

DECEMBER, 1963

EVALUATION OF SNCC IN AMERICUS

DON HARRIS

The Sumter County Movement was established in the fall of 1962. Its objective then was voter registration.

The County is for the most part rural with five small country villages and the county seat, Americus, a town of nearly 14,000. Just over 52% of the county's population is made up of Negroes. Only a little more than 6% of the county's Negroes are registered to vote.

In February of 1963 field secretaries from the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came into Sumter County to aid and work with the existing Movement. Since then with the SNCC workers canvassing and soliciting help in both the rural areas and in Americus, interest and active participation in the Movement has increased greatly. Over 375 Negroes have been added to the Registrar's list, Negroes have made application to formerly all-white factories and companies, and early in July the Sumter County Movement started a direct action project in the city of Americus.

On July 11, after two confrontations with Mr. Clarke, manager of the theater, eleven young people went to purchase tickets at the front (white) ticket booth of the Martin Theater in Americus. They were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct, blocking the sidewalk and failing to obey an officer. Their bond was \$212 per person. All were ultimately found guilty and given a 60-day suspended sentence. The Sumter County Movement then called for a boycott of the theater by Negroes.

July 13, Saturday, the Movement picketed the theater for 2½ hours in the afternoon. There were no arrests. That afternoon when they returned they were arrested. More people were arrested as they attempted to purchase tickets at the front booth. There was a total of 18 people arrested. After the arrests a crowd of over 200 Negroes marched through the community singing and shouting about freedom.

Saturday, July 20; five more were arrested at the theater.

Saturday, July 27, Negroes in the Sumter County Movement picketed the whole downtown area of Americus for 4½ hours. There were no arrests, but a number of the pickets were pushed, pinched, and cursed. One young lady was slapped, while another was nearly pushed to the ground by local whites.

Tuesday, July 30, several Negroes again picketed in the downtown area, carrying signs which protested the system of segregation in general. Two were picked up and are still being held, even though they were carefully observing the stipulations of a very restrictive emergency ordinance.

Of the 8 large Negro churches in town, we are now meeting in 5. Generally the weekly mass meetings are attended by 350-500 people.

The Sumter County Movement has an executive committee of fifteen members with 5 officers. Until a better location is found the Sumter County Movement is using the SNCC headquarters as an office, the address of which is 536 E. Jefferson, Americus.

Field Secretary, Don Harris

The above statements were written late in July as part of a news letter to friends of the Sumter County Movement. There has been enough written and publicized on the beatings, jailings, "the insurrectionists," and the other events of the summer for me not to go into them here. (Anyone interested see special report on Americus --- SNCC, Atlanta or Americus.)

Late in June an executive committee to the Sumter County Movement was formed. This group was composed of 12-15 individuals representing all aspects of the community and county -- farmers, businessmen, laborers, a minister and mature and militant women -- a former school teacher and a housewife. This was the first time, ~~at least~~ at least in Americus, that class and social barriers were broken down completely and people came together on equal terms to work for a common goal. Initially, there were some personality problems, conflicts, attitudes of condescension on the part of some, but after the first few meetings these began to work themselves out.

For the first three or four meetings I played a very dominant role. Although this was a forum of local leadership there were feelings of insecurity and uncertainty on the part of most individuals in regards to decision and policy-making ... this was due, I feel, to their lack of experience. By the first meeting in August the executive committee was run completely by local people; myself or any other SNCC worker in Americus at the time merely offered opinions (when asked) or made suggestions if the direction of the meeting or planning went momentarily opaque.

There was, in retrospect, (although I did realize this to a degree four months ago) a great reliance and confidence put in the fact that SNCC was represented at each one of these meetings. As the pace of

events quickened after our arrest (Aug. 8th), and thus precipitated more demonstrations, ie, decisions, methods of strategy, increased pressure on local leaders ---the just realized adhesiveness of this group broke down, self-consciousness set in and the group ceased being a unified decision-making body, but a splintered, and factioned bunch of frightened adults following the directives of John Barnum, one of the local funeral directors. Although Barnum acted I believe with the best of intent, his sporadic participation, tactlessness and often ill-timed and poorly planned decisions alienated a number of people on this executive board. This disunified effort on the part of the board (committee) caused other adults who were just becoming actively involved in the movement to back out.

The executive committee has now only seven not-wholly committed people. The group does not function well and the personality problems are more evident than ever .... likewise the actively involved adults have dwindled to a mere dozen or so.

This is one of the major problems that we now face here in Sumter. Recruiting people back to the executive committee and revitalizing it as a efficient and effective policy-making body for the Sumter County Movement and increasing the number of adults who will be actively and intimately involved with the Movement.

The Youth Council of the Sumter County Movement was formed sometime in October by Dave Bell and Bob Manta. The youth council was designed to build and channel the activities of the active and militant young people of Americus and the county. They hold their own meetings each week; plan canvassing, picketing and anything else they think necessary and meanwhile, then submit proposals to the executive committee which are passed or rejected after discussion.

The same situation seems to prevail here as in the case of the

adults and the executive committee. Just after we got out of jail both Dave and Bob took abbreviated vacations (or at least they were not active in the area). The close-knitness and structure of the youth council broke down to the extent that although there are still meetings very little effective action comes from them. Of course there is the very practical problem of young people being in school and not wanting to lose time in school. (A great number of kids have already missed from 3-5 weeks of school because of the arrests in August and September). There are also complaints of cold weather, inclemencies, the darkness of night and so on .... The youth council can, and, in fact should be the strongest element of the Sumter County Movement. This group needs close and ~~constant~~ for a while until it becomes a strong and vital organ of the Sumter County Movement, constant attention and guidance. It seems likely and most logical that Dave and Bob will be working with this group.

Sam Mahone, the President of the Youth Council, is a senior in high school --- dedicated and committed. Many of the other boys who were in jail during the summer have gotten jobs, gone away or dropped from the movement. The fellas who are here must be encouraged to return to the movement. This can only be done by hard, constant (DAILY) leg-work each day --- something that has NOT been done since November 1st.