

7/16/64

Report from Issaquena County Staff
Re: Courthouse Situation

This morning Louis Grant, Muriel Tillinghast and Bob Wright met with seven local people at the Moonlake Baptist Church for session on the details of registering to vote. At 11:00 A. M., the group reached the Issaquena Courthouse. The entire group entered the office of the registrar who requested that everyone except one person leave the room and wait his turn. Muriel Tillinghast asked the registrar, Mrs. Mary T. Vandevender, whether or not she intended to take just one person at a time. To this Vandevender hotly asked what the question was and when it was repeated, replied that that was just what she was going to do. Louis Grant then raised the point that extra chairs and desks could be placed in the office and that it was her duty to do so. Apparently greatly irritated, Vandevender restated her position; the group left the office. The registrar called Mrs. Iola Diggs to the counter-partition and it was she who remained to take the first registration-examination. Twenty minutes later when she emerged from the office, Mrs. Iola Diggs said that when she asked Mrs. Vandevender when and how she would be notified as to the results of her application, the latter said, "When I get in all the registrations I'll let you know." The registrar also requested to know Mrs. Diggs first name upon the receipt of the papers. The section of the constitution she used (question 18 & 19) was §110.

The next applicant was Mrs. Harriett Diggs who, when she rejoined the group thirty minutes later, said that the registrar had asked her if she worked for a doctor in the county (to which Mrs. H. B. Diggs said no) and when asked when and how she would receive notice on the status of her application, the registrar told her to come back early next week.

The other applicants who were at the courthouse were Miss Cristina Diggs who was denied the application because she had no available proff of age; ~~Exx~~ Miss Dorothy Lewis who filled out the application in a room full of noise (obviously staged); Misters Henry Fleming and Doc. Hall, both of whom will be 21 by the time of the election. The former was given a form that was incorrect and had to fill out a second application; when questioned later Fleming said that the questions on both forms were identical. Mr. Roosevelt Diggs, Mrs. Iola Diggs husband, filled out his form in the unusually noisy office. An eighth person, Rev. Robert Bunkner was unable to apply because he had left his glasses at home; however, he is to register on Friday the 17th. The persons in the order they appear in this paragraph spent thirty, thirty, one hour, forty-five minutes, and one hour in the office. All of them came in the office after 12 noon and the group was finished at 4 P. M. Their sections were (in the same order) numbers 179, 3, 185, 73.

Mr. Hall was questioned by the registrar as to who the "other people" were with them (referring to the COFO workers), how long they had been in the county, the name of the "boy with four eyes" (referring to Bob Wright) and how long he had been there. All of the questions according to Mr. Hall were answered with "I don't know," or "I've never seen him before."

Concerning the applicant who had no proof of identity, Cristine and her mother, Mrs. Harriett Diggs and Muriel Tillinghast went to office of the superintendent of education (title not worth capitalizing) to request a copy of a school form with the date of birth on it. We were told to come back later and Mrs. Diggs said that she would return in one hour. When we returned (30 minutes later) we were told that the records were available but the woman in the office could not write a legal notice to validate the date of birth. Mrs. Diggs pointed out that the books were gotten from the office in which the registrar had her office and that a legal message was not necessary when a quick walk down the hall is all that was necessary. This was flatly refused. The man who was head of the office was not in (for the legality of the notice). We were told to come back tomorrow for his signature. Miss Diggs is returning tomorrow with her own proof of birth.

We spoke to the high sheriff (again not worth capitalizing), Mr. Dennell about the procedural difficulties we were having. He gave Muriel and Louis the idea that he would seriously attempt to rectifying

the said situation. Nothing came of it.

Around 11:30 P.M., Muriel, Louis, Doc and Henry engaged Donnell in a conversation which lasted for about 30 minutes. (Upon arriving at the courthouse, the diligent members of the southern women's watchtower association -- hastily organized at the courthouse and headed by every white female in the place -- smile-- called Donnell and Davis (the deputy sheriff) in off of their plantations because a black sea had just swept into the offices. This around 11 AM when the radio messages began and at 11:25 the sheriff and his trusty side-kick O. B. W. (old bag of wind) Davis were on the scene. As are the usual conversations with white southern sheriffs, the conversation was dripping with honey which smelled of horse manure and was sterile -- as sterile as a poorly operated abortion. As further comments on the conversation are a waste of paper, brains, time and space, I will conclude my usually prolific and profound observations with the fact that Donnell mentioned several times the existence of "bad" white elements (and himself as the buffer between them and us) and that the full protection of the law was guaranteed to all exercising "a great privilege."

The JD's dropped in during the middle of things, we talked to them and promised so kind of report to the Greenville office to be used when they needed it. They have talked to almost every applicant and

the sheriff and O. B. W.

Other reported cases of registration hangups have been the registrar's refusal to give information of notification (Mrs. Unita Zelma Blackwell), additional questions (Mrs. Carletta Bunton), and demand for 3 witnesses to attest to the moral character of the applicant (Mr. Alfred Brown) and that these men should be white.

Tracing rumors, the following names are frequently heard and are not out of character with the personalities involved:

Harper Rilla Myers - owns about 1000 acres from B house his land runs from 4 miles above to Scott's land (w)
Has told Rev. Bupkner that some whites are going to beat some Negroes up.

A. E. Scott - owns about 500 acres in all; rents from whites and 2 years ago was bought out by Hegal; "Cotton Wood" area and is rumored to have said "any nigger which 're'listers" to vote on his land is going to get killed."

(spelling?) L. M. Hergle - owns 5000 acres above Myererville (north straight up the highway, from the area of Moonlake Church); has not yet been mentioned in rumor but is worth getting information on. Ops. name may be Higgins; "no nigger gonna pick cotton for me this year (automation hits the Delta).

Jimmy Hand (spelling?) - owns Levy plantation and lives in Sharkey County; has land run by Henry Davis (son of the deputy sheriff); is rumored that any Negro who goes to register has to take everything with him because he won't be able to return to his house; since rumor got started only one Negro from the plantation has been seen in town and that was to get supplies. Not verified is the bradishing and open display of high powered rifles. A yellow NO TRESPASSING sign has within the last week been nailed to a telegraph near the highway.