

Bernard Wasson - Research

August 8
Columbus

Dear pa, mona, thome, and all,

[~~xxx~~It's been so long now since I've written....] In that time I've been working hard, but not hard enough. Columbus is a discouraging place, the people are very scared and all over we see results more ~~in~~ rewarding than our own. To give you some idea of the fear we have to beat, in this town one Negro has registered to vote this summer, and three have said they will try soon. Everyone fears for his job, and rightly. They stand a good chance of being fired if they try to register.

Each day now I teach school from 8:30-12:00 and then canvas for voter registration and freedom registration for three or four hours in the evening. Freedom registration is the program we're pushing strongest. It is an attempt to start a political protest movement. This year it is challenging the seating of the Mississippi Democratic Party at the national convention. After that it's plans are unclear, but it will certainly remain in operation, serving as an introduction to the freedom movement and as an introduction to politics for the local Negroes. The party functions as a real party, it has meetings (presinct etc.) nominates candidates and so on but it is not a legitimate party- it has mock elections and, most important, noone downtown knows who has registered. The school teaching is generally ~~in~~ interesting although Negro history is a bastard; I never learned the subject which considerably increases the difficulty of teaching it. I also teach algebra which is easy and fun. Canvassing is rough. It's like selling some thing noone wants. People usually are friendly, and the statement "we are 100% behind you" is very common, but the Negroes are all afraid to be seen on our side (the all is an exaggeration) and many of them- 50% maybe- seem certain the white man will find out everything they do. Every house I visit I give my pitch and they listen and they usually agree "yasuh ~~everything~~ you say be true. OOH YEAH. Now aint that the truth though. Thas right. OOH THAS RIGHT!) But in the end half or so don't sign. Columbus is really slow.

I really have no business leaving here. The job is just beginning and it is huge. Many houses in the Negro community have no plumbing. Many people live in shacks. But these facts don't at all show the extent of the exploitation of the black by the white. A good paying job for a Negro is one which pays \$50 a week. And living expenses don't differ markedly here and in the North. In Columbus virtually every Negro lives in poor housing, and probably 3/4 of the homes are just miserable. Almost every white house is better than almost every Negro house. A Negro maid working 7, 6, or- if she is lucky- 5 days a week makes from \$12-\$18 per week. I've not talked to any maid who got more than \$18 per week, and I've talked to maybe 20. As I said things here are not moving in a ~~self~~-sustaining way and the only way these intolerable conditions will ever be removed is by the effort of outside agitators. The job is still huge. What's more, I have little faith that the job will ever be done without armed federal intervention. All of the few whites I've come into contact ~~xxx~~ with seem to be determined to go down with the ship: they refuse to admit ~~xx~~ that a problem exists, much less attempt solutions. Many "summer" volunteers have decided to stay, which is good. Everyone is very concerned about the safety of everyone who stays here after ~~the~~ national attention leaves with the summer volunteers. Keep your fingers crossed and do your best to see to it that any violence is fully publicized in Madison and N.Y.

I will be back here after I graduate. I haven't yet decided whether I want to work as a full time SNCC field secretary, or if I'll try to get a job teaching in a private college (I couldn't teach at any public school of course. There are no cowards greater than the public school teachers here. They're fired for looking at us, just about.) If I could get a job at Tougaloo college I would almost certainly take it. Tougaloo is a relatively good school with many people involved with both it and the movement. [There are other schools which would almost certainly give me a job, but the atmosphere at them has been described to me as intellectually and spiritually stifling, with hoards of rules and no concern among the faculty and administration for the movement. I'll, certainly apply to all these schools, though.

I wish you would write me all about your summers.

I will leave here on about August 22. I want to go to the convention in Atlantic City on, probably, the 24. That's when our convention challenge will be staged, I think. If we're not seated, here ought to be a HUGE demonstration. Not only is our delegation right morally and legally proper, but the regular democrats from this state will support Goldwater anyway. They haven't supported the national nominee for years.

I'll be seeing you all soon,

Love Bern