

August 5, 1964

I have been spending parts of the last two days in the darkroom. There is air-conditioning piped into this loft when "Doc" Henry thinks about it. Right now he apparently hasn't. Some feature story writers have been making a story about one of our girls, and would I develop his pictures? Thus, I got into it and have been doing some of my own as well.

All afternoon yesterday, all night, and all morning, we were without our car. I had loaned it to one of the more responsible young men to drive to Marks, in Quitman county, to do some Freedom Registrations. I had gone there the day before myself—the first break into that town.

In the afternoon we heard that Lou was arrested, the lawyers who went to bail him out—one of them was arrested, too. That part was true, about the lawyer. We had reports all into the evening. We walked to our house and called back periodically but no one could tell us anything. So we went to bed about 11:30 with visions of a crashed up car or sabotage or what not.

(When I think about any "progress" for the summer, I get discouraged. Also, somewhat upset about the morale of the group, until this morning, when a new purpose and rapport began to jell. Tomorrow I will go to Jackson, to the State Convention of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, also, privately to visit with the NCC. As for the week-end, we don't yet know whether to go to Nashville, 300 miles, Memphis, 75 miles, or stay in Clarksdale, even to preach.)

It is now Wednesday noon, and still no car. I understand it is safe at the moment, however. But it is a long story of Mississippi Police State. As I get the story, Lou Sitzer, whom I gave permission to drive the car in Freedom Registrations at Marks, was stopped and "arrested", later released. It is standard procedure in such times to telephone back to Clarksdale for legal help and bail bond cash. A lawyer team consisting of a Mr. Kassel from New York and a law student, accompanied by Yvonne Kline and Lafayette Surney, went to Marks. They were met by a local policeman who was interrogating Lou and the others in my car. While they were there, a second carload of registration workers drove up, immediately to be questioned by the police. The lawyer joined the group, to ask if they were being arrested. The policeman ordered him to leave the group. When he refused, the police cursed and threatened him. Mr. Kassels asked if the officer was threatening him, at which time the police grabbed him and pushed him backwards into the squad car, striking his head on the door, requiring medical attention, and kicking him in the groin. Dropping any formal charges against the volunteer workers, the lawyer was arrested, charged with interfering with an officer, breach of the peace, and resisting arrest.

Occupants of all three cars were escorted to the Quitman County Courthouse. The registration forms in their possession were confiscated, the names noted for reprisal action, jobs, intimidation, etc. Eventually, all the persons were released, Mr. Kassels on his own recognizance, and ordered to leave town. By this time a crowd of local persons, 25 or 30, had assembled, pickup trucks, shotguns, etc.

The cars became separated. Two of them made their way to Clarksdale in safety. The others were forced to play hide and seek for their lives in the Negro community of Marks, dodging into back alleys, calling long distance to Clarksdale and dashing on again. At Clarksdale, an all-night alert was posted in Freedom House, and at the home of "Doc" Aaron Henry, local druggist and leader in the NAACP. They called for protection of the Highway Patrol and the FBI for the young people stranded in Marks. The FBI agent in Clarksdale refused to help them; he wasn't a law enforcement officer. He had called the officers at Marks, to be assured the kids were in no danger. He was not concerned that the very "officers" making such assurances were part of the threatening crowd. Finally he hung up, upbraiding the callers for interfering with his sleep. Mr. Kassels called the FBI the most ineffective law enforcement officers in the U.S. I asked him if he had that feeling before coming to Mississippi, and he said no.

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Finally, about 11:30 p.m. the kids decided to leave Marks and come to Clarksdale, only to find a road block and the familiar gang of white youth and pick-up trucks lined up awaiting them. So they turned around in the highway and drove at high speed to Batesville, finally elluding their pursuers.

Here at Clarksdale, the local police came to the Freedom House office to warn those who were keeping vigil that if they left the office they would be in violation of the curfew!

At present writing the car has still not been returned to Clarksdale, the brave Civil Rights Workers believing they simply must return to Marks for an hour or so for the sake of the morale of the Negroes there, to register more local residents in the Freedom Democrat party. (Time out for a Staff Meeting).

The car came back—flat tire in Batesville, occuring during the night—if it had gone down during the chase, good-night!

The staff decided the Marks situation so bad that only experienced Negro SNCC workers should attempt it for awhile. They are going in, to "break" it, as they have done in numerous other tough situations. There will be a mass meeting Monday night in Marks. Some of the local ministers—Negro—are very much in favor. Psychologically the town is considered ripe.

I started to write this piece to Laird and Evelyn, then I thought I would telephone it to the R&T as an example of Mississippi Police State. Then I settled down, and thought you might like to see it, pass it around, then save it for my return.

This is the first such experience the staff has had this summer, and you can see the group come to life. Just like veteran soldiers, they grow fat and lazy, but look out when things begin to happen.

—Frazer