

[1964]

Moss Point - June 21-30, cont.

June 23:

The five of us plus one young lady from the community, who is very interested in working for Civil Rights, went to Hattiesburg for some much needed supplies. At this point, we had no materials, money, office or many people. After stopping at the Court House to see Theron Lynd - from a distance of course - we arrived at the Hattiesburg office where we were very impressed with the spirit of the Movement that is so apparent there, we really have something to work towards in organizing ourselves in Moss Point.

We returned to Moss Point about 6 PM and attended a lively NAACP meeting. The President was away at a convention; the Vice President presided. It was evident that the membership were very interested in hearing what we had to say. The chairman conducted the meeting so formally that it stifled any free movement or emotion - he always introduced people to the floor and had to reiterate what they said or asked. However, they were with us and said they would do certain things. We emphasized that this was their struggle as much as ours. People wanted to know what NAACP would do in case of reprisals; leadership was evasive - we outlined what we could do and what we would try - everything. Later talking to Charles Evers it was apparent that even here NAACP leadership is not receptive to needs of the membership and Negro people, but more concerned about "organizational status". The Negro people here are beginning to be more aware that SNCC is the people.

We announced a mass meeting for July 1 at KP Park. Everyone said they would spread the word. They'd look for an office also. We were told that while we were gone during the day, 2 young (16) Negro boys were picked out of a crowd at the soft ball field for having "insulted" a white woman and that they were arrested. No one could see them or bail them out; we said we'd try to get one of our lawyers down.

We also learned that the 3 civil rights workers were arrested in Phil. Miss., released at night and are now missing. The car was found burned. The press and the FBI are everywhere. The 3 went there to investigate a church burning and beatings of Negroes.

When we left the meeting, Howard and I went to a cafe and were going to call Hattiesburg about the recent trouble. I was told by community people about whites throwing poisoned candy and gum around the community. Two small children were supposed to have been poisoned badly. I called and they were to call me back within the hour. Howard left the cafe to see Charlie. I walked next door and sat on the lawn when I saw the Constable coming. The constable put Howie in the car and came over to me. "Whatcha doing here boy?" A short dialogue followed and I was put under arrest for investigation. On the way to a rendez-vous in Moss Point where the constable spoke with the Moss Point police captain, he drove 85 miles an hour. (The police captain had stopped Howard and me an hour earlier for a conversation). The constables then drove to Pascagoula County jail at 85 miles an hour with all lights out...no siren. The constable (Alford) drove smoking and talking to the other constable.

At the jail, the COFO volunteers met Highway Patrol, Pascagoula and Moss Point city police, sheriff's deputies and others. The general conversation was one of harrassment and intimidation. ("We treat our niggers well as long as they stay in their place...we don't want you commie outside agitators coming in - people get killed for less".) Then we all went up elevator, were made to face the elevator wall and a highway patrolman, who was the most aggressive, took out his billy club and smacked it on his own hand, and said, "You boys are in for a good whooping".

Upon entering cell block, COFOers were taken to "nigger bull pen". They were shoved inside and officers said: "Here they are, get'em boys". This is very unusual practice for whites to be put into the Negro section.

June 23rd continued, Moss Point

The Negroes expressed confusion and fear. They were not moved to beat us. Five minutes later, two officers took the COFOers and put them into a white cellblock. This was about 12:30 AM Wednesday. At the white cell, the officers tried to incite white prisoners to take out their aggressions on the volunteers. "It's whooping time".) The officers left and white prisoners gathered about. Ridenour opened a conversation with one, and eased some of the tension. At this point, a Mexican spoke up and Ridenour spoke to him in Spanish to help develop rapport. After several minutes, a Mississippian announced that he hated all niggers and nigger lovers and that COFOers were there to be beaten by the whites. However, he was going to let us go.

June 24 - COFOers lay down and listened to an argument that lasted about 3 hours on whether or not to beat up cofoers. Sporadically, police officers and trustees would enter argument, attempting to incite white prisoners to "do justice". Morning arrived without real incident. About 10 AM (6/64) officers took cofoers out of cell into fingerprinting room. Several officers including Alford, were there. As they were fingerprinting and mugging Kirschenbaum, the officers told Ridenour sordid stories about brutality that had been imposed upon fellow cofoers since the day before. At the height of the psychological indoctrination, Alford told Ridenour very solemnly and seriously that his project director (Charles Glen) had just been found in the river cut in half (this was untrue of course, but Ridenour didn't know it) and that a fellow white girl workers (Marianne McKay) had been brutally raped by a Negro and was on her death bed. At this point Ridenour fainted. Upon awakening, the back of his head was bleeding and Sheriff Byrd asked, "What happened?" Ridenour tried to tell him what the constable said, and Byrd told him the only stories he had heard had come from prisoners. The constable backed up Byrd. A few minutes later, both cofoers were escorted to the lobby where attorneys from COFO in Jackson were waiting. ....Local police refused to return personal papers, mainly handwritten notes, and denied they had ever taken them..... In a subsequent interview, FBI agents expressed no interest in the mental harrassment which occurred during the 12 hours spent in jail..... When taken to jail, Ridenour was told he was being arrested on a vagrancy charge. The following morning the sheriff said there were no charges. Early Wed. morning, the sheffiff told COFO legal staff that Ridenour had been arrested. Two hours later, he denied this to the A.F.)

Howard's father chartered a plane and took him home that evening. Ridenour drove to Jackson with the lawyers for a couple of days. The lawyers helped get the two Negroes out of jail and investigated the poisoning incident. No confirmation.

June 25, Thursday..... Almost the whole day was spent working with the youth council discussing the registration program and having a workshop on the methods of canvassing. The morning session, which was supposed to start at 10 and finally got under way by 11 (typical perhaps, but not satisfactory) was mainly centered around an explanation and discussion of the regular voter registration, Freedom registration and the Freedom Democratic party. While the discussion began slowly, it gradually livened up until the students were used to talking about the program and started showing some real understanding of the program. After lunch we returned to the Hall to have a workshop in canvassing methods. After a quick review of the points that should be made when talking to someone about voter registration, we had some role plays. Like the earlier discussion, it started off slowly, but when the kids got used to convincing people of the benefits of the program, they