

FIELD REPORT: FROM BRUCE GORDON  
Selma Alabama  
November 9, 1963

Selma is situated on the bluffs of the Alabama River. It is the seat of Dallas County, the seventh largest in population of Alabama's 68 counties. Selma is the largest city in Dallas County and one of the two incorporated cities in the county, the other being Orrville, the second largest city in Dallas County, about six miles southwest of Selma. Selma was incorporated in 1820, and during the Civil War a powder mill, arsenal, and shot and shell foundry were located in Selma, making it an important military target,

Today Selma industries are small and based mainly on cotton, and Craig Air Force Base, situated three miles outside of Selma, which is the home of the Jet Qualification Course, and Basic Instructors School.

Negroes account for 58% of the population of Dallas County, and (better) in excess of 50% of the population of Selma, 28,6000, yet Negroes control little of the economy and none of the politics of Dallas County or Selma. Approximately .9% of eligible Negroes were registered prior to SNCC voter registration project in Dallas County. Dallas County has a long and negative history, as far as race relations are concerned, with 21 reported lynchings of Negroes between April 1882 and January, 1913. Today police brutality, shots in the night, beatings, and economic reprisals are not rare forms of keeping Negroes out of the economic and political life of Dallas County. These factors, plus discrimination by the registrars are the main (factors) for the lack of Negroes registered in Dallas County. In 1958-59 Dallas County was one of the six counties, the others were Barbour, Bullock, Wilcox, Lowndes, and Macon, whose voting officials were their voting records before the U. S. District Court. This action was initiated by the Civil Rights Commission on complaints from Negroes, in the above named counties, that their efforts to register were met with intimidation. The findings of the



Civil Rights Commission showed that there was "a consistent pattern of denial of equal protection of the laws as regards voting in six Alabama Counties". (The above named counties) Last year (after) 30 Negro teachers attempted to register, they were threatened by anonymous phone calls and letters and finally fired from their positions,

Against this backdrop SNCC workers Bernard LaFayette, an ordained minister, student at Fisk, former Freedom Rider and leader in the Nashville movement, Mrs. Colia LaFayette, former voter registration worker, and student at Tougaloo College, Frank Holloway, former leader of Atlanta University students, and James Austin, voter registration work in Gadsden, Alabama, (came to Selma to explore the possibility of a voter registration project in Dallas County) came to Selma in the early fall of 1962, to explore the possibilities of a voter registration project in Dallas County. The SNCC workers set up shop in a small house and began canvassing the city of Selma. They set up voter registration classes, first in a house directly across the street from the county jail, then in some of the churches, after making contact with some ministers that agreed to back the SNCC workers project. The SNCC workers also made contact with a local civil rights organization, The Dallas County Voters League, which had been operating in Dallas County for about 20 years. This group provides essential support to the SNCC workers in getting their programs established in Dallas County. As word of the SnCC project spread, calls for help and information on voter registration began to pour into the small office that had been set up. One call for help came from a group of farmers in Wilcox County, where there hasn't been a registered Negro voters in over 50 years. SNCC worker James Austin was dispatched to Wilcox County to aid the local Negroes there in their efforts to register to vote. In late March James Austin took six Negroes to the city of Camden, the seat of Wilcox County, to register to vote. A crowd of 100 to 150 local white persons quickly gathered at the court house to watch this small



group of Negroes attempt to register. They were finally successful in filing application forms to register, but were later informed that they were not placed on the roll of registered voters. Mrs. Austin was soon recalled to Selma to aid the small overworked staff, that found the programs rapidly expanding beyond their capabilities. To date there are still no registered Negro voters in Wilcox County.

