

[1964]

MISSISSIPPI SUMMER PROJECT

Experiences and Observations

By

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(The following is a day by day account of experiences and observations during a week spent in Mississippi for the period of July 26-August 2, 1964, by Miss Mary Lou Pettit, the Reverend Eugene Van Kranenburgh and the Reverend Albert C. Rowander of the Stewardship Council Staff of the United Church of Christ.)

Sunday, July 26

Arrived at the Philadelphia International Airport to discover that I had left my tickets behind. Delta Air Lines quickly prepared a new ticket and Miss Pettit and I departed at 1:30 p.m. We arrived in Atlanta for a brief stopover and saw Senator Talmadge of Georgia looking fit and fighting. He was easily identified since his name was prominently displayed on the hand-tooled leather brief case he carried. Atlanta was celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of Atlanta and Confederate flags were everywhere on display. Upon leaving, the airline representative said somewhat menacingly: "I hope you enjoy Jackson."

Stopped briefly in Birmingham and were impressed with the number of industrial plants surrounding the center of the city. It exuded an air of prosperity. Arrived in Jackson at 6:30 p.m. and went directly to the Sun-o-Sand Motor Hotel where we met the Reverend Eugene Van Kranenburgh who appeared shortly thereafter having come by train from Chicago. Miss Pettit and I walked into the center of the city and were impressed with how quiet and deserted the streets were. While having dinner at the motel next to a table of 20 white high school young people, four Negroes came in to the room for dinner and a noticeable silence fell. However, after a short time conversation was resumed and no unpleasant incidents occurred.

July 27

Went to the Minister's Project Office at 507½ N. Parrish Street located in the Negro section (the office had previously been located at the foreboding address of 1017 Lynch Street). The Reverend Warren McKenna of the National Council of Churches was in charge and briefed us on the purposes and program of the Mississippi Summer Project. He stated that the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) sets the policy and determines the program and that the National Council of Churches provides personnel and training. He outlined some of the duties as helping in voter registration, counselling with the college students, assisting in Freedom schools, calling on white ministers and other citizens and securing registrants for the Freedom Democratic Party (the latter is a new political party designed to supplant the present Democratic party and to work for a strong Civil Rights Program in Mississippi). He also spoke of the work that the volunteer lawyers and doctors are doing. It was pointed out that doctors from out of the state can not practice themselves but have to work through resident doctors. If a civil rights worker is injured all that an outside doctor can do is try to get a resident doctor to treat the worker. Similarly, lawyers from outside the state are barred from representing the civil rights workers in the state courts. Mr. John O'Neill of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) gave a vivid demonstration of how one should defend himself under attack by the use of nonviolent means. We listened to a remarkable taped speech by the Reverend Vincent Harding of the Fellowship House, Mennonite, from Atlanta, Georgia. He reviewed the history of the past treatment of Negroes and spoke eloquently of the purpose and philosophy of the present movement for civil rights.

Later in the afternoon we were informed that our assignment would be Hattiesburg. Our group included the following:

- John Crossley (Professor of Religion, Hastings College, Hastings, Nebraska, Presbyterian).
- Richard Couch (Professor of Ethics and Systematic Theology, Union Theological Seminary, Buenos Aires, Brazil, Presbyterian).
- Jerome Lipnic (Rabbi Adath Jeshurun Synagogue, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Conservative Jew).
- George C. Pontikes (Lawyer, Chicago, Illinois, Orthodox).
- Theodore O. Fisher (Minister, Northwood Christian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana, Disciples of Christ).
- Paul Moore (Suffragan Bishop, National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., Episcopal).
- F. W. Wiegman, (Minister, Downy Christian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana, Disciples of Christ).
- Michael Starr (Law student, Stamford, Connecticut).
- George H. Kelm (Professor of Theology, Pittsburgh Seminary, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Presbyterian).
- Citso Morikawa (Secretary of Division of Evangelism, American Baptist Convention, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania).
- Jeffrey Smith (Minister, looking for church, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Southern Presbyterian).
- Rowland Bernstaine (Professor of Psychology, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut).
- John Baumgartner (Minister, Warren United Church of Christ, Warren, Michigan, United Church of Christ).

Paul Moore insisted on renting a car and we drove without incident to Hattiesburg arriving around 9:00 p.m. I had urged that we go by bus, however it was fortunate perhaps that we didn't since the group assigned to Canton went by bus and, as a result, had a rather unpleasant experience.

