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MKC

August 1, 1964

Dear Folks,

Sorry to have been so remiss in writing to you, but we have been quite busy establishing ourselves in various locations in the 1st Congressional District (new ones, I mean) and have all been working very hard to fulfill some sort of quota of registration forms for the Freedom Democratic Party. The hoped for state total is 100,000 forms, but with only about 3 weeks to go there are scarcely 70,000 in our Jackson (main) office. Getting the forms involves canvassing all the Negro houses in your area (town, city, rural county Etc.), explaining to the people that the FDP is a new party fighting for civil rights, explaining the convention challenge, and trying to persuade them that they don't have to be afraid of losing their jobs if they sign. Some days it's terribly disheartening -- most can't understand the "politics" of the party (precinct meetings, delegations, seating) but can understand the injustice of a system that gives Negroes less pay than whites working on the same job (for example). So perhaps 1 sign. In Columbus, where for some reason the people are more apathetic and afraid (for their jobs, not physically, I think) a good days work was 12 forms, in West Point, where I am now, I have gotten 29. The purpose of the form is to show the extent of voting discrimination in Mississippi, how many people would register if the form were simplified and did not require the interpretation of a section of the Mississippi Constitution (285 sections). Obviously the registrar can ask an interpretation of the section guaranteeing the Writ of Habeas Corpus and confidently expect the applicant to fail. When we get all these forms we will send a delegation up to the convention in Atlanta City and use our forms as the basis for our contention that the Mississippi Democratic Party represents only a few white citizens. The MDP is of dubious loyalty anyway, and the FDP supports the national platform. The MDP Convention was held a few days ago, but Goldwater support was so rampant that they adjourned until after the National Convention, hoping to have the best of both possible political worlds -- their delegation seated and the freedom to run an unpledged slate of electors, for Goldwater. If their delegation isn't seated, it would mean real competition for votes and patronage within the state. Right now, throughout the state, the FDP is holding precinct, county, and district conventions, in order to prepare for a legitimate challenge. Naturally the FDP is open to whites too, but for obvious reasons we canvass only in Negro neighborhoods.

I mentioned that we have branched out from Columbus -- into the cities of West Point, Starkville, Aberdeen, and Tupelo, leaving a smaller group in Columbus, which had been the only project in the First Congressional district (Mississippi has five). It certainly was the most dangerous district, but little work had been done here, and we had to open up new counties in the area. It doesn't look like I'll be going to Natchez. The town is practically run by the KKK and our

informants tell us that everyone is armed to the teeth -- submachine

guns, hand grenades. Its the depot for illegal arms entering Mississippi and only Negro staff members work there, and leave at night. Of course a white voter registration worker, at this time, wouldn't have a chance.