Working with the students at Selma University and Hudson High School Bernard and Colia LaFayette were able to organize a powerful functioning youth organization. Unfortunately, the university students later had to withdraw from the SNCC project due to pressure from the school. But the high school project was most successful. Working on an existing gang structure Bernard managed to develop a democratically controlled group of high school students. One particular student at Selma University (BENny Tucker) did not surmount administrative pressure and decided to suspend his studies, indefinitely to work as a voluntary SNCC worker. The high school students took over the job of canvassing the city for voters. The students also formed a freedom chorus to sing at mass meetings. In mid September it was the high school students that spearheaded the street demonstrations in Selma. In September Bernard and Colia LaFayette left Selma to resume their studies at Fisk University in Tennessee. This left the Selma movement without a policy making head. By this time the programs that Bernard initiated were showing great promise, and in early September SNCC workers Prathia Hall and Worth Long came to Selma to take over and expand the projects. Working with Wilson Brown SNCC worker from Birmingham, who came to Selma in early April, Alvery Williams SNCC worker from Gadsden, who came to Selma in late July, and two local persons Claude Porter and William Robertson, Long and Prathia were able to launch a more intensive voter registration program that rapidly expanded beyond the limits of Selma. Voter registration programs were started in the cities of Sardis, Orrville, Hayen, Bogue Chitto, and Beloit.



In early September under the prompting of the Dallas County Voters League, the SNCC workers aided in formulating plans by which they hoped to end segregation in the city of Selma. A list of demands were drawn up and presented to the mayor Selma. If the demands were not met, street demonstrations were planned for the following week. But two events caused the street demonstrations to be launched ahead of time. The first event was a letter by Mayor Hienz, mayor of Selma, published by the local newspapers stating that the mayor did not intend to honor the demands that were presented to him. The second event took place the following Sunday when a bomb exploded at the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham. Sit-in demonstrations against local downtown establishments started in the same week and were met with stiff and often brutal resistance from municipal, county, and state law enforcement officers. The purpose of these demonstrations were twofold: To bring degregation to an end in Selma and to highlight and dramatize, the conditions of discrimination that existed, and continue to exist though in more subtle forms, when Negroes attempted to register to vote in Dallas County. The court house was picketed by high school students and adults, with signs urging Negroes to exercise, their right to register and vote. The situation became pressing and SNCC chairman John Lewis came to Selma to personally supervise operations. The affect on the local Negroes was tremendous. This was the first time in the history of Dallas County that Negroes had ~~actually~~ actively demonstrated against this unjust social system. These demonstrations greatly reduced the fear and apathy that was prevalent at that time, among local Negroes. Sheriff James Clark had reason to be nervous about the demonstrations. A suit was pending against him, and the registrars of Dallas County to cease and desist in their efforts to intimidate Negroes that were attempting to register to vote, and the national, and international attention that these demonstrations were focusing on the conditions in Selma did little to improve



Sheriff Clarke's already precarious legal position. Sheriff Clarke called for, and received, from Co. Lingo aid in the form of a contingent of approximately state troopers. Sheriff Clarke also organized a posse of 300 local citizens to aid the local police and state troops in quelling the demonstrations. The sheriff, municipal police, county police and state troopers, were also attempting to break up the mass meetings that were now being held on a nightly basis, by various forms of harassment, intimidation, and brutality including the arrest of Rev. Benny Tucker while leading a prayer at a mass meeting being held at the First Baptist Church in Selma. Street demonstrations, in the form of picketing, were pressed harder, late in September, with the idea in mind of motivating as large a group of Negroes as possible to go to the polls on the next day of registration, being Monday, October 7, the day of registration being the first and third Monday in every month at that time. The demonstration lasted from Sept. the 15 until Sept. 25 when John Lewis was arrested with a group of demonstrators for picketing the Dallas County Court House with signs urging Negroes to the polls. Sporadic demonstrations continued until Sept. 28 when the majority of the demonstrators and leadership were arrested by the state troopers. In early October SNCC field Secretary Bruce Gordon arrived in Selma to aid in completing the plans for Freedom Monday as the first Monday in October, the 7th, the first day of registration had come to be known. The demonstrations gave the Negroes a new determination to become first class citizens. Prior to the demonstrations, a mass meeting with 100 people attending was considered a success, but during and after the mass meeting the churches were always filled to overflowing. As "Freedom Monday" approached canvassing was intensified, by door to door methods, and telephone. Printed matter was distributed from door to door and posted in public places. Voter registration classes were held with greater frequency and more intensive instruction. The week before "Freedom Monday" James Foreman



