

July 29, 1964

I've just come back from Dublin where six of us have spent part of the afternoon getting Freedom Party registrations.....eleven. This is part of a program to register 430,000 in the state in time for the state convention next week. I understand they have more than 2,000 in Clarkdale and hope for 3,000 from the county as a whole—I don't know the figures, really, because I just listen, but don't write down. This is the present voter registration program, however, rather than registering at the Court House. This will take up again, but right now it is at an impasse. All the potential registrants have at least once attempted to pass, only to be turned back. Now the plan is to round them all up again for the Freedom Day August 11. This seems to be the strategic date, for certain layover requirements before trying again. The hope is 100 persons to attempt, with a picket line, ministers and all, knowing full well that some of those in the line will be arrested. But don't worry. I myself will be in the office and behind the lines, encouraging all I can! What I really mean is, the NCC doesn't encourage us to put ourselves up for arrest. NCC isn't even sure how much to support Freedom Day. Certainly not to the extent the NAACP will ask of it.

This morning I visited two Freedom Schools for High Schoolers—mathematics, current events, drama, etc. These aren't really going too well right now. In fact, the entire project needs a shot in the arm. Workers are grumbling. Whether the heat, or poor leadership, or personalities, isn't clear yet. I don't really know what is going on or who is in charge or how policy is formed. But I am cautioned by NCC that this is of no direct concern of mine—except when workers as persons let their frustrations get them down. That is how I got into the afternoon program—no one seemed to be getting anywhere, no car, no nothin', so I said I had a car, let's go! The fellows thanked me upon our return. I was of some use! I guess we go back again tomorrow. The idea, I guess, is for me to enter with them in whatever they are doing, so they in turn will come to think I have a place in their lives.

Loris spent all day yesterday in the Community Center, working with little children, screaming undisciplined urchins. Today she took to the bed—not because of yesterday, but because of a cold and sore throat. They tell me this cotton spraying has some effect on lots of folks. Last night we heard James Forman, national director of SNCC, giving a rousing oration, singing, clapping, Amens, etc. I took some pictures. This morning I visited the white minister of the Disciples' Church, a College of the Bible man, native of Mississippi, who is leaving Clarkdale because it just isn't a place where he can be comfortable. I let him do the talking—he has a conscience. But Dale Piers hurt him when last year he and others tried to have an integrated meeting, "conversations" here in Clarkdale. I had read of it at the time but hadn't connected the incident with this town. I imagine some of us will attempt to go to church there on Sunday.

We are doing fine and don't need a thing except a cold wave to bring the temperature down about 20 degrees.

—Fraser A. Thomas

After our orientation in Jackson at the improvised and very unprepossessing Council of Churches office in a run-down building of the Negro section, we knew what to expect in the smaller towns to which we were sent. We had demonstrations in self-protection by non-violence, instructions in how not to risk arrest unnecessarily. (Some of the local laws are made in the hope we will break them). Also, we could better know and appreciate what the COFO kids have done in their efforts to make usable the bare board floors, slap-dash walls and woodwork and generally dilapidated appearance of the places where they must move in and go to work.

Here in Clarksdale there is Freedom House—at our mailing address of 429 Yazoo Street—and the Community Center down the block. Both have libraries, for which shelves have been made of planks and concrete block supports. Much elbow grease has been expended, walls and woodwork painted—and at Community Center, linoleum on the floor. They teach crafts, such as leather work, art classes, sewing, etc. They really need more help, since they are frequently interrupted in the craft work with the older youngsters by the seemingly endless stream of little folk who are hungry for attention and the fun of coloring or making things. I spent most of one day teaching them to fold squares of paper to make boxes that close up. These they colored and carried home—and five more brothers or sisters came to say "Make me a paper box." I think, when Fraser gets back, I will probably try to spend some time there every day. They are short one expected staff person, as one girl was called home by her mother's illness, and has not returned. Measured by its long term goal of making the center into a permanent thing to be staffed by local people to be trained by our workers, the accomplishments of the first week seem less than hopeful. But measured by effort and immediate results in interest and participation, nothing is wasted, and perhaps we can achieve something of permanence—if only the lingering memory that somebody cared enough to come and help—"to treat us black folks like the human beings we are, and help us become what we would like to be."

The younger children who come here are from the very poorest of the poor. Their homes are such dismal and sagging shanties that I shudder at the thought of how they survived the five degrees below zero temperatures felt here last winter. It stays about 95 degrees now!

The second day I worked with them, each one pasted together colored strips to make links in a chain, which we fastened together to make a large word FREEDOM to hang across the light blue wall. They are proud of this. I have remained away for two days since I caught a bad summer cold and thought best not to spread it. The time I use to rest I can also read, and write letters. The next project I have in mind is name tags, so I can know the children and work more personally with them. They also need to feel individually important. Some of them made their own checkerboards. Checkers is a favorite game. We need games of all kinds. We have so many unused items like that going to waste at home—if only I had known what to bring!

But I have told you only about the Community Center! Freedom House is the headquarters for the young people with two other emphases. Freedom schools are underway in three separate areas of town, teaching citizenship to older young people. I have seen only one of these in action, where a well-prepared debate was in progress, followed by some spirited singing of the many freedom songs. The young people staffing these are some of the finest-type of kids, who believe in the future of these Negro boys and girls, and in the value of what they are doing with and for them. The Voter registration occupies the energies of the rest of the team. It is, of course, the key to unlock the doors to other necessary changes. On its success hinges the election of officers who will represent all Mississippians, and enactment of legislation helpful to all. Segregation, as even white people who like it will tell you, is economically unfeasible. It works to everyone's disadvantage economically, in the long run. We are currently engaged in registering all over twenty-one in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which hopes to seat delegates at the National Democratic Convention, and already has the backing of nine states. With the whites turning to Goldwater here, the Mississippi Democratic office seekers are in some trouble.