Natchez is in the southwest, in the 3rd Congressional District. Getting back to West Point, we arrived here about 2 and a half weeks ago. It's smaller than Columbus. Our main contact, a man named Jackson, runs a cleaners and is well respected because he speaks his mind and is a registered voter. We got a church to let us hold meetings and Freedom School (most won't, afraid that they'll be bombed) and found rooms at Mary Holmes Junior College, a predominantly Negro, Presbyterian school on the outskirts of town. Our response was overwhelming -- when compared to Columbus. People are still afraid for their jobs, but on the whole they more willingly sign, more often, than Columbus. The reason, I believe, is that there is a greater feeling of solidarity (also, perhaps, well-being), a greater willingness to step out. In any case, the first day we canvassed the main street in the Negro section and, because in a group if one signs, most sign, we did very well. Naturally, after a while one has to canvass door to door, house to house, shack to shack, explaining, questioning, cajoling, and repeating. Most of the time you harp on education and jobs, and if it's an old person, on relief (\$50 per month). The hope for a better future ("I'm too old, I'm going to die soon") or a better future for children ("But I don't have any kids" or "They're all up North.") or the need for everyone to support change in the system ("God will find a way, the day will come when God wants it." "When?" "You got to let time alone. God will find a way.") And sometimes I give up, and leave a form for them if they decide to sign -- knowing that they won't. Or at the next house the woman says she'd like to talk it over with her husband (at work) and I leave a form, knowing I probably won't get back. Or stop at one house and find someone who not only nods, but says "That's true" or interrupts with complaints of his own and who signs and maybe takes one for his wife, and a few for his mother and father -- and who will probably return them signed. The most prosperous houses -- strictly middle class suburban by Northern standards -- mean probable good luck, with one major exception. Any teacher in the schools is absolutely unsignable -- they have to list all associations they belong to before they get their yearly contract, and are so fearful of losing their jobs -- and being black-listed -- that they unanimously refuse. Agreement, yes. Support, no. A teaching salary means too much, not that it's that high, but it means a manageable existence economically. The worst houses -- shacks -- imagine what you want. The only thing I can say is that no picture, photograph especially but also written, can accurately portray the dirt, the heat, the resignation. The nearest analogy I can draw is imagining that I lived near the sea, and was always tracking sand in the house, in the beds -- that's the feeling of discomfort I get, but it doesn't begin to describe the poverty. And this is the way people live. That's why teachers don't sign. And that's why it's hard to go through the summer, canvassing, without developing an abruptness, maybe even hardness, to people's problems. The same experience so often repeated, the same story, same situation, same smell, same house, the same purpose -- to get a form signed and get on to the next one -- make you search for an easier goal than changing the system and the lives of these people, a more satisfying one because this one won't be achieved. So the figure 100,000 and the idea of the FDP and the Convention challenge draw me on because when I leave that house I may add one or two

more forms toward that goal which represents so much more.

The police could scarcely have been expected to welcome our arrival. For days we were followed by the police, who often cruised by as we were talking to people on their porches. Then they began to photograph us, with movie cameras, wherever we happened to be standing or sitting. For example, I happened to be sitting in front of a cafe and the police drove up. One got out, with a movie camera and started to shoot. Having already been photographed that morning I turned around. The man got in the car, it drove up a little way, and he got out to get me from a different angle. I turned. The man got in the car and it drove around the block. I sat down. Back it came. At that point I wasn't going to make an issue of it, so I sat there, facing the street, finishing a cup of soda. The policeman got out, walked into the middle of the road, about twenty feet from me, and shot fully three minutes of me drinking the soda, got back in the car, and drove off. The people sitting near me were amused, but not really frightened. In Starkville the police chief threatened to kill the man who was housing volunteers, regularly harangued and insulted the volunteers on the street. One man paid a Negro in Starkville to beat up Steve Frazier on the street, and Steve escaped with a blow on the back before the man was subdued. In West Point a car of men told a few workers they'd be dead the next day and we have been followed by a gang of men the last few days. As we were leaving town to go to Columbus we noticed a car trailing us. We made some turns and so did it. Finally we drove to the police station and, since they are hoping to make West Point an example of "lawful" control of CR workers, they gave us an escort out of town. The same car followed us yesterday as we were canvassing, but goes to no pains to conceal the fact that they trail us.

Somewhat heartened by the first response of the community to our presence, we decided to hold a rally to explain why we were here and to propagandize the program. We handed out few leaflets, posted a few, and had an amazing turnout of over 200. The rally went off extremely well, the speeches were inspiring, and we got lots of forms filled out. The police stood by outside, directing traffic and taking the license plate numbers of the cars of those who went in. We later learned that the police had stopped several groups of whites in cars, carrying loaded shotguns and pistols -- and were generally appreciative of the way they handled the protection of the meeting. The editor of the local paper, a staunch Goldwaterite segregationist, in his daily column urged (I couldn't decide whether he was tongue in cheek, but couldn't really believe he was) that parents, citing the above example, tell their children to leave enforcing the law to police officials.

