

July 9

Dear Mom and Dad,

I hope the letter business is straightened out; I just spoke to Alan and Mrs. Shavzin and they both said you were worried. We've written I think two letters that you should have gotten since you wrote Sunday. (Behind me two Justide Dept. lawyers are busy talking to our staff leader). We had some trouble yesterday: the head of the ministers' project got arrested for passing a bad check. In Miss. intent to defraud is assumed, and you have to prove that you hadn't merely added your account up wrong; the lawyer says he's in trouble. The check that bounced was in payment for a taperecorder that he bought from someone who is not very sympathetic and will press the case; and Bob made a bad mistake. When the teller called to tell him that the check had bounced (this is a local bank you understand) Bob told him to try again to cash it; he should have offered on the spot to come down and give him cash. This ought to be a lesson to all of us that you can't operate here as if we were in the north, every slip can count against you. I found myself speeding today (by 5 mph); very careless. But we are all getting careless, I think, because this seems like such a loose town. Negroes have spontaneously integrated Kresses, Woolworth's, and a number of other places without trouble; Miss. in general seems willing to comply with the civil rights bill. The Citizens Council has loosed a terrific denunciation of businessmen who comply, and I think they ~~have~~ made a mistake. The Jackson paper, which is fantastically white supremacist, published a front page letter from a lawyer tearing into the CC for their stand. (Of course he said he was a segregationist and hated the law, but argued that we must obey). Criticism of the CC is not something that one does lightly in this state, and if the Clarion-Ledger put it on the front page it means that there must be many people who are rather fed up, even relieved, I bet, that they have a way out of CC domination. I have never seen a bill that means as much to anyone as the civil rights bill does to Negroes here. There is also a great deal of Kennedy love: almost everyone will tell you that Pres Kennedy tried to help the Negro. And Goldwater is hated; I really doubt that he would get a single Negro vote (not that there are any Negro votes here). Our landlady has a picture of JFK on the wall.

Both of us have been busier than Cain. Nancy finds teaching, under far from good conditions, very difficult. She has too many kids in a tiny attic room over the church and is very nervous over what she considers her total ignorance of both methods and subject matter (especially Negro history, which is a big thing here). The people, especially the adults, are very eager to learn; they are dying to discuss government and the movement, and dying to hear about Negroes who have accomplished things. They are pathetically ignorant about the background of their people; I asked a group of three or four older people to name famous Negroes and all they could think of were Carver and Booker Washington. The kids all know jazz musicians and sports figures but not too much else.

I have high school and jr high school kids, ten of them; I've got about the best teaching position in town. The schools suffer from too many little kids and not enough teenagers; the thing was billed as, or anyway became, a mass movement, and we attracted parents who can send their kids, but not too many of the older kids we wanted; I suspect they think school is too tame for civil rights militants. There are a few real bright kids, but most of them, even the bright ones, don't know much in an academic sense; we discussed the US gvt yesterday and they didn't know anything really, had never heard of the committee system in Congress. We staged a committee hearing in the classroom; someone made a bill she wanted Congress to pass and the rest were congressmen on the committee. The bill was to give money to Negroes in Miss; we had a

hot discussion of what conditions are like. I appointed four kids as the opposition, and they produced all the standard arguments: give them money and they won't work, they all have TV sets, living is cheap down there, etc. (but no one said they have too many kids). Finally we defeated the bill by a parliamentary trick (as I pointed out), deciding it was the wrong committee. It was a real lesson in congressional procedure and bargaining and that stuff. The kids, as you may have gathered, are very aware of what's going on and what life is like; perhaps this is a consequence of not getting much chance to use their minds in school.

Today we had a huge rain and only four showed up, so we did spelling and vocabulary all morning, and stayed an extra half hour playing Ghost. Vocabulary lessons are great taking off points: the word "compensation" came up and we got onto a discussion of how during slavery some people who were against it still wouldn't abolish it because the slave-owners demanded "equitable compensation" for their slaves. "Nutrient" got into a discussion of nutrition, on which they are all experts: home ec and that kind of thing is what the schools are big on, I imagine. But then I asked if the mind needs nutrition too, and we talked about what and how for awhile.

Yesterday a history prof from Stanford blew in for two weeks: Nancy had him talk to her adults about minority group problems, and how the Negroes got done out of the vote after Reconstruction; tomorrow I am getting him to do likewise for my kids. (Nancy teaches adults at night. I am free at night: our night registration is much lower than our day registration, which is a little disappointing, since there must be many people who work by day and could come at night.)

So we are busy and happy, and still seem safe. Of yes, we have been getting almost daily rescue shipments of new (professional) teachers from the NY Teachers Federation (?), which raised \$10,000 to send them down in vast numbers. As they keep arriving things will keep improving. Of course there is the underlying fear that as our activities keep expanding the white community will get more and more uneasy; there have been absolutely no overt signs of this but it's something to expect. As a community the town seems willing to live with the civil rights bill; but there may be a hidden line as to ~~how~~ how much integration they will tolerate (I mean the fringe elements). My own feeling is that the surface smoothness is deceptive, but perhaps that's only because I keep reminding myself that this is, after all, Mississippi. It sure doesn't seem like it.

Please send our regards to Mary and her sister (?) and thank them for thinking of us. Tell them that the Negroes in this town anyway are very brave and very determined (people in small groups are failing their voter registration tests every day), and that everybody is convinced that we shall overcome.

Love,  
Nancy and Joe

copy of a letter from Joseph Ellin, in Hattiesburg, Miss.