

Mississippi Diary

The following are excerpts from letters written by William Meyers to his wife. The letters were written in the haste of driving through the state and in the brief moments of rest that Mr. Meyers and Clark Foreman had during their hectic visit to Mississippi. *Rights* is printing these excerpts in order that our readers can get a feeling of what a short trip through Mississippi is like. —*The Editors*

JULY 7

I must start by saying that the past 24 hours have been completely different from any other period I can remember. It started with vague anxieties, and was full of new and revealing experiences.

We got to New Orleans at about 11 a.m. and drove to see Ben Smith, one of the best lawyers I have met to date. He represents the Southern Conference Education Fund in their fight to recover their records from their local HUAC. I told him about people wanting to come down. Is their presence important? Could they meet whites willing to talk about paths to reconciliation? Could they serve a useful purpose? Answers were all yes.

Later we went to see Jim Dombrowski of SCEF and then had lunch with some young lawyers who have come to the south to help the civil rights workers. One was from Washington, D.C., and another from San Francisco. We discussed the problem of practicing in Mississippi for out-of-state lawyers, enlargement of jurisdiction of Federal Courts, and problems of coordination between groups and out-of-state lawyers. Since little was happening in New Orleans, we thought it best we get started to see what was going on in Mississippi.

We decided to go to the Gulf coast first. Trouble erupted there last night with the shooting of a woman after a SNCC meeting. We heard about it through Ben Smith, who had gotten a call early this morning to send someone to help the SNCC kids.

Our first stop was at Gulfport, where we met with a white liberal who runs a store in town. I was greatly surprised to find that he had the same thoughts about integration we had. He is a member of a Unitarian group who have pushed the concept of racial progress for a long time. Was he alone in his philosophy, isn't Mississippi a closed society? We asked. No, he answered. Should people come down to Mississippi to create mutual understanding? Would he or others talk with these people? Yes, he thought out loud. This is certainly a point to open up.

Our next stop was Biloxi, where we met with eight white southern students. This is a "white community project" sponsored by SNCC. Under leadership of two young men who have received scholarships from SCEF, this project has been set up to establish liaison between young white southern integrationists and their community. They are working with the churches, unions, and other young people. There are two projects like this; the other is in Jackson. Ole Miss has representation here too!

JULY 8

We started out this morning with seven kids from the white community projects. We continued our talks on how to help in their project while on our way to the Moss Point-Pascagoula COFO project. This was the scene of the shooting two nights ago. We first stopped at the COFO headquarters and spoke with numerous kids from the North working there, including some of our friends from New York. We discovered that four of the COFO kids had taken after the sniper's car the other night. We went to the hall which the segregationist had shot into and after talking with some more of the kids we discovered that they took everything in a very common-place manner — no discouragement over the shooting at all. After these conversations we drove back to Biloxi where we dropped off our passengers, and continued on our way to Hattiesburg.

The road rambles on for miles through unappetizing country — barren and hot, and vine covered for nearly 70 miles. We headed for the COFO headquarters to see if we could meet a young worker whom I had known. On the shoulders of kids like this one, the tremendous burden of social change apparently rests. Things were happening all over the place, and he felt he had to be everywhere now. A few hours before we arrived he was called by the local people whose children decided (without the backing of any organization) to integrate a local ice cream place — the woman owner pulled a gun. The kids were roughed up and several were temporarily jailed. Since they were juveniles they were quickly released, but a father of one of them wanted to prosecute the owner. One worker has spent more time in the sheriff's offices and jails in the past two weeks than he would have in a lifetime in New York. While we were there the two young lawyers that we had lunched with in New Orleans arrived to help launch a suit to move all the civil rights cases to the Federal Courts away from the jurisdiction of the local state courts. I had supper with some of the young kids from COFO who are working on voter registration, which means that they are can-

vassing the community house by house in an attempt to get Negroes to make a date to go to the Court House to register. My friend manages to get at least six or seven a day after talking to many times that number. Although there is apathy, fear, intimidation, these kids are making a real dent. All I can say is that all of the kids in this project at Hattiesburg have become dedicated to this cause in a way that really has to be seen to be believed. As of 8:30 this evening they were busy unloading and sorting books for freedom schools. These schools are a smash success. The Negro community is obviously hungry for education. Everyone we spoke to thought it would be a good idea for all who could make the trip to come down and help. Most felt that even if people could only spend a day or two helping to register Negroes it would be an important contribution.

