had to work for his fam­ily. Now he's teaching himself how to read and write through the Laubach method."

In Greenwood, the Friendship Baptist Church is home for the Freedom School. One female worker, Carolyn Egan, a pretty, short­haired blonde from Portland, smiles with hope as she tells of one of her students:

"In my math class, my trigonom­etry class, my county is always asking for more homework. He's never written a day of math and is always there on time. He's really eager to learn. We've got him up at 5:30 to help canvass for voter registration be­fore school, out to work in the fields; then he comes to the Free­dom School. They don't teach this in the county only forty-one are registered, more than 8,000 voting-age Negroes in Tate County."

In Hattiesburg a Negro woman returning home from work on the bus, a white woman removed her package from the seat next to her to make room. When a white worker got on the bus, the driver asked the Negro woman to give up her seat. The woman didn't do anything and the driver called a policeman who arrested her. She was charged with breach of the peace and interfering with an officer; all the Negroes left the bus in protest. One of the workers, the occurrence was dis­couraging; they met with the manager and the bus company agreed to stop the boycott of buses. A mass meeting had been scheduled for the next night and it was decided to go for­ther into the situation then.

These people, these situa­tions, cannot be left behind, most of the summer workers feel. Some­thing for workers new hope; others make them more determined. In either case, they point to the need for continuing the work of the summer. About one-fourth of the volunteers plan to stay. At least as many more plan to return, some next summer, others as soon as next­early next year. To some an even stronger reason for staying is that the community has become a part of their life, has become their home. And they expect new groups of volunteers to join them.

As Woody Berry explained in Hollis:

Negro people here are happy that we're here. They feed us, take care of us, protect us. When Handy, a volunteer from Sacramento, was arrested he wasn't permitted to make a phone call, but we knew what had happened in minutes. A Negro man saw him get arrested at 11:30, he was in our office and told us.

Mississippi, with a total popu­lation of slightly more than 6 mil­lion, is extremely rural, and almost everywhere strong community longings exist. It is easy to become a part of the Negro community within a few days of active work with its people.

Twenty-five workers found this to be especially true in Mileston, project headquarters for Holmes County. Mileston is not shown on most maps; driving down U.S. Highway 49, from Greenwood, to Jackson, you see as a sign, a small, red-roofed cafe, and a small train station along two tracks where the Illinois Central hasn't stopped in years. A few miles south of Mileston, Mississippi is a community of 120 to 150 Negro families who have owned their own land since 1839. That was when the plantations went bankrupt and the fed­eral government gave the workers a chance to homestead the land. Few of the Negro homes have running water and in some the conditions are shocking. A seasoned voter-regis­tration worker, out canvassing one day, found a family living in a windowless shack. A little light and a few of flies—and in the winter probably a lot of cold—came in through the cracks in the walls. The husband and wife, often ill, could seldom work, and there were no welfare payments. In the shadows huddled three children, their eyes and faces running with pus. The boy's stomach was swollen from malnutrition. On the bed lay a young baby crying. He had been born blind.

Among the tracks is a narrow dirt and gravel road with small, identi­cal homes, run-down huts built for males and no longer needed, and fields of cotton and soy beans. Whites are seldom seen down this road in Mileston except for the civil­ rights workers who stay with some of the Negro families living along the road. "This area is so isolated here," ex­plained volunteer Gene Nelson of Evanston, Ill., "that you can forget about the rest of the world. You can even forget about the rest of the country you're working in..."

Enclosed is my contribution of $..."