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Since Frazer has come back, he has been going out into the rural areas with four or five others, to get these Freedom registrations signed. We need 14,000 from Coahoma County to be significant in the up-coming County Convention. After that, the emphasis will again be placed on Voter registration and Freedom Day August 11th, with a march on the court house. If we land in jail, that will be the time I Martin Luther King is expected here August 5th. There will be a full week of rallies, etc.

A new source of strength to the movement has been the teams of lawyers, on the spot to give aid and counsel, and the Medical teams. (Not AMA sponsored, as Frazer first thought, but organized in the East from among doctors and dentists, nurses and men whose interest have impelled them to come, serving as drivers for the M.D's.) Some, such as Dr. Segal, a dentist here this week, have children of their own in the movement. Others are interested in finding out first hand about use of federal funds in hospitals that are segregated, or not fully available to Negroes. They are careful to practice no medicine here—but are exceedingly helpful as advisors to the staff, and reporters of conditions as they exist. In addition, they enrich the whole experience for those of us who get to know each other—briefly, but deeply. You see, we start, not as strangers with chit-chat, sparring to know what may be safe to discuss, but as new acquaintances already knowing some rather basic facts about each other. The motivation for our being here has to arise from rather strong beliefs held in common, about the dignity of all men, and the responsibility of the haves to help the have-nots. This makes it very easy for a liberal Jewish surgeon, a Zionist Jew salesman, world-traveled, an Iowa minister's wife, and a Negro nurse from a New York hospital to be friends in no time. Add to these the little colored lady, Annie Kilgore, with a saintly smile and a big heart, in whose clog-trap house Dr. Morris and Mr. Lobell, the driver, stayed—all with a common cause. It makes for some interesting experiences. Or take Gil Bond, colored trial lawyer and part-time law-school professor at Pace College, New York, a young Jewish lawyer and Frazer and me—we had a wonderful talk together—sitting on the front porch of the home where we stay—not daring to have the light on, for fear of endangering the people who live here, and who have made us feel so welcome and at ease in their nice home.

I could go on and on—about my visit with the Medical team to the Coahoma County Hospital, where chairs in both waiting rooms were removed when the Rights Bill passed, and restrooms locked up to discourage visitors or "test" groups—about the cruelty of the Clarksdale Police Chief, Ben Collins, who is one of the more notorious brutes of the state—about "Doc" Aaron Henry, owner of the Fourth Street Drug Store, state president of the NAACP and moving spirit behind the whole movement in Clarksdale and surroundings. A coin toss decided whether he or Medgar Evers would be shot (Evers was Executive or Field Secretary). His store has been bombed, his home shot into, his wife barred from teaching—yet he has been called "The freest man in Mississippi" (see Progressive magazine, Dec., 1963). It is he to whom we go to get answers to any and all questions about our jobs here. He is a good parliamentarian, a genial host, and a completely dedicated leader. He has a party each Friday night in his back yard for the workers.

I am sure as the days go by and we become even more involved, there will be an even longer and more interesting story to tell. It is hard to be involved and to find the time to write, both; but I mean to try, for I know when I come back I shall plunge into a quite different round of activity, and memories will fade if I do not sort out my impressions as I go, and try to get some meanings from them.

I would strongly recommend, if you are interested in this social problem at all, that you get the Signet paperback (75¢) The Negro Revolt, by Louis M. Lomax, and read it right away. You will find it most helpful in understanding what is happening in America today that is of vital and, we hope, lasting significance.

We haven't been sorry for a minute that we came. It is going to be one of the truly great experiences of our lives. We'd like to share it with many others. Write to us. We get mail at 429 Yazoo Street, Clarksdale, Mississippi.

July 30, 1964

You will be particularly interested in my visit to the Hospital, after Frazer left, since this was a contact with the white community, and somewhat enlightening.

Dr. Ellis, head physician, an excellent OB-Gyn man and a fine professional gentleman, steeped in the Mississippi mores, yet educated in California, with experience in Japan and some in the East—New Jersey, I think—showed us through the new hospital, built with federal funds through the Hill Burton Act, and completely segregated. He was justly proud of the facilities, but glossed over some obvious (to us) inequities, also the fact that all chairs were removed from both waiting rooms and rest rooms locked to discourage "testing". (Us: Dr. Norman Morris, surgeon at Beth Israel Hospital, New York, and a colored nurse from his hospital and me). He attempted to explain segregation as a "mores", with "no implication of inferiority"—yet admitted it would have to go.

There are many fascinating sidelights to this story, when his facilities (oriental rugs and rich furnishings in his plush offices) are compared to the one colored doctor's place, and the facts are known about use of midwives and lack of public health care available to the rural areas of the county. It's a different world, the white community, and they are still unaware of what's bound to change. Completely at home in his field, he was totally uninformed about the movement. He slipped out of his professional role to comment in the vernacular about interference from the (cuss word) Council of Churches sending these dirty young people down here. Up to that point he'd thought I was one of the Medical team, and I'd been quiet. Here I spoke, to assure him of the role of the ministers, and that the young people were not sent by the Council, nor were they dirty, and to ask his permission for Frazer to arrange a conversation with him later. He agreed, quickly becoming professionally polite again. Frazer hasn't yet done so, but he did have a talk with the Christian Church minister, whose people refused admission to two of our white kids, one a Disciple, from Indiana. The minister has resigned now—Ben Collins, the state's most notorious police chief is a member there. We're told we would be allowed to attend, but not to feel welcome. We aim to try, if only to get the feeling.

We are certainly welcome in the Negro community. We shall leave many real friends behind when the stay is over. And there will be many more scattered around the country, with whom we have had the joy of sharing a great experience.