

Letter #2, 4 pages, undated (btwn. 6/22 & 7/2) 1964

c/o Charles McLaurin
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Ruleville, Miss.

Dear Friends:

I am sitting in a chair in the living room of the home of the Shields family of Ruleville, Miss. on a Thursday forenoon just a few days after the time of my last writing which was on the eve of the journey down here. In that time a good deal has happened in and around me. I hope you'll bare with me for I think this letter will run on.

Last Saturday four of us took the long ride from Oxford, Ohio to Memphis in a small corvette which was rigged with a mike so that a CBS sound car behind us could record our profound thoughts as we went into battle. Maybe some of you have heard snatches of that tape. We were all too tired to be the least bit profound. I felt quite relaxed during most of the 14 hour drive. Miss. seemed very remote! At midnite we pulled up to a Howard Johnson's Motel just a few miles from the Miss. border. The CBS crew went through great contortions in arranging rooms for us all which could be written off on their expense account. An old man who was in the office asked us what CBS was doing. We told him. He asked why we wanted to stir up trouble. Why didn't we take care of Harlem. People in Mississippi could take care of their own problems. We were too tired to answer, but the feeling that we were in enemy territoty swept in on me.

Sunday morning after the dead sleep of exhaustion I awoke with fear gripping my gut. I had a hard time forcing down breakfast. At 10 a.m. we left for the most direct route to Ruleville. When we got to the state line the camera car told us to stop at the side of the road while they went on to set up a shot at the big sign that welcomes motorists to the Magnolia State. Waiting there as cars streamed passed with their occupants craning their necks to look at us we got quite spooked. We finally got the go ahead but then had to go back passed the sign for a second run. All this time we noticed a big yellow car pass back and forth. We were quite angry at the newsmen's lack of planning and precautions.

After the first ten miles of inching along at 50 miles an hour across the sun bathed delta, the acute tension started to give way to a loose-limbed anxiety. In stead of being braced for what might come I was ready to give with it. But the fear still clutched at the back of my neck as a car full of white men approached from either direction. Once the photographer was shooting us from the back of the car ahead when a car full of white rowdies passed us on the left and observed the whole thing. Well we made it to Ruleville and Mrs. Hamer's house where some of the volunteers plus a whole lot of press and some local people were gathered. Oh were they a welcome sight!

Charles Scattergood, a boy who got his jaw broken just a month ago by some Negro hoods in Berkeley as he was walking home from a SNCC meeting, and I were assigned to one home. The family wasn't home so we talked to some of the neighbours. We all were stiff and selfconscious. Presently some of the other volunteers came by on their way to another home for a pop. We took the opportunity to get out of an embarrassing lag which had

developed in the conversation. The new home we visited was much less squalid-fresh paint, aluminium awnings, well kept lawn. As we sat around and talked to some old timers who seemed quite plucky about the whole thing, a constant stream of cars of whites passed. A half dozen car fulls of white college kids pulled into the yard of a white across the road. We got scared but the old folks said they weren't doing anything but looking. They were looking so hard in fact that two cars bumped together shattering a headlight. Every day since then there has been a near constant stream of cars circulating through the Negro community watching.

Charlie and I are staying with some grandparents and their two beautiful grandchildren who are down from Chicago for the summer in a tight little four room house. We are treated with care though I still feel a little reserve after the first 5 days. The old man chops cotton some days. He is quiet with cyclids that open only a crack. He offers us welcome reassurance when we get scared by the cars which pass by in the night. Mrs. Shield is a capable grandmother who cooks ample though starchy meals twice a day in her suffocating kitchen. She is a sturn, loving mother to her grandchildren. She is part of a small cooperative quilting group in town. They try to augment \$40 a month welfare doles or \$3-a-day wages for cotton chopping by making quilts on orders for northern buyers. IF ANYONE IS INTERESTED IN A WELL DONE HANDMADE QUILT PLEASE WRITE ME. They usually charge \$20 for a double bed and \$15 for a single-bed quilt though this seems to be exploitation to me. Would be helpful if you could send material. Charlie and I are just getting starting to get through to the kids. Their beautiful bright smiles make everything worthwhile.

The first night we lay down on our double bed under a window which looks out on the road and sweated and watched cars go by. One time the door slapped and we were both on the floor. It turned out to be Mr. Shield locking up for the night. Everyone got a kick out of that story in the morning. It is good for these people to see whites squirming under the same fears that they live under. The lady next door is almost lame because a hypodermic needle that a white doctor broke off in her h&p has worked its way into a ligament or something. We were talking the other day about being scared. She said with a smile that at the time of the shooting a year ago she had been so scared she tried to climb the pecan tree in her front yard. When she found it impossible to pull her two hundred pounds up into the tree, she squeezed under the house. Another old lady took to sleeping in the bath tub for a month or so.

