

First letter from Bill Hodes, written about June 16th, from the orientation course in Oxford, Ohio.

Dear Folks:

There has been increasing tension here over our relations with the Negro staff members, especially the ones who hail from Mississippi. They are very much an in-group, because of what they have gone through together. They tend to be suspicious of us, because we are white, northern, urban, rich, inexperienced. We are somewhat in awe of them, and conscious of our own inferiority.

In the evening, there was a CBS Report movie called MISSISSIPPI AND THE 15th AMENDMENT. It was the typical on-the-scene batch of interviews with people whose homes had been shot into, and the head of the Council of Churches and the liberal lawyer, and the sncc leader, and the fat bastard of a registrar. They explained how the Feds. had filed suit, and had convicted the registrar. They showed cases of guys with degrees, and teachers in the local high schools, being refused registration. Well, people laughed at the idiotic registrar, and they howled at the incredible double-talk of the rabid lawyer, and 6 Negroes walked out of the movie. One of ~~HHHHHH~~ the older staff members came to the front after the movie and announced this fact with tears in his voice. "Maybe you won't laugh when you meet these guys and hear them talk, and ~~HH~~ know that they are doing it every day with or without the Feds. We joined hands and sang the song again (WE SHALL OVERCOME, ed.) - this time with more feeling than before, I think, because we had been drawn into a sharp realization that the whole affair was no picnic.

Later, we had the whole thing out in the living room, with everybody sitting on the floor or standing along the walls. The kids brought out their gripes: the staff seemed distant - they didn't let us know what was ~~jjjjjj~~ going on.....and they looked down on us for not having been through what they had. They shouldn't walk out like that, saying, in effect: 'you people are too stupid to understand how serious all of this is.'

Other people argued that we should take into account all of the hardships the staff were going through, and the fact that they had a lot on their minds. Others, again, demanded that the staff respect us more. We were, after all, products of our environment, and did not understand Mississippi, and had not been beaten. Could we do something really concrete down there? Did the staff trust us? Could we learn?

Staff members began drifting in from a meeting, and entered the discussion. "We did not walk out because of you, necessarily. We have seen too much of that stuff in the flesh. We know that bastard and don't have to see him on the screen." One guy said: "That was a f.... cartoon, man, and I didn't want to see it. And if you get mad at us walking out, just wait until they break your head in, and see if you don't have something to get mad about. Ask Jimmy Travis over there what he thinks about the Miss. Project. He has 6 slugs in him, man, and the last one went right through the back of his neck when he was driving

...  
Negroes will go to the neighboring plantations. Most of the Atlanta sncc office is moving there for the summer, and it will be the center for the whole delta.

The singing has just ended. It is 2 AM. Tomorrow we will talk about non-violence for at least the morning. I think it is safe to say that while almost all embrace it as a tactic, almost none believe in it as a way of life. In other words, when the Man swings the club they do not swing back, but they hate him. They do not turn the other cheek in the Christian spirit, but only as a way of staying alive, for the time being.....

a car outside Greenwood. Ask Jesse, here: he has been beaten so that we couldn't recognize him, time and time and time again. If you don't get scared, pack up and get the hell out of here because we don't need any favors of people who don't know what they are doing here in the first place."

The next guy: "We cried over you in the staff meeting, because we love you and are afraid for you. We are grown men and women, hardened fighters who have been beaten and shot at, and we cried for you. Somebody walked out of a movie, but you won't see anybody walk out on your picket line. When you get beaten up, I am going to be right behind you. There ~~ARE~~ are people now in jail who know we are singing and thinking about them. As long as there is one person ~~ARE~~ alive wearing a sncc pin, they know. And you had better know it too, or else get out. I was a good soldier in Korea. I can stick a bayonet in your back in the right spot so that you don't make a sound. I know how to use piano wire around your neck and then let you fall to the ground soft. And all the time in Korea I was sick to the guts because I was being taught to kill so good. Know what happens when you starve to death? You bloat up first, and you dissolve your own stomach with your own juices to try to get a little protein. When you get pellagra, your tongue gets black and your teeth fall out of your head. People are starving in Mississippi, and they are going to be white ones, too, right down the block. Don't tell me that you are coming down to help us, because you are saving yourselves. We are proud of you, and love you. Don't worry when we don't have time to shake hands, because that is not the sncc greeting anyway. We hug and kiss you - because we love you."

Here is what I said: the last thing in the meeting, because some people came in singing, and we all sang together, and the first time really together. The crisis is past, I think.

Me: "People have been talking about Americans, and how there is more than just the black man's problem. Somebody said that we sounded like a sick bunch of people with all of our complaints. Well, we are all sick, black and white, because we are Americans, and that fat bastard on the screen has poisoned all of us. The whole god damned country has gone to hell, and we are the only ones who can save it. Isn't it sick when we have to see an in-group sitting together at lunch and feel that they are suspicious of us because we are white? That is why we are going down: not to help the Negro, but to get rid ~~ME~~ of those guys for all of us. It is natural that these things should come out, because that bastard put it into all of us. That is why the training is a week long and not just 2 days. When we start to work together and depend on each other for our lives, these will disappear."

I have been assigned to Greenwood. Greenwood is a large town for Miss., about 22,000. About 60% of whom are black. It is in the delta cotton area, (Yazoo River delta, ed.) right next door to Eastland's county & plantation. It has been one of the worst large areas for violence, and whites have only just begun to work there. The situation is much better there now, and some have actually been registered, after the first demonstrations around the courthouse. The result is that whites will be used almost exclusively in the city, and Negroes will go to the neighboring plantations. Most of the Atlanta sncc office is moving there for the summer, and it will be the center for the whole delta.

The singing has just ended. It is 2 AM. Tomorrow we will talk about non-violence for at least the morning. I think it is safe to say that while almost all embrace it as a tactic, almost none believe in it as a way of life. In other words, when the Man swings the club they do not swing back, but they hate him. They do not turn the other cheek in the Christian spirit, but only as a way of staying alive, for the time being.....