Upon arriving in Canton, there were 50 to 60 "red-necks" waiting for them at the terminal. The car in which they were to be taken to COFO headquarters was blocked and they had to sit in the car surrounded by red-necks looking at them threateningly for nearly two hours before the police arrived. Police had been notified of the danger of violence but it took that long for them to appear. Fortunately a group of Negroes arrived on the scene and remained until the police came.

We reported to the Minister's Project Headquarters located at 507 Mobile Street in the Negro section. This is under the direction of the Reverend Robert Beech of the National Council of Churches. The building is owned by a Negro who runs a radio and television repair shop in half of it. We were assigned beds consisting of springs and mattresses placed on the floor. Although living conditions wouldn't compare to the Waldorf Astoria they were adequate with two toilets, shower and coke machine. Our meals were secured in neighboring Negro restaurants bearing such exotic names as Whirly Bird and The Green Door. Miss Pettit stayed in the homes of Negro families and joined us in the Minister's Project Headquarters each morning.

July 21

Spent the day in Eaton precinct, working part of the time at the Morning Star Baptist Church on registration cards and calling in Negro homes in the afternoon to talk to the people about Voter Registration and to have them fill out the application form to become a member of the Freedom Democratic Party. Almost invariably we were invited into the homes and shown every courtesy. The people were well informed about the Project and spoke appreciatively of the Civil Rights Program. One elderly Negro man informed me that he had been laid off after working 18 years for a furniture factory because of poor eyesight and he was not given compensation

or retirement pay. His wife works and now supports the family. The houses are poor but neat. There are no sidewalks and few street lights. The supplies for the stores come from white merchants. There are lots of children. I was most impressed by a young Negro boy age 14 who accompanied us on our visits in the homes. The college students are a dedicated group and work hard at their task. In the evening we returned to the Minister's Project and I was entranced with the sparkling discussion held by two of the lawyers on the merits of Reinhold Niebuhr's theology.

July 29

Reported to the Mt. Zion Baptist Church and spent the day calling in the homes of Negro people. Among those visited was the Reverend Dr. Sherman Haywood Cox, Seventh Day Adventist, Negro minister. He was strikingly good looking, alert and genuinely concerned with civil rights. He said that he served six churches between Hattiesburg and Gulfport, that he preaches twice each Saturday in different churches and is presently conducting a revival nightly in a tent in Hattiesburg. He indicated that the police and certain "red-necks" had driven by the tent and glared at him but so far had not created any difficulty. I later called on Mrs. Jake Hawthorne who said that she had originally intended not to get involved in the Civil Rights Movement. However, when she saw the college students parading around the court house in Hattiesburg in the rain demonstrating for the right of Negroes to register that she joined the marchers with her little girl and has been very active ever since. She said that her home had been used for meetings even though it meant taking certain risks. She told me the story of her husband who some months earlier had lost his job. He had gone to the court house to pay his poll tax and after waiting over two hours, had finally left. When he returned to his

job, his white employer informed him that it had been reported that he had been seen in the court house. The employer told him that, if he were ever seen there again for any reason whatever, he would not only be fired but "something worse" might happen to him. When he told his wife what had happened, she insisted that they get in the car and go talk with the employer about this threat. They did so and, when the employer refused to back down, Mr. Hawthorne asked for his "time" and quit. They had to manage on Mrs. Hawthorne's meager salary for several months but recently Mr. Hawthorne was fortunate in finding other employment. Mrs. Hawthorne was recently injured as a result of a fall while going to church but, despite the pain she was suffering she said that she would come to a meeting at the Mt. Zion Church relating to a discussion of the Freedom Democratic Party if I would arrange transportation and help "ease" her into the church. She was later unable to come because of a relapse in her condition.

One of the strange anomalies of this experience is that I felt absolutely secure in the Negro communities and quite the reverse in the presence of Southern whites. A number of white citizens driving by glared at us but there were no unpleasant incidents. One of the Negro ladies called on replied when asked if she was a citizen of Mississippi, "as much as I can be." Most of the homes we called in had television sets and these seemed to be on most of the time. In walking through the area we came to a Roman Catholic Church that had had the parish house burned a month earlier because it was assumed that the building was being used for civil rights meetings. The sanctuary was miraculously saved but there is an ugly black scar on the outside rearwall. We had dinner in a Negro restaurant for 41¢ which consisted of what is called a "dressed hamburger." It was not filet mignon but it was edible.

The meeting at the church in the evening was attended by approximately 40 persons and officers were elected for what is to be called the United "Freedom/Citizens Organisation." The temporary Chairman began the meeting by saying, "Mississippi is my home. I don't want to live any where else. I have no other place to go and no one is going to drive me out." The meeting was well planned and conducted and there appeared to be a genuine determination to continue the Civil Rights Program after the Summer Project is over.

