

507 Mobile St.
Hattiesburg, Miss.
July 10, 1964

To the Editor of the Gazette:

This morning three of our workers were beaten while canvassing for voter registration on the border of one of the Negro districts. Their sole job is to talk to Negroes throughout the town and persuade them to go to the courthouse and attempt to register to vote. One of the canvassers, a rabbi from Cleveland, will be in the hospital for 24 hours; the other two, college students, were treated and released. The attackers, who have not yet been identified, used lead pipes; they drove a truck with no license plates. After the attack the three canvassers, covered with blood, staggered to a nearby church which we are using as a Freedom School. For the kids in school, it was, I suppose, the best possible lesson of the cost of Negro equality in Mississippi.

Until today, Hattiesburg has been, for us whites, a relatively quiet and seemingly secure town. The night before our arrival, two weeks ago Sunday, two empty cars parked outside the COFO office were shot into and the motors slightly damaged; no one has been arrested for that either.

But otherwise nothing really startling has occurred. Two days ago, the head of the Ministers' project was arrested for passing a bad check. He had balanced his account wrong, and wrote a check he couldn't cover. It would be a minor incident in the north (the bank would cover it of course) but civil rights workers in Mississippi are not allowed to make any mistakes. The law here says that a check that bounces is prima facie evidence of intent to defraud; the defendant must prove that his intentions were honorable. Our lawyer says that it will be a tough case to argue before a Mississippi jury.

This kind of lapse is a sign of how loose things have been here. I found myself speeding one day, and had to remind myself that the three men missing in Neshoba were speeding too. But we have had so little trouble from the police and the white community that we tend to forget where we are. Hattiesburg is a relatively good town by Mississippi standards, and the lid, we are given to understand, is really on this summer. This town is very image-conscious. One of the volunteers was stopped for a traffic violation yesterday, but when he produced a press card (from his college newspaper) the cop apologized and let him go.

Hattiesburg has a population of about 36,000, one-third Negro. The white sections are indistinguishable from hundreds of towns throughout the country: there is nothing "southern" about them. The Negro sections are something else. They are slums, but nothing like the urban slums the North is used to. The streets are generally unpaved, there is an absence of street lights, traffic lights, and no sewers at all. No signs, no bells, no gates guard the numerous railroad crossings. Almost every house has a few chickens; we are awakened daily by crowing roosters. Virtually no one has a car. We live in comparative luxury in a house with running water, plumbing and a phone; the more rural areas just outside of town lack even these comforts. Economic discrimination against Negroes is incredible in this state. We were told that there are generally different pay scales for Negroes doing the same jobs as whites; in fact, whites will get as much as three times the pay for the same work. (The Citizens' Council wants to drive all the Negroes out of the state. What they will do without them, I can't imagine). The man

we are staying with owns a business in Mobile St., the main street of the Negro district. By local standards he is a financial success. Ironically, school-teachers as a group are the best off members of the community. But their financial security is paid for by subservience to the authorities. By and large they are too timid to participate in the civil rights movement; almost no Negro teachers vote in Hattiesburg. Mobile St. has a few substantial-looking businesses: a drug store, a Gail station, a rooming house, perhaps a restaurant of two. And somewhere in town there is a Negro-owned funeral parlor (the owner is building an impressive house on the very edge of ~~xxxx~~ the Negro section). ~~xxxxxxx~~ But most of the Negroes live among indescribable delapidation. It is not squalid, exactly; certainly the tone of the life that is led here is not squalid. But by American standards of neatness and propriety, most of the houses and most of the buildings are total failures.