We also spoke with a group on a project of the National Council of Churches in Hattiesburg. When we got to see the ministers we discovered that the co-leader of their group had just been arrested. Rev. Bob Beach from Illinois and the Rev. John Cameron, who ran for office on the Freedom Democratic Party, have been doing so effective a job that they were obviously going to be picked up by the local police on some kind of charge. The police arrested Rev. Beach on a phony charge concerning an overdrawn check, and he is presently in the County jail with his bail set at \$2,000. We began calling lawyers, and I suggested that the FBI be called, so I phoned Jackson. I told the agents that they ought to be up here investigating this incident and protecting people. But . . .

We made it to Jackson and are staying in the King Edward Hotel. We selected this hotel because it was integrated several days ago in accordance with the desire of the Jackson Chamber of Commerce. Yesterday the state legislature here in Jackson voted (70-4) to censure the Chamber.

The legislators who were living in this hotel had moved out. The police were at the desk when we registered for what purpose I am not certain. It appears as if the local businessmen are concerned about the "image" of the state and of Jackson.

Before we got here we decided to attend the arraignment of Rev. Beach. Clark and I decided that we would join the ministers (one of whom is Negro) in integrating the court room. The Supreme Court has ruled that segregation in a court room is unconstitutional. Instead of taking place in a court room, however, the proceedings were moved to the home of a Justice of the Peace. We had to drive almost out of town to get to his home. After the arraignment had taken place with no major incident (except the exclusion of all friends of the accused) I met with some of the local people, one of whom is married to a professor of a local college.

Over lunch we discussed at great length the treatment of dissenters in Mississippi, about the failure of the church, about Mississippi justice, etc. Everyone seemed to agree that some degree of Federal intervention is necessary — *excluding the use of troops*.

We left Hattiesburg and drove to Jackson, where we met with the COFO people and also with Mr. George Crockett, who runs the National Lawyers Guild project here. While we were with George Crockett a call came in from Yazoo City, where a COFO worker had just been arrested at 4:50 p.m., tried at 6:00 p.m., and fined \$125.00 for reckless driving.

He was in jail at the county seat. The caller said that if the fine was not paid by tomorrow at 10:00 a.m. the COFO worker would be transferred to the County Work Farm. George Crockett's assistant and two other lawyers immediately drove to Yazoo City to try to bail the young man out. The Quakers have projects down here in the summer too. A friend told us that a group of local white women are working in Jackson to attempt to create an atmosphere wherein integration can be accomplished without violence. Spent most of the day with COFO people, especially with a serious and brilliant organizer. Everyone down here is in favor of the bail fund concept, and we should get it in the works as soon as possible.

July 10

Today we are heading for Greenwood. Before we leave Jackson, Clark is busy writing a letter to Drew Pearson (*reprinted below*), who in a column this morning called on northerners to stop coming to the south to stir up trouble.

We stopped by the COFO office in Jackson before our drive to the delta and discussed what we could do to help. We get suggestions for people who might want to come down: working with the white community, helping register voters, being available to speak at meetings, providing specific skills (artists, for example, could help publicize the case of COFO), and helping in local freedom schools, theatre and literature groups.

After this conversation we left on our journey deep into the delta country. This is where cotton is still king. We arrived in Greenwood, the heart of the delta country, at about 1:00 p.m. It took us about half an hour to find the SNCC office because no one wanted to tell us where it was. This is a small mean-looking town, and my impression is completely poisoned by the fact that Lamar Beckwith (the man who was tried for the murder of Medgar Evers) drives around town selling manure. We saw his house, which looked like a small Charles Adams creation. I was also distressed by seeing five Negroes having to stand at the Court House in an attempt to register to vote. The authorities have taken out the phones and benches and closed the toilets in the Court House so that, if you are a Negro and want to vote, you have to stand for hours until some red-neck registrar is ready for you.

Although the Supreme Court has ruled that a six-grade education is tantamount to proving literacy, the registrars in Mississippi are still prone to refuse to allow Negroes to register, claiming "illiteracy."

Jackson Mississippi

July 10, 1964

Dear Drew Pearson:

Your open letter to Dick Gregory appeared in the Jackson Mississippi, CLARION-LEDGER this morning. The "Project Mississippi" is so important that I write at once to give you the views of this native Southerner.

I know you have taken many fine stands in the past for civil rights and democracy and therefore am all the more convinced that you have written without all the facts. In my lifetime I too have seen many changes and improvements in the South.

Most of my life has in fact been devoted to the understanding that Americans as a whole can only develop their destiny if they recognize the equal rights of Negroes to share that destiny with them.

I am convinced after traveling through Mississippi in the last few days that if we are to make the most of the "greatest document for Negro freedom since the emancipation proclamation," as you correctly describe the civil rights law, we must help the people in Mississippi who are trying to see that the law is enforced.

