

Hattiesburg
Mississippi
August 26, 1964

Dear Family and Friends,

Many of you have asked for news of my experiences this summer; others, some of whom haven't heard of my summer plans, will, I think, be interested. To write each of you individually would tax my letter-writing capacity beyond its limit, so I write all of you at the same time.

Much of what you have read and heard of this summer's events has been grim. Tragic things have opened but I should like to focus on a few of the less-publicized and more hopeful aspects of the summer.

On August 7, 8, and 9 a Freedom School convention was held in Meridian, the city of about 50,000 from which Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman set out in June to investigate a church burning.

I wish I could convey to you the excitement of the convention. Imagine a thousand or so high-school students, most of whom have been raised in poverty and have gone to poor schools, few of whose relatives have ever voted, who know policemen in general as people to avoid in time of trouble and white men as people who may have fathered their great grandparents and cheated their grandparents and parents. Next, give these young people a month in a freedom school, discussing, arguing, debating, learning about the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and about Negroes who have struggled for better conditions for their people, and discussing, arguing, and debating. Finally, transport seventy-five of the brightest of them from many parts of the state to one room in Meridian and step aside. You, as one of some hundreds of freedom school teachers, gave them an initial nudge and they have taken off. Their enthusiasm is contagious, their determination thrilling and almost frightening. Some of the more cautious people of good will have said that much needs changing in Mississippi--as in many other places--but it should not be done by outsiders. Leadership should come from the Negro people themselves. From these young people it will come--if they will stay in Mississippi. Between 1950 and 1960 the number of Negroes in Mississippi between the ages of 20 and 44 decreased between a quarter and a third.

Along with several other teachers from Hattiesburg, I attended part of the convention. All teachers were observers; the meetings were run almost entirely by the students. Sometimes teachers disagreed with the stand taken by a student and occasionally a teacher would feel impelled to talk. On one such occasion the statewide director of the freedom schools asked that teachers not speak; he was therupon squelched by a student, who said to the applause of other students, that the students welcomed comments by teachers as they didn't want to make fools of themselves. And so it went.

The schools in each community had sent resolutions to the convention. In committees the resolutions were discussed, argued, and combined (many similar ones naturally were brought in by several delegations). The resolutions adopted by the committees were presented to the convention and discussed again. Most were passed without change; some were altered and some discarded.

I watched at the meeting of the committee on voting. The delegates knew very well the rights denied to their relatives and friends. Their views can best be summarized by quoting the resolutions they passed, as adopted by the convention as a whole:

"VOTING

- "1. The poll tax must be eliminated.
- "2. Writing and interpreting of the Constitution is to be eliminated.
- "3. We demand further that registration procedures be administered without discrimination, and that all intimidation of prospective voters be ended through federal supervision and investigation by the FBI and Justice Department.
- "4. We want guards posted at ballot boxes during counting of votes.

"5. The minimum age for voting should be lowered to 18 years.

"6. We seek for legislation to require the county registrar or one of his deputies to keep the voter registration books open five days a week except during holidays, and open noon hours and early evening so that they would be accessible to day workers. Registrars should be required by law to treat all people seeking to register equally."

Five pages of resolutions were passed dealing with public accommodations, housing, education, health, foreign affairs, federal aid, job discrimination, the plantation system, civil liberties, law enforcement, city maintenance, voting, and direct action. I'll quote some which especially struck me:

"We...demand...that the school year consist of nine consecutive months" [In some areas the Negro school year is interrupted in late spring so that the children can chop cotton and in the late summer so that they can pick it; school is then in session in July and August, at which time the children learn virtually nothing]..."that taxpayers' money not be used to provide private schools...that all schools be integrated and equal throughout the country...academic freedom for teachers and students...that teachers be able to join any political organization to fight for Civil Rights without fear of being fired...that teacher brutality be eliminated...All doctors should be paid by skill, not by race...All patients should be addressed properly... The United States should stop supporting dictatorships in other countries, and should support that government which the majority of the people want...that ...the federal minimum wage law be extended to include all workers, especially agricultural and domestic workers...The federal government should force plantation owners to build and maintain fair tenant housing...Section Two of the Fourteenth Amendment should be enforced, specifically in Mississippi and other Southern States, until voter registration practices are changed...A national committee should be set up to check police procedures, to insure the safety of people in jail...Law enforcement officials should provide protection against such hate groups as the KKK. Police and public officials should not belong to any group that encourages or practices violence..."

Other things went on at the convention. There were speakers. James Forman said, "Young Negroes have to begin to decide to stay in Mississippi." Get the education you can get, he said, and then use it for other people. He left the young people with the question, "How do we translate the freedom school experience to those around us?"

A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, is an impressive man. I wish I could put into words how it is that he is impressive; it's his whole bearing, and his speech. The main points of his talk were that freedom is never given; it must be won. Though a cause may be right, it will be won only if its supporters have power. The objective of the civil rights "revolution" is to effect a distribution of rights. A major problem, now that the civil rights act has been passed and is being implemented, is to gain full employment.

For me, the most exciting part of the convention was the discussion of the resolutions and the most moving part was the drama program, "In White America" tells of "What it has meant for two centuries to be a black man in white America." It was performed by the Free Southern Theater, which has played this summer in freedom schools and plans to tour the South performing for Negro and, where possible, integrated audiences. Another play, composed and performed by students of the Holly Springs freedom school, was about the life and death of Medgar Evers. There was no script; rather, the play was created each time it was performed, for the performers knew essentially what they wanted to say and made up their lines.

