

Box 547
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by Wallace Roberts

terror, harassment, intimidation and economic exploitation are a way of life to the Negro in Mississippi, but one's first contacts with it are rather disquieting. Last Saturday night the 19 Summer Project volunteers here in Shaw gathered at our headquarters, a four room house that serves as office, Community Center and Freedom School. We were planning a party of singing, talking and watermelon to take our minds off the depressing reality that surrounds us.

About 8:30 a young Negro man rushed into the office and told us that four white men had offered him \$40 to tell them where we were living and \$400 to blow it up. All of us immediately moved into a back room and shut off the lights. Guards were posted on the roof and sides of the house. Calls were made to the Jackson headquarters of COFO, the FBI in Greenwood and the local police. The latter organization told us simply that police cars had already been posted on the roads leading into our section of "Niggertown," but whether they already knew of the proposed bombing or were just taking precautions because it was Saturday night, we do not know. The windows facing the street were barricaded with boxes of books to prevent bombs from being thrown through them. Water buckets were filled, a hose connected and the one fire extinguisher readied. Almost constant contact was being maintained with Jackson.

When it appeared that the FBI was not going to show up, Len Edwards, a project member from neighboring Ruleville over for the night and son of Congressman Donald Edwards of California, called his father in Washington. Because of Representative Edwards' pressure, the Washington FBI headquarters dispatched two agents from Memphis. They arrived here at 1:30 A.M. and took statements from Sam Thomas, the man to whom the offer was made, the project director, and Len Edwards. Thomas gave the FBI the names of the four men who offered him the money and a good case can be made against them.

The girls had been moved to a nearby house about midnight. A few of the remaining boys stayed on at the office and the rest went home to bed about 7:30 A.M. No one had showed any fear; everyone had acted and talked as rationally as the situation allowed. But beneath the surface one could sense the mixed feelings of fear, anger, incomprehension, anxiety and futility.

The next morning the local chief of police came by as I was eating breakfast and informed me that the county sheriff wanted to see some of us. I and a girl went down to the mayor's office, a dry cleaning shop. He was mainly concerned as to why we had called the FBI. I explained that we had no faith in any local

law enforcement agency in Mississippi, despite his apparently sincere intention to protect us. He had told us a week ago that he was going to protect us because he had to protect the image of Mississippi" and he did not want a Philadelphia incident in Bolivar county." I also told him that we were all quite concerned about the possibility of increased danger after we white northern volunteers left at the end of the summer. We were afraid that whatever protection an law enforcement was being given to us now would fade into nothingness and the normal terrorizing of the Negro community would return. Sheriff Capps mumbled a few irrelevant remarks and then changed the topic.

When I got home I found out that the son of the woman I am staying with was arrested on a drinking and driving charge and fined \$112. It was a valid charge but trumped up just because I am staying at his mother's house (he and his wife and family live ~~there~~ together). When the police stopped him the deputy shined his flashlight in Mr. Fisher's face and asked the local cop, "Is this the guy we want?" The reply was "Yeah, that's him." This conversation took place before they found that he had been drinking.

Just this morning Mr. Fisher lost his \$1.50 an hour job as a mechanic-welder. Ostensibly it was because a white worker could not get along with him. But all of last week the manager of the company had been commenting and questioning Mr. Fisher about my presence in his mother's house. There is no doubt that he was fired because of me. Yet he is not as bitter or discouraged as one might think he ought to be. "It's just one of those things. I expected it would come." Mr. Fisher is hardened to being a Negro in Mississippi; a white co-worker gets \$1.65 an hour even though he is not as highly skilled.

And so the story goes. It is going to be a long time before there are any significant changes in the Deep South. They will come but not before enough of the Negroes and northern whites get angry enough to do something. Mr. Fisher was not angry because he believes it does no good. "Those things" will just keep on happening until something is done. The Negroes here cannot do it alone; the strength of Southern conservatism has been supported by the spineless northern "liberals." One very specific way of breaking this strength is to continually pressure the federal government to protect the people and enforce laws. Slim Thomas is now a marked man because he is a witness to a white man's crime. Lewis Allen was killed last January because he, too, had witnessed such an event. Yet the FBI will not grant Thomas protection.

Yet we cannot rely solely on the federal government to bring about changes in the Deep South. We all must act. As Thoreau said in his essay "On Civil Disobedience," "The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way."