Incident in Hattiesburg

There was one moment of sick humor when the fastest of us in the FBI office in Hattiesburg, Miss., met the interrogating agent who had come in to get the facts from Oscar Chase about his beating the night before in the Hattiesburg city jail. John Pratt, attorney with the National Council of Churches, tall, blond, slender, was impeccably dressed in a dark suit with faint stripes. Robert Lune-
y, of the Lawyer’s Committee on Civil Rights, dark-haired and clean-
cut, was attired as befits an attorney with a leading Wall Street firm. I did not quite match their standards because I had left with-
out my coat and tie after hearing of Chase’s desperate phone call to SNCC headquarters to get him out of jail, and my pants had lost their
press from standing in the rain in front of the county courthouse all the day before, but I was clean-
shaven and tidy. Chase, a Yale Law School graduate working with SNCC in Mississippi, sat in a corner, look-
ing exactly as if he had a few hours before when I saw him come down the corridor from his cell: his boots were muddy, his corduroy pants
badly worn, his blue work shirt splattered with blood, and under it his T-shirt, very bloody. The right side of his face was swollen, and his nose looked as if it were broken. Blood was caked over his eye.

The FBI agent closed the door from his inner office behind him, smiled at me, and then said so-
berly: “Who was it got the beating?”

I mention this not to poke fun at the FBI, which deserves to be treated with the utmost seriousness. After all, the FBI is not responsible — except in the sense that the en-
tire national government is respon-
sible, by default—for prison brutality and police sadism. It is just one of the coldly turning wheels of a federal mechanism into which is geared the frightening power of lo-
com policemen over any person in their hands.

Chase had been jailed the day before—Freedom Day in Hatties-
burg — when a vote drive by SNCC had brought more than 100 Negroes down to the county courthouse to register. On Freedom Day, also, fifty ministers came down from the North to walk the picket line in front of the county courthouse, pre-
pared to be arrested.

It was a day of surprises, because picketing went on all day in the rain with no mass arrests, though the picketers were guarded the whole time by a hostile line of quick-
ly assembled police, deputies and local firemen. These arrived on the scene in military formation, accom-
panied by loud-speakers droning

orders for everyone to clear out of the area or be arrested. Perhaps there were no mass arrests because SNCC had been tirelessly putting people into the streets, until police and politicians got weary of trun-
dling them off to jail; perhaps newly elected Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson wanted to play the race issue cautiously (as his inaugural speech suggested); or perhaps the presence of ministers, TV cameras and newspaper men inhibited the local law men.

At any rate, only two persons were arrested on Freedom Day. One was Robert Moses, SNCC’s director of operations in Mississippi, who has, in his two years or so in the state, been beaten, shot at, attacked by police dogs and repeatedly jailed — a far cry from his days in Har-
vard graduate school, though not perhaps, fundamentally, from his childhood in Harlem. Moses was ar-
rested for failing to move on at a policeman’s order, across the street from the courthouse.

The other person arrested that day was Oscar Chase, on the charge of “leaving the scene of an acci-
dent.” Earlier in the day, while driv-
ing one of the ministers’ cars to bring Negro registrants to the court-
house, he had bumped a truck slightly, doing no damage. But two policemen took note, and in the afternoon of Freedom Day a police car came by and took Chase off to jail. So Freedom Day passed as a kind of quiet victory, and everyone was commenting on how well things had gone — no one being aware, of course, that about 8 that evening, in his cell downtown, Oscar Chase was being beaten bloody and uncon-cious by the other prisoner while the police looked on.

No one knew until early the next morning, when Chase phoned SNCC headquarters with a young Negro SNCC worker from Greenwood, Miss., in a Negro cafe down the street, when the call came in. We joined the two minis-
ters, one white and one Negro, who were going down with the bond money. The police dogs in their kennels were growling and barking as we entered the jail house.

Bond money was turned over, and in a few minutes Chase came down the corridor, unescorted, not a mark on him. The day before, the corridor had been full of policemen; it seemed now as if no one wanted to be around to look at him. After Chase said he didn’t need immediate medical attention, we called for the police chief. “We want you to look at this man, as he comes out of your jail, chief.” The chief looked surprised, even concerned. He turned to Chase: “Tell them, tell them, didn’t I take that fellow out of your cell when he was threaten-
ing?”

The chief had removed one of the three prisoners in the cell early in the evening, when Oscar complained that he was being threatened. But shortly afterward the guards put in
another prisoner, of even uglier disposition. He was not as drunk as the man who’d been taken out, but he was in a state of great excite-
ment. He offered first to lock any man in the cell. Chase said later: “He was very upset about the demon-
stration — wanted to know why the jail wasn’t full of niggers.” He had been a paratrooper in World War II, and told Chase he “would rather kill a nigger-lover than a Nazi.”

The third man in the cell pro-
ceded to tell the former paratroop-
er that Chase was an integrationist. Now he began a series of threaten-
ing moves. He pushed a cigarette near Chase’s face and said he would burn his eyes out. Chase called for the jailer, and asked to be removed from the cell. The jailer mustn’t move to do so. The ex-paratrooper asked the jailer if Chase was “one of them nigger-lovers.” The jailer nod-

What Oscar Chase remembers after that is that the prisoner said something like, “Now I know why I’m in this jail.” Then:

The next thing I can remember was lying on the floor, looking up. I could see the jailer and some other policemen looking at me and grinn-
ing. I could also see the other pris-
oner standing over me, kicking me. I began to get up, was knocked down again, and they heard the
I didn't know colored people could vote.

"I came up on a perch and an ancient man says "Yes, sir," and offers me his chair. An enraged white face shouts curses out of a closed window, saying "I don't know colored people could vote," and people ask why we are down here . . . ."

—from a white SNCC worker's field report.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
6 Raymond Street, N.W.
Atlanta, Georgia 30314