The fine young men and women from outside Mississippi who are working through COFO, NAACP, Hattiesburg Minister Project (National Council of Churches of Christ of the USA), Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee, National Lawyers Guild, and the Southern Conference Educational Fund, along with the visiting groups sponsored by the national YWCA, Friends and others are engaged in a vital fight for the preservation of our democracy.

They realize that they are running a great risk, as is everyone here who challenges the power structure of this closed society. They realize too the great risk that is run by the Negroes and white people of Mississippi who cooperate with them in trying to turn a document into a living reality. But they realize that without help from outside, the Civil Rights law is not likely to be enforced in Mississippi.

Now is the time for all the people of this country who want to bring democracy to Mississippi to find some way to help those who are trying to remove the vestiges of slavery. In my opinion, it will be best to come here first and see for themselves what needs to be done. If that is not possible they can at least contribute to one of the organizations which is fighting for all of us.

Yours sincerely,

Clark Foreman, Director

Emergency Civil Liberties Committee

Although we were going to go to Clarksdale and the county of Eastland, time was running out so we headed straight for Oxford. After arriving in Oxford we called Prof. _____ at Ole Miss and fortunately he was in. He invited us over to his house because Professor Silver was supposed to be on television that evening—from an educational station in Memphis.

We arrived in time for the program on TV but for some as yet unexplained reason the television station carried a program of Mozart rather than Professor Silver. The professor immediately called the TV station and protested as did various other professors here.

Talked with some of the students at Ole Miss and they had harrowing stories to relate. _____, a senior, had been beaten up twice in the past few months all because he had invited five Negro students from another local college to come to Ole Miss for a concert.

We talked for about 4 hours about the closed society and COFO, etc. They all greed that we have to continue to come down, to beat continuously until we remove the lid—if racism can be defeated in its bastion, Mississippi, then it will fall everywhere else. The professor gave it ten years at most—1,000 years less than it would have without the battle fought by the SNCC kids and all the others. And so to bed, exhausted, but unable to sleep—what, what can *we* do?

July 11

Seven hundred and ninety-two miles and five days later—we're on the plane to take us home. I thought I would get started on this letter sooner, but the passenger in the adjoining seat was, or I thought she was, a nice old lady who wanted to talk. A school teacher from Ardmore, Oklahoma, should, you might think, be a welcome relief from the ordinary Mississippian but this gal was not. She volunteered that Medgar Evers should have gone hunting or fishing on his time off—"had no business messin' around"—this among other gems. When she got off at Birmingham, I felt that although I had argued at length with her about integration, I didn't get too far.

We left Oxford early this morning and stopped at Canton for a few minutes to locate a white lawyer we had been told to look up. We called his office only to find he had left for Gulfport. I hope nothing is wrong and he gets back to his practice—as you know, there is no white lawyer who can handle a civil rights case here and still be allowed to practice. We did not stop at the COFO office in Canton because we were working on a tight schedule.

We got back to Jackson at about 11 a.m. First stop was the COFO office, where we saw Jim Forman sweeping up the floor—if any COFO kid feels anything has to be done, the theory is he should do it. No one apparently feels he has a right to request anyone else to do a particularly dangerous job, or for that matter, a job involving a necessary although unpleasant chore. We also met Michael Standard, who had just arrived to file the complaint of the Southerners, Governors, COFO etc., against Mississippi, White Citizen Council, KKK, Sheriff of Nebraska County, etc. This promises to be a case of major implications.

We then stopped to say so long to George Crockett and ironed out a few details on the bail fund. Next door the National Council of Churches were moving into their new headquarters—they had been thrown out of their quarters in Jackson State College. The city had ruled that no commercial(!) establishment had the right to be on campus, hence the move! We talked at some length about the bail problems; the Bob Beach incident had raised many questions. It seems that the Council did have an insurance carrier that wrote bonds until three months ago, when they were notified (orally I supposed) that no bonding company would be licensed to do business in Mississippi if it did business with civil rights defendants.

Incidentally the Rabbi whom we met at Hattiesburg several days ago was beaten very badly but not fatally, according to the papers—how many incidents are necessary to bring the country to its senses? The only crime of this Rabbi was to walk in the Negro area to encourage voter registration. And this is what all the shooting is about. The Mississippian white might say, and sincerely, that he's afraid of his Negro brother raping his wife or daughter—yet violence in this state occurs for only one reason. That reason is to thwart the Negro from exercising his right to vote so that he can determine what his fate will be. What will happen to Eastland and other racists in the delta area when 78 per cent of the population are finally allowed to exercise their prerogatives as free men?