arrived in Selma to oversee operations, since most of the SNCC staff and local leaders were in jail. At seven o'clock on "Freedom Monday" two hours before the court house opened, Negroes began lining up to attempt to register. The municipal, county, sheriff's posse, and state police were all present to make sure that "no one molested" those that were in line. By the time the Court House opened at nine o'clock the line of Negroes stretched from the Court House door to the end of the block. <sup>PB</sup> In the early afternoon the line reached its greatest length, 450 persons, from the Court House door to the end of the block, around the corner, and 3/4 of the way down the block. SNCC field secretaries Carver Neblett and Alvery Williams were arrested when they attempted to pass out sandwiches to the people standing in line. James Foreman and SNCC field secretary Bruce Gordon, James Gildersleeve, president of the Dallas County Voters League, and the state Senator from *Maryland McWaters* were driven away from the line of Negroes by Sheriff Jim Clark and three of his deputies, when they tried to speak to the people in the line. This was the first time in the history of Dallas County that such an event had ever taken place. The local white citizenry was taken aback by the number of Negroes that were willing to come to the court house, in an orderly fashion to exercise their right to register. One local white citizen, Mrs. Charles Dunn, the owner of a large rest home for the aged, a segregationist, and member of the white Citizens Council didn't like the idea of Negroes trying to register and voiced his opinions quite loudly when SNCC field secretary Carver Neblett and Alvery Williams were arrested. Mr. Dunn employs from 50 to 60 Negroes as nurses at his rest home. He recognized two of his employees in the line outside of the court house. He later fired one of these employees and brutally attacked the other one, in his offices later on in the week. These actions of Mr. Dunn caused 40 of his employees all Negro, to walk off the job in protest. To date, Mr. Dunn and his employees are still at a stand off/



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About 14 Negroes in all, were processed that day, a small reward for standing in line, in the hot sun for eight hours. But the Negroes of Dallas County by their action showed beyond a shadow of a doubt that they will be totally free. Not only on the job, or at the corner lunch stand, but more importantly at the polls exercising their political power.

In the following all of the local citizens and SNCC workers that were jailed were released and work once again proceeded at an accelerated pace. Then it was learned that instead of opening the books to register on the first and third Monday in the month, the books would be open 5 days a week from October

to November 5th, Our efforts of canvassing from door to door and by telephone were doubled with the high school students doing the majority of the work in the city, and SNCC doing the majority of the work in the country. Our programs of canvassing, mass meetings, and voters clinics were quickly expanded to the small towns surrounding Selma to get as many people mobilized and prepared to come to the court house to register in the days ahead. SNCC field secretaries Thomas Brown and William Robertson went to Plantersville, SNCC workers Rev. Benny Tucker and Wilson Brown went to Sardis, the Rev. Powell a native of Orrville who has been an active SNCC worker in that area, teamed up with SNCC field secretary James Austin to cover the Orrville and Bogue Chitto area more thoroughly and rapidly. Worth Long directed the entire project and Bruce Gordon worked in the capacity of administrator. One more person was added to the staff, a Miss Louise Johnson a former employee at Dunn's rest home, who proved to be an able office administrator. The results of our work have been most encouraging to date. Although the majority of Negroes who have attempted to register have not been accepted and placed on the rolls, the events of the last three months have instilled, in the Negroes there, a new determination to become



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first class citizens and more actively engage themselves in the political life of the community. Our work must be continued in not only Dallas County, but expanded to the surrounding ~~to the surrounding~~ counties. It is difficult to document the spirit and drive that must motivate these people through their apathy and fear, to commit the simple act of coming to a court house to register to vote. Perhaps it is best exemplified by this experience. While driving thru the rural area returning to Selma after a day of canvassing, I passed a Negro farmer, on a mule drawn wagon, singing, "we shall overcome", to himself.

Refer - Daily Reports SNCC office

Selma, Alabama, SNCC files Selma, Alabama

Selma Fact Sheet, for further information.

Worth Long, Selma, Alabama, Project Director



SPECIAL REPORT from:  
STUDENT NON-VIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE  
31 $\frac{1}{2}$  Franklin Street  
Selma, Alabama

November 7, 1963

OFFICIAL REPORT  
OF ORRVILLE

Here, we have a very interesting, but dangerous city to work in, in relation to Voter's Registration. Orrville is a city which is the population of approximately 3,500, however, the unusual thing about it is, the Negroes outnumber the Caucasian 10 to 1 and still the Negro has nothing in Orrville. Taking very an extensive study of Orrville of which I must remind you is also a part of Dallas County; I came to find out that this small city has two suburban areas of which are Boquechitta and Hayzen, which are unique in their own way. I will go into detail on these areas in further reports, however, some things I write on Orrville will include Boquechitta and Hayzen.

