

FOR THE RESIDENTS of Panola County, March 5th, 1966, is a date to remember. On March 5th, two Negroes ran for the positions of trustee on the local school boards, the first Negroes to run for public office in the county since Reconstruction.

Panola County is still predominantly agricultural. It lies on the edge of the rich Mississippi Delta, close enough to benefit from the fertile soil yet far enough out so that small, diversified farms are profitable. Negro farmers constitute the core of a strong county chapter of the Freedom Democratic Party.

According to the 1960 census 57% of the county's population was Negro. However, since employment opportunities in the Delta are limited, a large proportion of the young adults leave. Thus in 1960 the median age of Negroes in Panola County was 19, as compared to 27 for whites. Since then, agricultural mechanization and the introduction of chemical insecticides have increased rapidly, causing an even greater exodus of Negroes, particularly those just entering the labor force. Thus the potential Negro voters constitute only about 45% of the county's population over 21. Actual Negro registrants total less than half the white electors.

Nevertheless, the candidacy of Negroes, even in a nonpartisan election for one of five non-paying positions, caused considerable distress in sections of the white population.

In the North Panola School District, Henry Edmond, an auto mechanic, was nominated after a four-way vote in the Negro Parent Teachers Associations. On the day his advertisement appeared in the local paper Mr. Edmond was called aside by his employer, a Chevrolet dealer, and asked about his candidacy. The employer informed him that he had known about his candidacy for two weeks but had decided to "wait and see." Edmond thought this offered an explanation for a mysterious meeting

of large numbers of whites which he had observed outside the Chevrolet store on his way home one night that week.

"Why do you want to run the white schools?" asked the employer, understandably overlooking the minimal desegregation of the first four grades. Edmond reminded him that the board controlled the Negro schools as well. "Why do you want to mix with white people?" asked the exasperated employer. "The color of my skin shows who has done the mixing," replied Edmond. The dealer finally informed Edmond that he would have to resign or withdraw from the race. He offered to pay for the withdrawal advertisement and reminded Edmond that he had to pay two more year's social security in order to be eligible for full retirement benefits. At the end of the week Edmond packed his tools and left.

In the South Panola School District, the Negro P.T.A. agreed to support any candidate chosen by the local F.D.P. chapter. The F.D.P. nominated Cleveland J. Williams, an independent farmer.

After Williams inserted an advertisement of his candidacy in the local paper the local radio station began frequent announcements of the candidacies of two Negroes and gave their addresses. Several nights later crosses were burned on both candidates' front lawns. One of them was ten feet tall. Deputy sheriffs hauled off the crosses but so far no one has been apprehended. The next night a white brick with tin cans attached, bearing the initials K.K.K. was thrown at the Edmond home. The sheriff now has the brick. The next day Klan leaflets were distributed to all white homes in the county, with demands including the firing of all Negroes, since the civil-rights movement "is part of the Communist conspiracy."

Shortly before the election the Mississippi government entered the campaign. In past years school-board elections have been run in town meeting style.

Usually there has been only one candidate and the dozen or so electors present would vote for him and go home. Mississippi officials recognized that at least in theory a well organized group could come into the voting place, elect a chairman and choose the trustee. On February 21st, Governor Johnson signed into law a bill requiring a candidate for school-board trustee to submit to county school superintendent a notarized nominating petition signed by twenty-five qualified electors ten days prior to the election. An announcement of the new law was made on the local radio station in Panola County on the 22nd, and with considerable effort the two Negro candidates were able to secure the requisite signatures by the deadline, next day. Panola was the only county in the state where Negro candidates were notified in time to meet the new requirement. No other radio stations in Mississippi carried the announcement and newspapers mentioned the new law for the first time the day after the deadline.

Acting quickly, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law filed for a federal injunction. At the hearing they found the State well represented; in attendance were Attorney General Patterson, the chiefs of the State's legal divisions for civil rights and education, and nine other lawyers. The judge ultimately ordered that the plaintiffs, representing two counties, be permitted to run, but refused to make a class order affecting all counties as the civil-rights lawyers had requested.

A noteworthy sidelight to this was the law's exclusion of two counties. One of these has large federal military installations and thus receives substantial federal monies for its schools. The other recently had its desegregation plan rejected by the Office of Education, and is awaiting a decision on a new proposal. The potential power of the federal government to mitigate discrimination is thus clearly recognized in Mississippi. Last year, in Arkansas candidates for

school-board trustee were run in S.N.C.C. project areas, and all were defeated. When a delegation of students and S.N.C.C. workers went to Washington with massive evidence of fraud and intimidation at the polls, they were told that, "it will not be permitted next time." In order to prevent a similar result in Panola County, a letter was sent to the Office of Education requesting that they inform local school officials that illegal election procedures would lead to a withdrawal of federal funds. No reply was received.