We have few illusions about the difficulty of forming a local self-sustaining movement. In Canton and Hattiesburg where the movement has been for a long time, local people do much of the work -- forming executive boards to direct boycotts of downtown stores, picketing, Freedom Days in which large numbers go to the courthouse to attempt to register, and canvassing (In Hattiesburg they have over 100 block captains and are thus able to do a really thorough job of Freedom Registration, unlike here where about 10 people cover one town, and are lucky to get to all the houses, much less back to them). It is something to reach for, but you've got to break into the feeling that people have against stepping out. First you let them know you're here, holding meetings, familiarizing them with you, then you can make tentative steps toward organization. Saturday, with high hopes, we had a precinct meeting, to begin the process that will end at the convention. It rained, and people seemed more reluctant to come to a meeting under the scrutiny of the police in the daytime

Freedom Registration. Unlike here where about 10 people cover one town, and are lucky to get to all the houses, much less back to them). It is something to reach for, but you've got to break into the feeling that people have against stepping out. First you let them know you're here, holding meetings, familiarizing them with you, then you can make tentative steps toward organization. Saturday, with high hopes, we had a precinct meeting, to begin the process that will end at the convention. It rained, and people seemed more reluctant to come to a meeting under the scrutiny of the police in the daytime

was the first political experience for those who attended, and we were sure that the job of explaining to them nominations, delegations, resolutions, ~~and~~ would be impossibly complicated. It was tremendously interesting to watch and indicative, I think, of the innate political nature of all men. Withing ten minutes they were completely at ease and had elected a chairman, secretary, and ten delegates to the district convention in Tibbee. The ~~half~~ delegates were teachers, housewives, packinghouse workers, a toy factory worker, in short, a genuine crossection of the community, an "aristocracy" of merit and understanding. The county and district conventions were held at Tibbee, a small community eight miles from West Point. The delegates gathered from all over the First Congressional District, but really only from the five counties in which we had projects and could hold precinct meetings. If all counties had been represented there would have been about 255 delegates -- 10 delegates and five alternates from each of 17 counties. As it was we had stragglers from counties in which we had no projects, so they got votes too. When the delegations got there we first held a precinct meeting for some Tibbee residents who showed up. Then all the counties had county meetings where the precincts in each county gathered and elected delegates to the district caucus. Since Clay had two precinct meetings (West Point and Tibbee) they gathered to elect 4 delegates and 4 alternates to the distict meeting. We had informed the county police that we were holding the meeting and there were about 10 cars of them parked across from the church or down the road. Since most people were coming as elected delegates this didn't serve to intimidate anyone. One worker heard one cop ~~ask another cop~~ ask another cop, "Where are you from?" At the Clay County meeting we elected 2 teachers, the owner of a Cleaners, and a carpenter-farmer as the delegates. Resolutions had been passed at the precinct meetings. Most dealt with equal job and educational opportunities, also with street paving and repair, enforcement of the Civil Rights Bill, and support of the National Democratic Party. Some of the more specific suggested resolutions ~~which~~ protested against the closing of Negro schools at 1:00 during cotton picking season (so the children can pick with their parents) and expressed support of unionization in order to get equal wages for Negro and white. There were several attempts to unionize Bryan Bros. Meat Packing plant, the largest employer in town, in the last 10 years. The first attempts failed because the voting was done openly, so anyone who wanted the union was afraid to vote for it. The last, a ~~secret~~ secret vote, failed because the management offered an employees's barbecue and a 5 cent an hour wage increase. Most people regret not having a union know, ~~and~~ so most of the packinghouse workers in West Point can appreciate our position that everyone should sign in order to support the FDP. Anyway....about 200 people, including SNCC staff workers, showed up for the meeting. Of course there was lots of singing. The main speaker was none other than Bob Moses, the leader of the Mississippi Summer Project, who delivered a characteristically soft-spoken talk on the FDP. I won't use superlatives to describe him -- when he was introduced as the #1 Civil Rights Leader in the Nation I could feel him wince, even though I couldn't see him, and when everyone stood and applauded, with an embarassed, pained, happy expression, he tried to get them to sit down. At the meeting (district) immediately following, 4 delegates were elected to the National Convention, 3 members to the State FDP Executive Board, and one Presidential elector. The meeting is really a caucus, and all the delegates elected in the county meetings, who vote for the Exec Board etc. at the district meetings (5) go to the State Meeting in Jackson, on August 6, where they choose more delegates to the National Convention. Bob seemed to think that Johnson has agreed to support the seating of the MDP in return for getting on the ballot in Mississippi -- support being too much to ask and his fear that if the FDP is seated he might lose the rest of the South. What a pity politics in the USA ~~is~~ not a trifle more moral! In any case, I will probably be going to the State Convention in Jackson and will let you know what happens.