In order for you all to understand my reactions and those of the people here to the loss of the three fellow workers near Philadelphia, Miss., you need to know the background in which such thing took place. These people live under the almost absolute power of the white community. This releaves the whites of most of the external limitors of their use of power. Until the civil rights movement started the only protection that the Negro had from arbitrary use of force or violence against his interest was his ability to Uncle Tom, to convince them that he was willingly subservient. With the movement the Fed. government has come in but still the FBI doesn't find terrorists and get them convicted. Also as the Negro community becomes united in its determination to stand up it becomes much harder for them to be pushed around. Perhaps one of the most exciting things about this town is the way Negroes

talk to us or wave to us in full view of their employers or the police. But even with the strong movement that is growing in Ruleville, justice seems far off. One man told me that he hasn't been able to get compensation from the I.C. railroad though he has been totally disabled for 6 years. Others have been fired or taken off social security for registering to vote. The lady next door was told by the mayor that she might get beat up if she took in some freedom workers. Recently three field workers were killed when they fell off an over loaded truck coming back from the fields. A state trooper told the director of our project that if he had a chance he would grind him into the dirt like a bug. When the mayor came around to investigate shootings into three houses a year ago he said he kind of wished they had of got a whole bunch of them niggers. The sentiments are so violent and dangerous that I will never be able to laugh at the ridiculous racists again.

In this context people don't get too excited about the tragedy at Philadelphia. Negroes are being murdered weekly down here! People express a sincere concern and compassion but this just isn't anything out of the ordinary. It also must smart to see the President and everybody getting excited the first time a white gets it.

I feel a deep loss and an immanent danger. However, my sorrow is somehow forced. I didn't know those boys personally. However the main reason for my lack of an acute feeling of sorrow is the fatalism which one readily acquiesces down here. Somehow death becomes part of the every day. This may seem spooky to you but it really helps us continue to work. We are always very vulnerable and if we had what might be considered a normal portion of fear we would probably be paralyzed.

Tuesday evening we canvassed in the Negro community to get people who wanted to go down to the court house in Indianola the next day. Lots of people in Ruleville had been before. Many people with sensitive jobs- teachers, domestics etc. - would not take the risk of losing their jobs. Others had to work all day. We got together about ten the next morning and a few workers escorted them down. A white girl from Swarthmore College and I had the job of baby sitting for three kids while one woman went down for the first time. That four or five hours with those kids was probably the most significant experience I have had here. When we came in they were on edge. The younger two were the first to break down their reserve and play with us. The oldest, 4 or 5 years, however kept her guard up for over an hour. Finally I won them over with "This is the way the lady rides". When the barriers came down they started to explore my long straight hair- combed it for over an hour - hit me to see how much I would take, vied for position on my lap, etc. The oldest saw a white man in a truck out front and said in mild wonder "There is a white man like you". Finally we got them all except the oldest to sleep. She wandered out on the porch. I had to sit out there in view of a white bar across the street in order to watch her. A white man walked across the street and asked me for a cigarette. I was very happy I could say I didn't smoke. The situation seemed menacing. Life here is full of love and danger.

When I was down town the other day the ladies at two stores

must have known who I was but still they were quite friendly. One talked for quite a while about her children and grandchildren. I have a real fear of most whites down here because I cannot understand them except on a very detached intellectual plane. Some of them are very nice and others quite civil during the day and yet Tuesday night four or five houses were pelted with bottles. Last night the small church in which we meet was set on fire. Luckily it isn't far from the house of somebody who is active in the movement. He saw them light it and the fire department arrived to put it out before it did much damage. This morning as we gathered for our staff meeting the sheriff, the mayor and the FBI arrived. The mayor thought we must have done it since we found it out so soon. The FBI didn't even take samples of the broken glass to check for fingerprints. Our main fear now is the haunting question which is the next step in this escalation.

Last evening we went up to DREW, the next little town north of here to do some canvassing. Whites streamed through the area glaring at the residents. Sometimes they would call a Negro over to their car and send him scampering back in his house. The police kept talking into their mics as they cruised by. Most of the people were not at all receptive. I talked for a while to some kids who may be willing to start a group. Then I talked for 15 minutes to a woman who said she might take our Freedom Registration Form though she was afraid to go down to the court house. We talked about the whole movement and about how you were safer if the community was united. She said she would talk it over with her neighbors. When we got back, Mac, the project director said that was the first time they had tried to go into DREW. The mayor there told the people we wouldn't try to go in there. This evening we will go back again and talk to people a bit, just to show them we are still around. At the mass meeting last night some adults volunteered to go over with a minister on Saturday morning to talk to folks.

A little bit about McLaurin the project director who has been working in this area for quite some time. He is in his early twenties. Last night at the meeting he told us how he got into the Movement. He was concerned that the 40-50 high school kids who have started to work know the dangers they are letting themselves in for. He said he chickened a couple of times when he first was getting in. His mother gave him some money to go to Chicago and he did instead of go on the Freedom rides but when he got there he read about how all his friends were in jail and took the next bus back. Then he told about his first beating. How they took him out of the cell after dumping the beaten body of one of his friends back in the cell. He said he was so mad his body sort of became detached and the blows didn't hurt even though they knocked a tooth loose. Mac related this all with a certain kind of easy humor which is the product of being able to look back on a lot of terrible experiences. He meets the future with these experiences under his belt. This makes him what the mayor calls a dangerous rattlesnake. His experience, lack of fear and easy way of kidding folks into taking risks for the movement make him effective. His experiences also make him keep his distance from the white volunteers. We enjoy his sense of humor though some are disturbed by his casual approach to details. We have some volunteers who are good about organizing security precautions, e.g. phone checks that every one is in at night. We all knew about the fire before the fire dept. got there. I hope this gives you an idea of what things are like down here. Mike