The civil rights bill has meant a great deal to the Negroes here, more than any law has ever meant to anyone in my experience. We drove to Hattiesburg by way of Montgomery Ala., and as I was having breakfast in a lunch room that morning I suddenly realized how insane it was that a Negro passing by couldn't stop in for a cup of coffee. The Negroes feel this very keenly. (What can you say? If you sit next to them at a ~~xxxx~~ lunch-counter they might marry your sister). As soon as the bill became law, spontaneous attempts at integration began all over the state; in Hattiesburg there has been a general acceptance of desegregation, but in other places it has not gone as well. The Rev. Cameron, pastor of a Negro church in town and as fine a gentleman as you are likely to meet in one lifetime, is now entitled to go into Kresge's and have an ice cream soda, just as if he were a human being. The local whites will stare and grumble; but, in Hattiesburg, they will probably not beat him up or put him in jail; not yet, anyway. For there is doubtless an invisible line. No one, not ~~xx~~ us, not the police, not the Governor, not the FBI, knows how much civil rights activity the lunatic element can tolerate. There has been violence before, as the charred remains of two Negro churches testify. Undoubtedly the Klan has been watching us, seeing our integrated cars moving freely about town, seeing Negroes go daily to the courthouse, watching the success of our Freedom Schools. Perhaps they will take it in stride; the so-called "responsible" elements seem to have decided to let us be, provided we don't demonstrate or call attention to the problems here. But whether they can control the Klan and its friends is an open question.

The attitude of the white community to the civil rights bill has been surprisingly positive. Gov. Johnson and the Citizens' Council have urged non-compliance, but very few responsible elements have echoed their pleas. Wednesday the Jackson newspaper, unalterably white supremacist, printed a front-page letter from a local lawyer denouncing the Citizens' Council for advocating disobedience. He began by establishing his credentials as an ardent segregationist who hates the new law, but argued that the US Government is simply too powerful to resist. This is about the most one can hope for down here: no one has stated publicly that the law might be a good law. Nevertheless any resistance to the Citizens' Council is encouraging. I wonder how many Mississippians are secretly relieved that the Federal government is forcing an end to segregation. The law gives those who need it a safe way out. Perhaps, if the President enforces the law vigorously, the Citizens' Council will destroy itself by its own intransigence. Enforcement is the key; those who wish to resist Citizen Council dominance must be able to show that they have absolutely no alternative to desegregation.

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All of us have been very impressed by the Negroes we have met. Many are illiterate, and few have anything like book knowledge, but from young to old there is an impressive awareness of the world and understanding of the things that count. An elderly man, unlettered, gave us a lecture one day on the duties of jurors that any judge would have been proud of (Negroes are not allowed on juries, but they suffer at their hands). There are people here who do not vote and cannot read, but who know more about precinct meetings and county conventions than most professional politicians. This much white supremacy has done for the Negro: it has made him a knowledgeable and eager citizen. Mississippi law requires a voter to explain random passages of the Mississippi constitution. White voters can get away with explaining the simple clauses, but the Negroes have to be prepared to explain anything and everything. Political power seems more real when you don't have it than when you do. To these people the right to vote is a palpable part of American freedom; they believe in it. Ask anyone why he wants to vote and he will say, when we vote the police will stop mistreating us, or, the city will have to pave our streets. (It is a rule of thumb in Hattiesburg that where the pavement ends the Negro section begins).

Every day a few people take the long walk up the courthouse steps to try to register. Mississippi law requires the county to publish the name of each applicant in the newspaper for two weeks running. This is an open invitation to retribution from the whites. The walk up the courthouse steps is about as long a walk as you can make.

The Negro community in this town is very spirited and very determined. We have had an incredible response to our Freedom Schools; over 600 people of all ages (8 to 82) have signed up for our classes in literacy, Negro history, and US and state governments. We hold classes in five churches, morning and night. We must have about thirty teachers here. Those of us, mostly college students, who took the orientation session at Oxford only two weeks ago (it seems like years) are practically veterans now: we have had to call in many new teachers during the past few days, professionals recruited from New York. We are working under terrific handicaps: large classes, small classrooms, no equipment whatever, not a single text for the kids to use. What is perhaps worse, not too many of us are very knowledgeable about the subject our students want most to learn, the history and background of the Negro people. There is a thirst for knowledge here, and a pathetic ignorance. I asked my class of adults to name famous American Negroes, and all they could come up with were George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington (the kids know musicians and athletes). Perhaps few Americans could do better; the Negro is the forgotten man in American history. Who knows, for example, that Arizona was discovered by a Spanish Negro explorer, or that the first man to fall in the Boston Massacre was a freedman? Who can name the many inventions made by Negroes

Who knows that the first open heart surgery was done by a Negro? Children educated in Mississippi surely don't, and they are anxious to hear.