My trial for trespassing has been transferred into the federal court, or

at least the plea for transfer is pending. There are so many cases on the docket that I haven't the faintest idea when the transfer petition will be heard, much less the trial date set. I'm confident that in a fair court the charges against us will be dismissed

some of the bail money back since \$400 per charge is unreasonably high.

While on the subject of money.... SNCC doesn't have much (if any). Although the Summer Project is sponsored by COFO, composed of many organizations, SNCC is running the organization at the grass roots level. This means that in every district but one SNCC staff workers are doing the VR work, canvassing, directing, organizing, and are getting beaten and put in jail. The Fourth Congressional District is worked by CORE, and Micky Schwerner was a CORE staff worker. Nevertheless, all the other organizations in COFO (NAACP, SCLC, CORE) except SNCC have regular or semi-regular means of obtaining money. CORE is furnishing the expense money for all the delegates to the National Convention. SNCC is, as the name indicates, a student organization, and although most of the summer volunteers pay their own way, there are staff workers to be paid, office supplies to be bought, offices to be rented, gas for cars to be paid for, and all the other things to be paid for that make the Summer Project run. We are dependent upon donations. We need money. Every staff member receives the munificent sum of \$9.64 --- every two weeks, when they get that. The Summer Project started, got off the ground, because of one donation, a private one, of \$90,000 --- if that person had not decided to give that money there would have been no Summer Project. I urge you all, if you can, to give money to SNCC, and by the most direct way possible, by sending money to the Jackson Office, ~~122~~ 1017 Lynch St. Please make checks payable to SNCC. Talk to your friends about us, try to organize parties. Remember that the project does not end this summer. Staff workers and many volunteers are staying on to do the same work they are now doing, and it may be harder because public attention will not be focused on Mississippi all year around, and resistance may be stronger. If you feel that you cannot afford to donate some money you might consider loaning money to SNCC for bail --- workers are always being put in jail on some charge, and it takes \$50, \$100, \$500 to get them out. You will get the money back when the case is finally decided; it may take a few years but it is as good as a bank, except that it doesn't pay money interest. If you can arrange a bail fund with friends, you might contact the Jackson office, and they could contact you when it's needed.

I was sorry to hear that a SNCC volunteer was killed in a car accident, and another was injured, a few days ago.

I have just received word that two SNCC workers from Columbus are in jail, one on charges of improper tags on the car he was driving (\$300 bail) and another on a charge of aiding and abetting (\$100). The latter had registered the car under his name and since it was one of the brand new cars bought for SNCC for the projects it had only temporary tags, which were unfortunately a few days out of date. That's what I mean about needing bail, since their arrest means the cancellation of plans for covering the rural districts of Clay County today, and probably of the other counties during the week.

I'm fine, and acquiring a bit of a tan, although I hope you won't think from lying out in the sun. I'm well-fed, too, since I take meals at Mary Holmes. Doing lots of reading, and just finished Black Bourgeoisie, a really important book about what happens to the small group of Negroes who do become well-to-do, how their values are distorted by self-hate and a desire to imitate white society. It's by E. Franklin Frazier, a Negro sociologist. Also reading some historical novels, which, despite my interest in history, I had never taken up before.

Much love,

Jel