

May 1964

Introduction: Close to 100,000 volumes of books have been sent to Mississippi during the past several months for use in this coming summer's Freedom Schools and libraries to be set up all over the state. The books were donated by northern supporters of the SNCC project in Mississippi. In addition to voter registration, the project hopes to supplement the inferior education available to Negroes in the only state which has not made even a token start toward public school desegregation since the 1954 Supreme Court decision. Average schooling for whites in that state is 11th grade, while the average level for Negroes is the 6th grade.

TWO INCIDENTS OF ARREST AND IMPRISONMENT IN MISSISSIPPI

By: JOHN PAPWORTH, Correspondent to PEACE NEWS; International Secretary, The Committee of 100

Our party numbered six: Will Henry Rodgers, 17, from Greenwood, Miss.; Clinton Douglas Smith and Alvin Packer, both 17 years old and from Hattiesburg, Miss.; Richard Frey and Larry Rubin, both 21, from Philadelphia, Pa.

We left Greenwood, Mississippi in a car pulling a trailer loaded with books around 10:00 pm on Monday, May 4, 1964.

Our destination was Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi where the books were to have been stored until the SNCC libraries were set up. All the occupants of the car were working for SNCC except myself, who was travelling as an observer for an English pacifist newspaper - Peace News. I had plenty to observe. Around 2:00 am we pulled into a garage in Oxford for petrol. Alongside was a police patrol car which pulled in behind us and then beckoned us to stop. Whilst the driver of the patrol car checked our identities two other police patrol cars appeared and a great deal of questioning began. At one stage the door of the trailer was opened and one of the police opened several books saying they looked to him like stolen property and that we had no bill of lading to show we were in authorized possession. He ordered Larry to drive our car behind one of the patrol cars and the rest of us to get into the patrol car. We were then driven to the local jail. Our personal possessions were taken from us and listed and we were then placed in a large cell.

There were no bunks on which to sit; it contained some steel benches and tables welded together, a shower and a lavatory. Apart from this, it had no amenities, unless there be added a large package standing on a ledge, the label of which proclaimed to us that it contained epsom salts. There were empty cells further along the passage which contained bunks, but we had to remain where we were.

Prisoners from the other cells were put in with us in the morning when breakfast was served. I decided to fast against this detention

and did not eat. Later, most of the other prisoners left.

Shortly after we were sent for one at a time. When my turn came, I was asked a number of questions about my identity and then a small and somewhat agitated gentleman whom I later learned was the sheriff, and who seemed to feel the world was altogether too much with us, requested me to place my fingers on an inky pad. Such conduct I did not expect, for I never met a sheriff before. I declined to comply and requested to be put in contact with the nearest British Consul. The sheriff's excitement appeared to increase and he began to betray some confusion about my identity, for as he grabbed my hand and proceeded to take ink prints of my fingers he asked me if I thought I was Sir Winston Churchill.

With the customary calm of an English gentleman confronted with the exciteable and unpredictable conduct of a hostile foreigner in a strange land, I observed that it was unlikely that any exertions of mine would enable me to render the same degree of service to the cause of freedom as had Sir Winston's. This mild rejoinder appeared only to excite my interlocuter the more and he continued to regard me with rather less than that degree of love and brotherhood that Holy Scripture enjoins. At the same time he proceeded to press my fingers into the pad with some degree of force, so much so that I ventured to suggest he should take up giving instructions on playing the piano. I regret to say that this mild observation in no way tempered his state of excitement and he ordered me to return to the cell.

Later lunch was served, but I continued to fast. Shortly afterwards, Larry was sent for again, but just prior to this the sheriff appeared in front of our bars and distributed to each of us a copy of a document. It was a search warrant obtained on the grounds that we were engaged in a conspiracy to overthrow the government of the state of Mississippi.

At the time this was a new idea to me, but I must confess as I savored it, it did not seem to lack attraction. I am not given to seeking to overthrow states anywhere but I think if I were I might be tempted to place Mississippi rather high on my list.

Shortly after Larry left the cell I, too, was called out. This was about 1:30 pm on Tuesday, May 5th. I was taken outside the jail where I saw my knapsack on the lawn in front of the entrance. Nearby was a large pile of books from the trailer with the car parked alongside. Larry was there, too, and appeared to be in no way perturbed or harmed.

Two men, who I later learned were prisoners from the jail, began to go through the papers in my briefcase and the sheriff ordered me to unpack my knapsack. I protested at the irregularities of the procedure and again asked to be permitted to communicate with the British Consul. I complied however with the order. The examination of my papers and possessions was now assisted by a number of police officers, a gentleman who proved to be a journalist and another with a rolliflex camera who the sheriff said was his deputy but whom I suspect was also a journalist. There was also present some kind of legal officer but I did not ascertain his status.

The curiosity of the searchers appeared to be purient rather than penetrating and as soon as it seemed clear there were no pictures to be viewed it was abandoned. The sheriff pointed to a number of names in my notebook and said he knew all of them. I was glad to learn we had so many friends in common but in the light of this the sheriff's conduct appeared all the more inexplicable. Then Larry was taken away and I was left alone on the lawn with the two prisoners. One appeared to suffer from either defective speech or intelligence for he manifested little sign of either, whilst the other seemed mainly defective in the latter, for at one point he opined that if there was one thing he "hated more than a nigger" it was "a nigger lover".

