

MISSISSIPPI - AUGUST 2 - 1964

August 2 - Meridian

I don't know what we expected but Mississippi seemed as pretty and peaceful as Louisiana. The really noticeable thing, however, was the large number of Goldwater stickers and Confederate flags on the cars.

The COFO Office and Community Center are upstairs rooms in the poorest section of the Negro business area. As soon as we drove up we felt among friends. A lady called out that we didn't need money in the meters on Sunday -- the taxi drivers smiled-- and Charlie's Barber Shop has Freedom Registration cards in the window. The Community Center has 2 rooms lined with well-used books and several sewing machines and typewriters. It is also headquarters for voter registration in Meridian. Marjorie was waiting for us -- she looked well. She's been working on voter registration and helping in the office. She is also trying to interpret the students' work to local white people. She has sent out a letter to every minister in Meridian, etc., and attends the Presbyterian Church and Sunday School (white). According to the Unitarian minister counsellor from Palo Alto she can make contacts where he can't. A meeting between local white students and COFO students was planned thru the Presbyterian minister but fell through when he couldn't find a meeting place. (The U.S.O. hootenanny in Biloxi also fell through.) Marjorie feels the most hopeful white person she's met is the librarian -- a Negro taxi driver suggested she contact her.

We spent a couple of hours at the convention of the congressional district where delegates were elected to the State Freedom Convention. It was hot and sticky and everyone was tired but with a little imagination you could visualize the hours of work and courage that made this meeting possible. We were surprised to find most of the delegates over 40. Marjorie's hostess is 75 -- she's captain of her precinct and an alternate to the convention.

We drove Marjorie and her hostess home and saw her comfortable room in a tiny neat house. We were invited to supper -- black eyed peas and collard greens and chicken and fresh figs and pound cake. Mrs. C. is a widow who looks after Marjorie with a motherly eye and sees she eats a hot breakfast (cat fish, mashed potatoes and gravy!). People have made "bad remarks" about Marjorie living with her, but "I own this house and I like to have her." She, however, won't allow a Negro boy to come to the house to see Marjorie "that is going too far for our community." Mrs. C. feels there has been real progress in her life. "People are more polite and many call me Mrs. C. I've never heard a white man call a Negro mister, but many now call the women Mrs. It's wonderful to have the young people here because now we know others are interested in our problems. They work as hard as if they were paid \$1,000 a day."

Later we took Marjorie and 2 of her Negro friends to the best Negro restaurant -- top meal was \$1.00. She had wanted to go to the more glamorous Holiday Inn but the project director said, "No -- we ain't here to test facilities."

The students are hot and tired -- there are frictions between those of vastly different backgrounds -- they can never relax and just be young people -- but they have a real sense of mission and we've never felt so proud!

August 3 - Jackson

We had several hours of orientation in the National Council of Churches Office. A tape of sessions at Oxford -- a session with a lawyer and a doctor -- reams of papers we still haven't read -- a demonstration of techniques of non-violence by 2 former Tongaloo students. After we had been taught how to curl up in the fetal position with our hands protecting our face the 95 degree room seemed almost chilly! Then we were given our assignments -- two carloads of us headed for Hattiesburg with instructions not to stop -- not to ask directions except from a Negro -- and to phone back when we arrived. In our car was the Canon of the Cathedral in Detroit and two people from the Disciples in Indianapolis.

The "office" of the N.C.C. Minister's Project in Hattiesburg is a small store front in the Negro business street with "Colonial Bread is Good Bread" still on the door. Behind is a "Dormitory" for the men with 12 mattresses and springs on a cement floor. The whole street seemed full of warmth and welcome. The TV repairman next door let us come in and watch the news and the newstand on the corner sent up word if an unaccounted for white face appeared on the block. We were told that the Negroes sitting on benches along the street weren't just sitting -- they were watching to see that our office and the COFO Office across the street were safe. We got good but unaccustomed food at the restaurants -- 69¢ for a full dinner.