Perhaps you saw the article about the Mississippi Summer Project in the issue of Newsweek which had a picture of Robert Kennedy on the cover. In it the community center in Palmer's Crossing was described. I lived and worked in Palmer's Crossing and have been in the center many times. It has been wonderful to see it develop. Physically, it

consists of a building with one large room complete with stage, two small rooms, and a tiny kitchen, and a large yard, in the center of this predominantly Negro community of perhaps 2,000, outside of Hattiesburg (about 40,000). Volunteers cleaned and painted the inside (white walls with black trimming--"black and white together") and built tables and shelves. There was a gala opening. Now each morning there is day care for small children, with games, art work, stories, and music, and each afternoon recreation for the older children, with the boys generally playing ball outside in the 90° to 100° heat! In the evening there are adult classes in sewing and health and a weekly dance for teenagers. Probably the summer's high point at the center was a visit by Pete Seeger, the folksinger, who charmed everyone in the packed house. On an individual basis, a volunteer is teaching literacy to adults. Her youngest pupil, 23, grew up away from any school and, since there is no compulsory school attendance law in Mississippi, never got around to going to school; her oldest is in his 80's. Moreover, she is teaching some local residents the art of teaching adults to read.

An important part of the summer's work has been the setting up of libraries. Next to the Hattiesburg COFO office are now shelved about 350 feet of books, sent from the North. Many are excellent; some should eventually be discarded. Most in demand, and in growing supply, are books by and about Negroes, especially history books. Now the main library is setting up others. In Palmer's Crossing an unused building belonging to a church is being transformed into a study center, which will be open several hours a day as a quiet place for high school pupils; classes may be held there, too. Some of the houses I have visited are so cramped, quite aside from their complete lack of books, that it must be virtually impossible to study in them. The libraries are being used eagerly, but by only a small portion of the Negro community. Perhaps in the more literate future more people, especially adults, will have a taste for reading.

What, you may be wondering, about the public library? Attached to the Hattiesburg community center for Negroes is the city library for Negroes. I visited it once. Uneven as the COFO library is in quality and made up as it is mostly of second-hand books, it is already better in most respects than the city library for Negroes. The city one has half as many books as COFO's and no catalog (nor has COFO's yet: circulate now, catalog later, is the idea). I was impressed by the paucity of children's books (COFO has lots and needs more). About ten days ago half a dozen freedom school teenagers went to the main (white) library downtown, which is many times as large, and asked for library cards in order to get books not available in their library. They were refused them and the library was hastily closed "for inventory". The (white) teacher who had accompanied them was arrested for vagrancy; she had in her purse some tens of dollars. A few days later, after a similar incident, it was closed again. It is still closed.

One important phase of the work conducted in Hattiesburg--as in otherparts of the state--was voter registration. Since you have probably read more about that than the other phases, I'll not tell about voter registration, except to say that it is difficult for a Negro to register in Hattiesburg. My hostess (we lived with Negro families) has tried eight times to register to vote. Perhaps she passed the test she took this month (one doesn't learn the result for a month).

My own work was concerned primarily with the freedom schools. I taught in one of six schools conducted in churches in and near Hattiesburg: St. John Methodist Church in Palmers Crossing. Since there were more teachers than rooms, we inevitably did team teaching. I had expected to teach math and English to high school students, but actually taught eight to twelve year olds. We concentrated on language arts (reading, writing, spelling), Negro history, and math. The most popular subject, I think, was history. We presented it in the form of biographies. The children loved acting out parts of the stories. The first time we did it, they all wanted to be dogs chasing a runaway slave(Harriet Tubman; she and Frederick Douglass were the favorite heroes). Sometimes we listened to music or drew. One eight-year-old is an extraordinarily gifted artist.

The teenagers and adults learned more about government, with less emphasis on English and math. The teenagers studied the Declaration of Independence and decided to write one for themselves. The beginning and end of theirs are, "In this course of human events, it has become necessary for the Negro people to break away from the customs which have made it very difficult for the Negro to get his God-given rights. We, as citizens of Mississippi, do hereby state all people should have the right to petition, to assemble, and to use public places. We also have the right to life, liberty, and to seek happiness...We, therefore, the Negroes of Mississippi, assembled, appeal to the government of the State, that no man is free until all men are free. We do hereby declare Independence from the unjust laws of Mississippi which conflict with the United States' Constitution."

Members of all classes were encouraged to express themselves. The tales the adults told of treatment they had received at the hands of whites were almost incredible. Skeptics might say that some of them were fabricated to arouse our sympathy. If they had seen the depth of feeling with which the stories were told, and the response they evoked from the tellers' neighbors, I think the skeptics would have been convinced.

One of the purposes of the schools, as of all the things COFO did this summer, was to help give the Negroes in Mississippi a sense of dignity and a feeling of pride in being Negroes. The desire to learn Negro history must have come from a longing for a sense of identity and pride.

One day my class had a discussion on "What is a free man?" The next day the children wrote on the same subject. Here are some excerpts from their papers, uncorrected: "a Free Man have his rights Just as the white Man have his rights... a Man Most have eQual rights to vote Pelpo Who Was Master Degree and Docter Degree Could Not Pass the test they therow Lind [the registrar] give to theM Now they are trying to get a siMple test" (Clarence, age 9). "A free man is a man that has his rights. And a man that says he is a man. A free man feel like a real man." (Billy Ray, age 10). "A free man is a man that believe thaths he's a man, and a free man who has his rights. Have the right to do the things that anybody do... he's a man that have the rights to drink out of a white water-fountain, and the rights to eat in the white folks restaurants. Without the owners throwing you out, and we should have the rights to go to white folks movies, because our money is as good as anybody else money." (Jimmie, age 12).

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Madison, September 3. In the August 29 issue of the New Yorker, page 80, is an excellent article on COFO. You might like to read it.