

July 25, 1964

We drove into Clarksdale, our home for a month, about 1:30 this afternoon, located Freedom House, met some of the people, and then were delivered to our "home". It is a modest, two-bedroom Negro home, not like the shacks we usually associate with Mississippi Negroes. We have a neat comfortable bedroom outfit, vintage of Uncle George's room at home. There is a gas stove in the kitchen, a decent refrigerator, crocheted pieces and photos and a calendar picture of President Kennedy. I guess such a frame bungalow would look out of place in Wakonda Manor, but there are thousands like it in Des Moines, built perhaps following World War I. Our host runs a dry cleaning and laundry establishment. We haven't yet met our hostess. We get the idea that we will have the run of the house, prepare our own meals, etc.

So far, no incidents.

But we have been warned, and briefed, and given demonstrations of what we might possibly expect. Warren McKenna is in charge of the National Council of Churches' summer projects, as concerns the ministers and counsellors. Yesterday perhaps twenty of us were briefed--most of them giving a week or so, but a half-dozen a longer time. He called such persons as Loris and me "pretty precious people" () because we can stay a month. Our job is to be pastor and friend, working closely with the "kids" here--black and white, summer volunteers and COFO professionals. We don't have them sifted out yet, of course. We do not direct the program, but presumably will be in a position to give it some guidance, working through the Project Leader here, a young Negro we only know yet as "Lafayette". He doesn't seem to be the natural leader, as we sensed in the 3/4 hour or so we spent in the confusion there before coming to our room. A girl named Yvonne--white, seems to have that role--a sort of capable secretary and trouble-shooter.

The program consists of "Freedom Schools" in four town centers--high school age, some grade schoolers, some adults--art, music, class subjects--and photography! The NAACP has outfitted a darkroom, but they don't have anyone to use it or organize a photography group. A shame.

The other thrust of the Clarksdale program is Voter-Registration, enlisting adults to bone up on the qualifications and then to register at the Court House. It seems we may have come in at an auspicious time, because I take it there is to be a "Freedom Day" on August 11, when under notice to the press and TV, etc., there will be a big march to the Court House. They are talking about fifty ministers coming in ahead of time to help in the project.

There is more, of course. We are "so-called" ministers to the white community's way of thinking. The National Council is held in complete disdain, and we have no protection at all from the lawless hoods--nor the police. But we are not demonstrators, we do not press for integration, picketing, nor any direct contacts with the white community. The Mississippi summer project, under COFO, is Voter Registration only--in the long run a far more potent threat to white supremacy than integrated motels and swimming pools.

Oh yes! When the Democrats have their National Convention, there will be a move by the Mississippi Freedom Democrats to gain recognition. Mr. Aaron (Doc) Henry, a druggist, is a representative on this ticket. He will likely be in the news. As president of the State NAACP, he is quite a power in Clarksdale, and we will be with him a good deal during our month in the town.

We receive mail at 429 Yaxoo Street, Clarksdale Mississippi.

--Fraser Thomson