We women were lucky because we stayed in homes. People have had their homes burned for less but you'd never have known it from the warm welcome I received. My host family own a small grocery store which opens into their kitchen. The living room and store were air conditioned. Mrs. B. teaches fifth grade in the public school. She had just had her registration to vote accepted after 5 attempts. Her husband's application has never been accepted. Many teachers are afraid to register but the B's and their whole family are active in the Freedom movement. "We've been treated as children long enough -- it makes us feel inferior." When I expressed concern that the white salesman with Confederate flags on his car who saw me in their home might cause trouble I was told, "This is our home -- we entertain who we wish." They regard the white man's fear of inter-marriage with a wry humor. Mrs. B. says her grandfather was a white man and her husband is part Irish and Italian. One of their friends put it succinctly, "The white man has a low mind -- they think we want their women." This same friend works at Hercules -- the biggest industry in town. The white men he works with have asked him, "Do the civil rights workers really live in your homes?" "What do they do?" To which he replied, "Oh, Facho--they just go to bed and go to sleep like anyone else." The B's son is a student at Jackson State -- he came home Saturday with theatre stubs to prove he'd really been to the white theatre since the Civil Rights Bill was passed. "Lots of people are leaving Mississippi," he told us, "but I'm going to stay and help make it the state it ought to be."

August 4

Bill and I were both assigned to Mt. Zion Church -- a Freedom School and voter registration center. We were under the direction of the COFO Students and sent out in teams of 2 to canvass assigned streets. We were to encourage people to go to the Court House -- let them know the Freedom Schools can help in their preparation-- and also to sign up for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. (MFDP) This is a very simple form but for many it is a first declaration -- even to themselves -- that they want to be full citizens.

Anyone who thinks the students have chosen a glamorous summer should walk the streets in 98 degree heat! But it is exciting. The students seem to have almost a universal welcome in Negro Hattiesburg now and we came with the students so we were

welcome, too. There was the woman who had visited in Detroit and who wanted to join the Freedom Party. "I know Detroit has troubles but when we went to the park no one paid any attention to us. When my grandchildren come here they can't buy a coke at the 5 & 10 and I don't know what to tell them." (A child at a Freedom School wrote "Happiness is going to a public place and no one looks at you.") There was the elevator operator at the hospital. She had been on duty when Rabbi L. came in after being beaten. She had talked to the civil rights workers with him "Now the hospital is 'fouted' at me -- but I don't care. They can fire me but I'm going to be in the Freedom Party -- I'm tired of being treated like a child."

Bill hit the jackpot when he registered a man believed to be 12 $\frac{1}{4}$  years old.

We heard Pete Seeger at the Freedom School -- a warm, wonderful person who played and sang an hour with the sweat running down his clothes.

August 5

More voter registration for me. Bill went to call on faculty at the colleges and high schools and learned about the "other America" which for us is now the white community.

In the afternoon I went with a student to notify people about the district meeting of the Freedom Party. There are also block meetings this week in homes. We're all getting a real education in politics! The students are discouraged. They had hoped for 200,000 registrations and to date have less than 50,000. But we are overwhelmed by the dogged perseverance and vision that has made this showing possible. Very real fear, based on real burnings and loss of jobs has had to be reckoned with -- and real suspicion of white faces -- and fear of their own "Uncle Tom." But the local Negro leadership emerging seems to hold a tremendous hope for our nation.

I'll never forget one of the delegates to the Freedom Party Convention in Jackson. He's a handsome, distinguished looking man and owns a construction company. He's tried to register 5 times and never been accepted. I expressed amazement when he said he had paid his poll tax for 12 years. "Honey," he told me "if I ever do get registered I'm going to be ready to vote." (A citizen must pay poll tax for 2 consecutive years in order to be able to vote.)

I've forgotten to say that every noon at the 6 churches in Hattiesburg where there are Freedom Schools, lunch is served 5 days a week to all the civil rights workers. The local women do this as their contribution and it is a very valuable one. We had a good and varied hot meal each time. This has not been true in other cities, except Jackson, so far as we know. Some of the students are really in need of food because of limited funds. (The "professional" CIO worker gets \$10.00 a week, if it's available; the summer volunteers are on their own and share their resources with each other.)

Tonight was the Mt. Zion district meeting with 50 local people attending. The chairman is a well-known man in the community. The first item of business was plans to approach the Negro pastors who are not yet involved in the Freedom movement. "The only leader we have known is our pastors -- if we can get them all to urge people to register, our task will be much easier." (Most pastors are part of the Freedom movement -- but the man at the largest church is old and has "played the role" too long.)