Following Stanley Edmond's forced resignation for announcing his candidacy a letter was sent to the Fair Employment Practices Commission inquiring if any federal action could be taken. No reply has been received.

The week of the elections, notices appeared in the local papers stating that voters would be eligible only if they had registered and paid two poll taxes before November 5th, 1965. This is directly contrary to the 1965 Voting Rights Bill, which states that any person who registers and pays one poll tax forty-five days prior to an election is qualified to vote. In a previous case the county registrar had similarly violated the clause in the Voting Rights Bill which requires the registration of illiterates but complied, after five months, when the appointment of a federal registrar appeared imminent. It is no secret that the appointment of a federal registrar has always greatly increased Negro registration, since many Negroes are still fearful for their lives, jobs and property. The result would almost certainly be the same in Panola County and therefore even the hint of a federal registrar would probably be sufficient to obtain compliance with the poll-tax sections of the act.

So far, however, the only federal action elicited by the election has been a call from the Justice Department to inquire if it had been possible to file the nominating petitions in time. This inquiry was made in response to a call from the Lawyer's Committee notifying Washington of the difficulties encountered in meeting the deadline on such short notice. The Justice Department did not participate in the hearing to obtain an injunction against application of the new law in this election.

On Friday, March 4th, an announce-

ment was made in the white schools that there would be a special entertainment program for all students, to be held at the white junior high on the day of the election. The junior high is next to the white high school, site of the election for the South Panola School District. The program lasted from 2 to 5 PM, the exact hours of the election. Apparently the white school officials hoped to provide white parents with a combination lure and babysitting service. No similar announcement was made in the colored schools.

On Saturday, the election began smoothly at the school gymnasium. At both a white man was quickly elected chairman and the people filed in to previously arranged tables, set up by election beats. Most Negroes were allowed to vote without difficulty, perhaps partly because it was obvious from the beginning that the white candidates would win overwhelmingly.

There was some trouble, however. Negroes who came without their poll-tax receipts were turned away, despite the fact that the names of all eligible voters were listed in the registration books and it had been announced that the receipts would not be required. One Negro in the South Panola district went to his table and was told he lived in a different area. When he went there, he was sent back, only to be sent to see the county registrar at the courthouse. The registrar gave him an authorization, but when he returned the men at the table let him vote but refused to take his wife's ballot. When the Negro went back to the registrar, who was now at the gym, he overheard him telling a ballot taker to allow a white couple to vote even though they were not listed on the book because "they really registered."

Despite the announcement in the local papers that payment of two poll taxes was necessary, over thirty Negroes who had paid one and were thus eligible under the 1965 Voting Rights Bill attempted to vote. They were turned away at both gyms.

There was a strong undercurrent of tension throughout the three-hour election. At the South Panola gym most of the overt white hostility was directed towards the white civil-rights worker observing the election.

At the close of the balloting, the volunteer started to leave with a small group

of Negroes. As he reached the outside door a white who had kicked him earlier rushed over, knocked him down and began kicking and hitting him with clenched fists on the head, as the volunteer curled up on the ground in a non-violent position. Over thirty whites observed the whole incident silently.

There is no question that it is a terrifying experience for Mississippi Negroes to vote, particularly for Negro candidates. The school-board election was probably the best opportunity to begin, since the vote was for one position of five in a relatively minor post. It was also less frightening to Negroes because the polls were open only three hours and everyone in the county went to one of two polling places. Therefore there were always many people present. Even so, the ability of whites to attack someone there with impunity indicates that any fears which the Negroes have are justified. The courage of the six hundred who did cast their ballots is extraordinary.

In these crucial years federal protection is imperative to protect the white people from themselves as well as to protect Negroes who are exercising their constitutional rights. If a federal presence insures that elections over the next three or four years are fair and free of incidents, the results will show whites that their fears are unjustified. If the federal government does not enforce its laws, then the fear, violence and destruction will undoubtedly be needlessly prolonged and increased. The federal government will then inevitably be forced to enter anyway and its job will be doubly difficult. Whites are an overwhelming majority of eligible voters in Panola County; in counties such as Holmes in Mississippi and Lowndes in Alabama, where Negro voters have a clear majority the potential for terrible violence is obvious.

Both the Office of Education and the Justice Department were informed that this was the first time a Negro was running for public office in Panola County since Reconstruction. Because of their absence many were afraid to vote, qualified voters were refused ballots and a civil-rights worker was beaten. It would be a great tragedy for the South, black and white, and for the whole country if further trouble and even murders are necessary before the federal government will act.