Later they, too, went away and I was left alone. This was a curious situation and but for my friends being inside I might have considered walking away.

The two prisoners drifted back and then the sheriff reappeared with Larry and told me to help reload the books on the trailer. Afterwards we were taken to the jailer's office with all the other members of our party and our possessions restored to us. We were then told we were free to go but before leaving Oxford jail I gave a brief lecture on neo-platonic community principles and added some points on existential survival values; but my hearers appeared to be more entertained than enlightened.

At some point on the road to Holly Springs we became aware we were being followed. At the outskirts of the town several police patrol cars appeared and we were conducted to a weighing station where the car and trailer were weighed. The party had evidently been prepared for us, for a magistrate was solicitously in attendance to try Clinton on the spot for a charge of reckless driving, for which he imposed a fine of \$119.00. A number of other fines and charges were made during the next 24 hours and I think the total came to \$356.72.

We were taken to the sheriff's office and there we were fingerprinted, photographed and asked a great many impertinent questions. Afterwards, we were removed to a large Georgian mansion, the windows of which were admirably proportioned to the red brick walls, as is customary with this style of architecture. Unfortunately this proved to be the local jail and we were shown into an incommodious apartment from which led two pokey cells, each containing two bunks and a lavatory. No sooner had the police disappeared when a number of prisoners appeared at the barred door. They had just been turned out of our cell and given the status of "trustys". They celebrated their new "freedom" by going out to buy our party some packets of potato crisps and some bottles of that curious and much publicized drink which tastes like the drippings of an ancient radiator and which Americans have been brainwashed on a mass scale into believing is drinkable.

Later I exchanged some pleasantries with the jailer. Wednesday morning, after breakfast had been served (which I refused because I was continuing to fast) the jailer returned and asked for the key to the car. Larry asked if the officer had a search warrant and the jailer began to get angry. Since the locks would probably be forced I suggested to Larry he hand over the key but that he make a formal protest. The jailer turned on me in a fury and said, "When I deal with s--- I treat it like s---." As I tried to remonstrate with him his

hand went to his revolver and he threatened to put a bullet through me if I did not shut up. It seemed wise, on reflection, to concur with his wishes. Later we were sent for one at a time during the morning and, after being again photographed and fingerprinted, was questioned. When my turn came, I answered a great many questions about my family, my work, my background and then my opinions about race matters and the South. I answered as best I could and during my replies on the last point I was constantly interrupted by a morose looking, cigar-smoking gentleman who repeatedly urged me not to give him "any of that s---". After I had given a lecture on nuclear disarmament, I was conducted to a single apartment at the top of the building. The heavy metal door was locked behind me and I noticed that the large window too was heavily barred. It did however give onto a fine view of a slate roof.

Later, food was brought which I refused because I was continuing to fast. There occurred no other event of moment except that it being hot and I feeling a great thirst, decided to drink some water from the running faucet of the lavatory -- there being no other supply accessible.

We were released at approximately 5:00 pm. No reason being advanced for our arrest or imprisonment. Before leaving I shook the jailer's hand after he had told me that he was on the point of killing me that morning. I explained such a handshake was an English custom and pointed out to the jailer that in former times before a man's head was chopped off he would offer the ax man a gift, but that since he was not proposing to visit such an extreme penalty on me there was no need for me to look around for his gift.

I think the sheriff must be very underpaid for his work for when I looked through my luggage later I discovered a pair of trousers and other small items of clothes were missing, as well as a notebook of mine.

s/ John Papworth
Atlanta, Georgia
May 21st, 1964

A notarized affidavit from Larry Rubin adds the following detail

Rubin was ticketed for faulty lights when the group reached Oxford. All six were held overnight in jail for "suspicion of stolen books", after Oxford police searched their car and trailer without a warrant. Police are reported to have made it clear they were picked up because they were an interracial group. They requested they be allowed to call a lawyer several times in both Oxford and Holly Springs but were denied. Sheriff Boyce G. Bratton of Oxford searched for two things not included on the warrant obtained May 5th which entitled him to search for "printed material which advocates the overthrow of the Government of the State of Mississippi", stolen books and a gun. Rubin was taken to the home of the Mayor of Oxford to be tried

on the traffic charge. A man identified as Tom Scarborough of the State Sovereignty Commission was present part of the time they were being questioned in both Oxford and Holly Springs.

On May 14, 1964, Rubin and six full-time SNCC workers were picked up in Belzoni, Mississippi and held overnight in jail for "suspicion of burglary". It was made apparent, according to Rubin, that information had been exchanged from Oxford and Holly Springs about Rubin, the SNCC program, and the fact that these were civil rights workers.

Prior to May 19, FBI agents Charles W. Bone and Samuel N. Jennings, both from the New Orleans FBI bureau, interviewed the rights workers about the Belzoni incident. They refused, however, to investigate the Oxford and Holly Springs events.