The second item of business was a report by a CIO worker -- a freshman from

Stanford -- on a series of workshops to be held in neighborhood houses. 1) Discussion of the techniques of the Birmingham bus boycott and possible local applications. 2) the development of the labor union and its application to the Freedom movement. 3) power structure of Mississippi (eg. If you want Negro police and porters, etc. who do you approach?)

Next the chairman spoke briefly about people who said the Civil Rights movement was a "mess." "I've tried to register for 35 years -- that's a mess. The Civil Rights movement is to lift us out of the mess."

Last was a report of the State Convention at which members-at-large to Atlantic City were elected. There were cheers when some local people were named as delegates. The keynote speech was reported briefly -- the high point was that we must work so that the country will be as concerned about a Negro boy who is lost as about a white boy.

Friday, August 7

Today I went to Palmer's Crossing -- a rural community outside Hattiesburg. There is a community center there and 2 Freedom schools. The C.C. has been loaned by a local woman -- rent free. It is a local shack with a big room for dancing and games and a stage -- and outside space for ball games. Everything was in full use, including a well-stocked library sent from all over the U.S.A. The student we talked to was a slim pretty girl who looked as if she'd just stepped out of the library at Willamette University where she'd graduated. Now she's living in a house where 4 families share a pump and an outhouse. She's a music major but her specialty here is literacy. She teaches individually at night and also has passed on to 6 high school students the literacy techniques she learned at Oxford. Some of her students are over 75.

The Center was decorated for a teenage dance the night before for 135 youngsters. They called it "Swinging into Freedom" and had decorated accordingly with black and white hands of welcome on the front door. The little ones were finger painting when we left to see the Freedom Schools at nearby churches. They were having a debate between the 2 schools on the church lawn. Resolved -- that violence is necessary to obtain civil rights. The points are outlined below. (The debaters were 12 - 16 years old.)

Affirmative:

1. It's too late for non-violence (nv) NV can only work if can reach the conscience (eg Gandhi and the British). The white conscience is dead. The Jews practiced NV against the Nazis and were exterminated.
2. Violence has been successful in Africa -- we must show the white man we aren't afraid. Haiti got freedom by violence -- Joseph Saint led slaves to freedom after a revolt.
3. Violence shows people you aren't happy even if you don't win.

Negative:

1. Negroes should not stoop as low as whites.
2. We're outnumbered -- life is a very precious thing -- we can save lives by NV.

- 3. Love creates community between brother and sister.
- 4. Negroes have come a long way through NV. (eg. the Civil Rights Bill.)

Rebuttal Negative: White man's conscience isn't dead -- I don't believe it and neither do you. Frederick Douglas may have fought but he fought harder with words. U.S. isn't 100% against us or how would Civil Rights Bill have passed?

Rebuttal Affirmative: People are afraid to use the Civil Rights Bill -- if you really believed it you'd all enroll at Ebttsburg High (white). (This caused shouts of laughter.) People pick on you if you're NV -- what good did it do Medgar Evers?

I regret to say the Affirmative won. The debaters were older and spoke better. After was the most spine-tingling singing of Freedom songs led by a 15 year old girl who had been in jail several times. Everytime a car with a white face passed the children sang louder and waved. The cars slowed down but all summer no one has ever waved back. "Maybe someday they will," the children say.

At lunch I spoke with one of the teachers who is a public school teacher in Harlem. She feels the academic background is superior here to the children in Harlem. "This is a teacher's paradise -- school is voluntary and they want to learn. I'm going to stay here."

Saturday

Bill spent all day putting in wall plugs and new lights at the Community Center. Now they can use their sewing machines.

Sunday

Church at the Presbyterian (white) was a chilling experience. I felt, I think, as a Negro must often feel in a white church. Perhaps it was partly my own fault. I'm sure we all are touched by the general paranoia. In the afternoon we went to a Negro Gospel Sing which threw us all out and made us feel we'd been to church. That night a Negro church held a memorial service for the 3 civil rights workers -- a moving affair in which many of the COFO students took part.

Monday - Meridian

A brief visit with Marjorie. They were all **stirred** by the Memorial services and funeral for James Chaney, whose home is Meridian. The voter registration workers have been out at 5 A.M. to contact people before they go to work. I spoke briefly with a Negro boy who had come down from New York City with Michael Schwerner. He's going out with other boys every day trying to find homes in Haskoba County where civil rights workers can live and work.

Marjorie went to lunch with us at the Holiday Inn. In the week since we were there they had eaten at the Inn in an integrated group.

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