July 30

Went to the county court house in Hattiesburg to meet the county clerk, Mr. Lynn. I had seen him on television some months previously and he had been depicted as one of the most formidable obstructionist in allowing Negroes to register. He is well over six feet in height and must weight approximately 300 pounds. When I walked into his office, I introduced myself and extended my hand. He did not seem eager to take it but as I drew near he finally clasped my hand at the last moment and I vigorously shook his hand and said that I was delighted to make his acquaintance. I asked for a copy of the registration form and the laws of the state that voters are required to interpret but he informed me that these were not available to be taken from the court house. There were no chairs in the office and one elderly Negro lady was trying to fill out the form while we talked. She seemed awfully small and brave in that setting. There were two drinking fountains outside, one for "colored" and one for whites. There were several pieces of literature in a rack outside the door, most of them written by a white minister. One of them was entitled "John F. Kennedy, a Type of the Anti-Christ." This was quite typical. The stores in the town were attractive and

people are friendly except when they see you working with a Negro or know who you are. The police were more restrained and less belligerent than had been the case several months earlier.

Later in the day I called on Harold Meye in his well furnished home and learned that he is a registered voter and works in the local pecan factory. He said that there were about 40 Negroes working there and that they have a "gentlemen's agreement" that they will all quit if any one of them is fired for trying to register.

As I was walking along a dusty road with a young Negro boy in an isolated section, I heard a truck approach. It finally slowed down and pulled along side where we were walking. There were two dirt farmers in the front seat and seven or eight high school boys sitting on a pile of sand in the rear. We went along together 20 or 30 yards while they glared at me. They finally pulled on ahead and, when they came to a Stop Sign a short distance further on, the high school boys let out a series of Rebel yells. I expected trouble but they finally drove on and I didn't see them again - much to my relief.

In working with college students I am impressed with their dedication and zeal but, at the same time, I am a bit disturbed at their lack of security at some points. They tend to be a bit jealous about program and welcome the help of ministers but do not want to be told how things ought to be done. We had an excellent meeting in the home of a Negro family talking about civil rights and making plans for the year ahead. The two little Negro girls in the home had probably not had white visitors before and they were somewhat cautious about making up, even as they were insatiable curious. One of them finally took my hand and before long both of them were sitting on my lap. As we were leaving a white announcer on the radio read a statement by a successful Negro business man urging all civil rights workers to leave the state and charging that the "agitators from the North" had lost the Negroes thousands of jobs.



July 31

Assigned to the True Light Missionary Baptist Church and spent the morning calling on Negro families to talk to them about the Freedom Democratic Party and Voter Registration. I found much more apathy in this area. Many promised to come to the Freedom School the following week but on checking our cards I discovered that they had promised to attend previously but had not done so. One man actually showed some resentment and hostility and clearly indicated that he wanted to have no part in the Project. He has a job that brings him in an adequate income and apparently doesn't want to jeopardize this. I had the impression that many Negroes are so used to agreeing with white persons and promising to do whatever they ask that it has become a ritual without any serious intent to perform. I called on a Miss Betty Jane Townes who works in a laundry five days a week, eight hours per day, and receives \$28.00 a week minus Social Security weekly deduction of \$2.00. She has six children but is not married. It is not uncommon to find mothers with a number of children and no father in the home. I spoke with a Mr. Joseph Salters who calls himself "the oldest paper boy in Hattiesburg." He said that he did such a good job that the Hattiesburg American finally gave him a cloth paper bag to carry his papers in. He is 78 years of age and walks five miles a day delivering papers for which he receives \$40.00 per month. He does not receive any pension payments or relief support. He reported that he had been to the court house to fill out the form to register but had never been informed as to whether he had

passed or not. He has been a member of the True Light Church for 54 years. When filling out the Freedom Registration Form at the point where the question was asked whether he was a citizen, he wrote in a firm hand "Yes Sir!" The two Negro boys who accompanied me on my rounds said that the police didn't allow them to play on the school grounds during the summer months, even though their parents pay taxes for the support of the schools.

