

March 2, 1964

LARGEST MISS. VOTER REGISTRATION ATTEMPT IN CANTON

"Freedom Day" (February 28) in Canton, Mississippi, saw over 300 Negroes stand in line to register in this state's largest registration attempt. Negroes from all over rural Madison County (which is 72% Negro) waited at the county courthouse between 3 and 5 hours in the chilly air. Registrar L. Foote Campbell admitted only five to take the registration test. He told them they would be notified by mail "in about 30 days" whether they had passed the test. Despite Canton's history of violence and harassment, including shootings, beatings and loss of jobs, there were only minor incidents as more than 50 police patrolled the streets. The shotgun and tear gas equipped police - city, county, state, special and some from other counties - prevented any crowds of onlookers from gathering. As each Negro took his place in line he was asked his name, address and business at the courthouse. Only residents of Madison county 21 years old and over were allowed to remain on the courthouse grounds. Many of the Negroes were 40 and over; some were in their 70's and 80's. A group of 15 ministers from the National Council of Churches and agents from the FBI and Justice Department were present as observers.

The registration drive, organized by CORE and SNCC, under the structure of COFO (Council of Federated Organizations in Mississippi), was viewed as a success by its leaders. Said CORE field secretary Dave Dennis, "Today was a dramatization showing that the Negro people in rural Mississippi want to vote and are willing to risk harassment and intimidation in order to register." "The only thing preventing them from registering is the unwillingness of local officials to let them register. Dennis said the drive would continue with smaller groups for at least the next several weeks. Additional large demonstrations were a "definite possibility," he said.

"Many more people could have taken the test," Dennis stated, "if

county officials had heeded our request for additional registrars on Freedom Day." "They managed to obtain plenty of extra police." Dennis said a new strategy was being used in Mississippi, one of preventing incidents during publicized events but still not registering Negroes. Because of this, he said, many people think that violence and brutality have lessened in Mississippi and that Negroes are being allowed to register. Dennis called both impressions "very false."

On Friday evening a Negro teenager, Milton Esco, 17, of Canton was arrested for ~~making~~ violating a court order by being around the Freedom House (office and residence of civil rights workers). Esco had been arrested on January 23 for distributing leaflets without a permit, violating an ordinance passed by Canton on January 21 to combat an effective selective buying campaign of the Negroes. He was released by ~~juvenile~~ juvenile court on good behavior and instructed not to take part in any civil rights activities.

At his news conference on Friday in Jackson, Governor Paul B. Johnson urged citizens to stay away from demonstrations, saying that such matters "should be left in the hands of law enforcement officers." He added, "When situations such as these arise, when the agitators make a spectacle of themselves, I'd like to see the people laugh."

Apparently with Canton in mind, the state legislature on Wednesday, February 26 passed a bill providing for "mutual assistance pacts" among Mississippi cities. The bill provides for cities to pool "personnel, equipment, supplies and material" to combat natural disasters and for the "prevention and alleviation of riots, or civil disturbances of the peace and tranquility within such municipalities." The act provided that it should be "liberally construed" to serve its purposes. The presence in Canton of police from other counties indicates that the bill was being put to prompt use.

The legislature also passed a bill allowing cities to restrict the movement of any citizens. The bill provides that in order "to protect property, health and lives and to enhance the general welfare of the community" municipalities may "restrict the movements of the citizens, or any group thereof, of such municipalities when there is eminent ^(50c) danger to the public safety because of freedom of movement thereof." On the day after Freedom Day, Saturday, February 29, Canton Mayor L. Stanley Matthews declared a 10 PM curfew for all citizens.

A third bill passed by the legislature last week was introduced by state senator Ed Henry from Canton. Canton's selective buying campaign ~~is~~ against 21 stores and three products is in its ninth week and is about 90% effective. Senator Henry's bill provides penalties of up to \$500 and six months in county jail "if any person shall wilfully and maliciously print, circulate or distribute" any material designed to "wilfully and maliciously interfere with, or prevent another from exercising a lawful trade or calling, or engaging in lawful use and enjoyment of his property."

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/Ed Hollander

Additional Canton information:

1. On Saturday Feb. 29, 25 Negroes stood in line at the courthouse from 10 AM to 12 noon. Two were admitted to take the test. There were no incidents and a lot, but not quite as many as Friday, of police.
2. On Monday, March 2 George Raumont was arrested. Not sure why, but believe for bad brakes and faulty muffler on friend's car he was driving.
3. Monday, March 2, students boycotted Rogers High School in Canton; about 1400 of 1700 stayed out. It was organized by the students themselves. They have 13 demands (will get copy) and hope to meet with Mayor, Superintendent and principal on Wednesday.
4. The Esco situation is being looked into.
5. No arrests for curfew violations that we know of.