Thanks to Rev. Powell, the only courageous minister of this area, we have been able to infiltrate this area slightly. Rev. Ceborn Powell is a volunteer field Secretary for S. N. C. C. who has had his life threaten constantly and has been put out of his church; plus being told not to be seen in Orrville too much.

My report is based upon the facts given to me by the Rev. Powell plus a few visits in which I encountered myself.

When one drive into Orrville (of course being a Negro) he will feel and see the coldness of fear in every "Black Brothers" eyes. If he speaks of Registering to Vote, he might as well be speaking to a "Stone Wall". Sometimes you might find an individual who will say in a whispering voice, "Shh! Not here, come to my house or to a certain Box number on a certain road.

Rev. Powell was successful in getting 19 Negroes to come to Selma, Alabama to Register to Vote and this minister has been in Orrville just about all of his life, but what did this middle aged minister encounter during the Voter's Registration Drive. He was called crazy by his Black Brothers when he first started, for the White Brother of that area had so indoctrinated the Negro against the cause of "Freedom" till it was like telling a staunch-Nazi that the Jew was equal. However, Rev. Powell looked over the dangers of being killed or even seeing his family killed and knowing no justice would take place, Why? Because Orrville is the White Man's justice and no Black Brother goes against the "White Man's Law" of Orrville which is, "No Black Brother is Allowed to Vote."

During the past three weeks an extensive Voters's Registration Drive was launched into Orrville, with the Rev. Powell somewhat being the guide for the area. We were able through a miracle to talk some 50 people in Orrville, however, we only got 19 Negroes Processed in the County Court House in a period of three weeks.

The Rev. Powell was able to report some other interesting factors while going through the extensive work of Voter's Registration, he



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Contd-OFFICIAL REPORT--OF ORRVILLE.

stated that , "Some people told me about some threats made concerning me." He also said that "The White Brothers there had been asking Negroes what kind of a car that I drove, and what name, other than Rev. Powell, was he known by, in his community. He was told that if he came back to the Church, where he was giving lessons and talks, that he would probably be surrounded and killed, because the Whites who owned the property that the church was on, had set up road blocks for one way in and one way out from the church."

He told me that the Negro Farmers, there, were being refused loans by the Government Agent, A Mr. Burton, they were given loans only if they were recommended by the whites. Not ten Negroes have been given Federal Loans. Other Negroes who applied, were given some kind of excuse about why they couldn't get Federal Loans. Mr. Powell went to this man for a loan, twice. The first time he was refused flat. The second time he was told that there was someone in Orrville that was able to give him this loan. Consequently, he had to go to this white man in Orrville to borrow the money. This white man, of whom we're speaking, lends money to these Negroes at aa25% interest rate on the dollar. He sells them a \$40 sack of fertilizer for \$47.50. Consequently, he is making a large profit on money that he borrowed from the government. Rev. Powell told me that people were being threatened by their White Landlords. Ten or twelve people were being threatened by Mr. Joe Hughy. He told them if they got mixed up in this Nigger Movement to register to Vote, they could look for another means of support for next year because he would drop them.

This was the problem Mr. Powell wanted to know about. He wanted to know if a branch office could be set up here to loan money to these farmers, or if some system could be arranged with the farmers there, who owed their own property.

Rev. Powell conducts Voter Registration Clinics at the Salem Baptist Church on Wednesday Nights, and at St. Mary's Baptist Church on Tuesday. Rev. S. M. Sanders (Salem Baptist) and Rev. James Shaw (St. Mary's) are the pastors. Rev. Powell was the pastor of the Zion Baptist Church, 10 miles North of Orrville.

Rev. Powell told us of one lady (he was not at liberty to give her name) who asked him if she register to vote, what would happen? He said that she told him that she had been threatened by her landlord. He told her "If you go up there to register to vote, make sure that she moved her things in the road so that she would not have to come back into the house. Undoubately she went down, because she told Rev. Powell later that, "I moved."