In the afternoon, Miss Pettit and I drove to Gulfport and Biloxi with three lawyers. The beach in front of the towns stretches for 25 miles and is manmade, having been paid for out of public funds. The area is known as "the French Riviera of America." There were few people using the beach. Negroes are excluded. The latter live in poor shacks back of the white sections in an area that is hot dusty and sandy. We visited the Back Bay Mission in Biloxi which is supported by the Board for Homeland Ministries. Last fall the Executive Committee of the NAACP met at the mission and, as a result hundreds of white residents pelted the building with rocks and broke most of the windows. There have been several other occurrences in which passing cars have thrown rocks at the building. Because of the expense of repairing the damage, the windows are boarded up good and the doors are reinforced with barricades. The present Director, Jack Argood, feels that conditions are improving and that the mission will eventually gain acceptance, if not enthusiastic support. We had a fine sea food dinner at the Harbor Light Restaurant in Biloxi overlooking the bay. It is interesting

to observe that while Mississippi is "dry" most restaurants permit a customer to bring their own liquor. The restaurants provide glasses and the ice.

The lawyers told us the story of Milton Hancock who has been in jail in Hattiesburg for more than three months. He is a resident of Forest County and filled out the Registration Form to register. One of the questions asked was whether he had ever sought "to obtain goods under false pretense." He replied in the negative, not thinking that this would apply to a check that he had written some months earlier when his account was overdrawn. This fact was discovered by the authorities and he was charged with perjury. He is being held on \$5,000.00 bond for which no Bonding Company will put up the money. His case has been moved to the Federal Courts but there is no immediate prospect that it will come to trial due to legal technicalities involved. The lawyers were of the opinion that he might be incarcerated for a considerable period of time. His real crime is that he was working in the Voter Registration under the Council of Federated Organizations.

Upon returning to Hattiesburg the following incidents were reported. Mr. Van Kranenburgh asked a young Negro boy accompanying him whether he believed in nonviolence. He received a reply "I believe in it when I am on duty but not during off-hours and on Sunday!" We heard of a Negro woman who made a purchase in a department store from a white salesgirl and signed her name to the charge slip prefixing it with Mrs. The salesgirl crossed

out the Mrs. saying that only a lady could sign her name in that way. The Negro woman after being told that she could only use her first and last names asked to see the manager, a Jewish merchant. After listening to the complaint he ordered the salesgirl to write in "Mrs." before the customer's name or face immediate dismissal, adding that he had suffered too much from discrimination himself not to want to help others. The salesgirl burst into tears, talked about the sanctity of white womanhood and claimed that she could not bring herself to recognize a Negro as an equal. When the manager remained firm, however, she wrote in "Mrs." on the slip, promising to raise no further questions on the matter in the future and apparently survived the experience without impairment to her soul.

August 1

The day was used in walking around town, sending cards and generally recovering from the intense and exhausting experiences of the week. We drove to Jackson later in the day and checked in at the Sun-n-Sand Motel for the night.

August 2

Miss Pettif and I secured a ride with the Reverend Warren McKenna who drove us to Tougaloo College. We attended Bible Class and Church. The chaplain, Reverend Ed King, who has been active in the Civil Rights Program and has experienced physical violence took us about the campus. We were impressed with the competence and dedication of his leadership and with the quality of the students and the attractiveness of the campus. We were privileged to have Sunday dinner with Dr. and Mrs. Adam D. Beittel. He is the president of the college and is a distinguished educator and

administrator. I asked him if he knew of an instance where a white person had been arrested and adjudged guilty for a crime against a Negro person and he said we could not recall any such instance. He further added that it was almost unheard of for one Negro person to be arrested for a crime against another Negro person. I told him that he raised the question that I had read in several places that Mississippi has the lowest crime rate in the United States. He agreed that the reason for this is that crime against Negroes seldom enter in the police records or gets into the courts. He further said that the largest portion of state income is derived from a 4½% sales tax levied against food, clothing and medicine as well as nonessentials and this places a disproportionate tax burden on the lower income groups. He also pointed out that no white lawyer in Mississippi will defend a person in a Civil Rights suit and that only three Negro lawyers are qualified to do so. He spoke with great appreciation and enthusiasm of a number of Harvard graduate students who are spending the summer at Tougaloo teaching on special grants. The president's home given by Dr. Theodore Lawless of Chicago is most attractive and spacious. Dr. Beittel said that no Negro student at Jackson State College (an all-Negro state supported institution, the only one of its kind in Mississippi) cannot participate in the Civil Rights Movement in any way without facing immediate dismissal. He further added that Negroes who attend there are often given preferential treatment in securing jobs after graduation on the basis that they will not question the status quo. Tougaloo is the only higher education school in the state that is intergrated and

allows and encourages whites and Negroes to mingle freely<sup>4</sup> on its campus.

We drove to the airport which is quite new and beautifully equipped and laid out. It was built with federal funds and there is no acknowledgement of that fact anywhere in view. We departed in the early afternoon and arrived at Philadelphia in the evening, relieved to get back to the City of Brotherly Love after having lived in the land of racial strife.