

[Florence Sayer]

LETTER from

MISSISSIPPI

teaching

NEW YORK ADA *
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Long in The Minneapolis Tribune

Listen to the Mocking Bird

The following are excerpts of a letter written by Abe Sayer, Chairman of N.Y. ADA, who, with his wife Florence, is running a Freedom School in Mississippi. They, along with their son Mike, and John Friedland, son of Louis and Lily Friedland, are among the ADAers working for civil rights in Mississippi this summer.

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July 11, 1964

It's just a week since we left Memphis and crossed the boundary line into DeSoto County. Outwardly it was no different from riding into any other state, but we felt that we had entered into enemy territory - and we had! Florence and I had one "scare" the other day - we went shopping at a supermarket around the corner and were followed by a car; so we didn't return to the house where we were staying, in order to avoid putting the finger on our hostesses; instead we went to the COFO headquarters.

One of our main difficulties is the fact that our movements have to be so restricted. I haven't been able to "take a walk" since we left New York; to get a haircut you have to arrange for transportation, and sign in and out. Even sitting on a porch is indiscreet since it enables whites in passing cars to note which houses are keeping the COFO workers. We are aware that the license numbers of the cars used by the COFO people have all been noted, and that the phones are tapped.

On the other hand, the Negro people with whom we have had contact are wonderful. They show their appreciation and gratitude in every possible way. Our hostess has just put up screens on the porch so we can sit there unobserved. They have courage - these people - and they know what the battle is about; but, as in every cause, the large majority of the Negro population find it easier to live with their shame and their fear.

Shame! I talked the other day with the wife of the only Negro doctor in Meridian, whose daughter attends the Freedom School. Only one hospital in the entire area allows him to practice now a Hill-Burton Law hospital is opening, and it remains to be seen whether this hospital will obey the federal law and allow him to practice there. There is one Negro registered nurse in Meridian, and she is given only night work. For fifteen years the doctor's wife has been conducting a single-handed campaign in the stores; if the salesclerk refuses to write "Mrs." in front of her name on the sales slip she cancels the sale. The usual practice is to use the first name only. For men, of course, the term "boy" is most convenient.

And fear! To contradict, to claim one's rights, to talk back in any way is to invite humiliation, beating and sometimes death. The killing of a Negro is not ordinarily considered newsworthy. But any form of violence by a Negro on a white person is unforgivable. So the Negroes live in never-ending fear that any little incident, however inadvertent, may provoke "trouble".

As for the school, the Meridian Freedom School has the "best" physical facilities of the Freedom Schools - an old Baptist Seminary with rotten woodwork, feeble lighting, inadequate ventilation, paperboard walls. We have lots of miscellaneous books, but no sets. There are no recreational facilities except for a piano and a couple of record players. You can imagine what the other schools are like - basement rooms in churches, etc.

Yet this has been an exhilarating week - 150 youngsters from 12 to 19 who have come to learn something, to have contact with a friendliness and freedom they don't get in their regular schools. The most distressing feature has been the widespread fear about attending the Freedom School. They have been warned that attending the school would endanger their graduation from high school.

Nevertheless, the contact has been fruitful for both sides. We've gotten an understanding of some of the Negro people here. And they have learned that there are lots of white people outside Mississippi who have a different attitude toward Negroes than the one they take for granted. And they show their gratitude by housing us, feeding us, and listening to us as we talk about civil rights, Negro history, improvement of reading, music, art, public health services, science, Mississippi politics, etc.

There are many people doing many things--there's much inefficiency because of crude physical conditions and lack of experience, much time is lost because of the need for observing security rules, and there's good reason for discouragement - yet it's all wonderful because it's based on courage, idealism, hopefulness.