

Meridian Report --- November 23, 1964

1. As of now the Meridian Project has two cars. One was brought down by a summer volunteer, Brad Clark, and is registered in SNCC's name. It is a 1953 Ford in fairly good condition, but has cost us much money in repairs. It cannot be used for travel outside of Meridian. The other car belongs to Sandra Watts, a CORE staff member. It is a 1956 Plymouth in good condition. It has just recently gotten new tires, so it is used outside of Meridian. It must be stressed that the Meridian project does not have a good dependable car. Both of the present cars are old and could require repair at any time.

2. Community Center. The Community Center has been operating under the direction of Eric and Elaine Weinberger. There is a large library with many very good books on the Freedom Movement. Every night after school the younger children come up to the center and have a play time. The center is also offering sewing classes, voter registration classes, a drama class and some music appreciation hours.

3. Freedom School. The Freedom School is being coordinated by Gail Falk. The school was just recently started due to the previous trouble in getting a place to hold classes. The Baptist Seminary which was used for the Freedom School this summer was finally obtained the first of November (the entire third floor). Since that time, Gail has been working along with Frank and Judy Wright and several interested students on getting the place in shape. The entire space has now been painted and shelves have been put up for books. Classes started two weeks ago and are held every night after school. The courses being offered are English, Freedom Classes, Negro History, French, Biology and Algebra. There are approximately 20 students attending at the present time, but much time and effort are being put forth in getting the interest of a greater number of students.

4. Federal Programs. Since most of the emphasis on Federal Programs has been on the farm and rural problems, Meridian has not been working on Federal Programs. However, there is a very great need to have information on Federal Programs that apply to an urban area, since many of the people here are in need of federal assistance.

Food and clothing distribution. The distribution of clothing (we have no food to distribute) has stopped temporarily due to the lack of clothing. Previously it was handled through the community center coordination headed by Mrs. Fannie Lee Chaney. The clothing was handed out at two churches. When the people came to get the clothing they filled out welfare and relief forms and also questionnaires as to whether they were registered voters or not. There were no restrictions put on this clothing, but the local people helping with the distribution tried to give the clothing to those families who were in need of it. We have received most of the clothing from CORE in New York.

6. Voter registration. Meridian has been divided into 13 precincts, 10 of which have Negro residents. The staff has been assigned to two precincts apiece and have been conducting voter registration

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classes regularly. On October 29, we had a Freedom Day in which 50 people went down to the courthouse to register. Only 7 people got to take the test from 8:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.

7. Freedom Democratic Party. The Freedom Democratic Party has been ineffective in Meridian due to the head of the Executive Committee who is an "Uncle Tomish" leader. The party was only active in regard to the Johnson campaign in which they sponsored a fund-raising dinner.

8. General. Right now the Meridian project is in the process of moving into a new office, so all our energy has gone in the past week toward this goal. After the Freedom Vote and the general election, the staff decided that new steps were going to have to be taken to get the local people more involved in the movement. We made a list of local people who have been helping us all along and who could be counted on to give further support. We purposely bypassed the established Negro leadership due to their conservative attitudes. The entire staff worked on contacting these people (about 35) individually and inviting them to the meeting. The meeting of these people was held Sunday, November 22, in the new office. Its purpose was to get together these people to act as a COFO steering committee and to get them talking about what they wanted to do in Meridian.

Since Meridian is an urban town, many of the programs that are proposed for smaller rural towns like Canton or McComb are not effective here. The purpose of this meeting was to find out what the local people thought would get the town going and get more people behind them. There is also the additional problem in Meridian of a "liberal" type of white power structure, which makes it seem that Meridian Negroes have it better than in any other place in Mississippi. The local people on this committee seemed to feel that Direct Action was the only way to either make the white power structure show how liberal it really is, or to force it to show that it really is not so liberal. The committee thought that testing the Civil Rights Law would be the best way to proceed from here with other programs like a store boycott, organization of unions, etc. coming in later. The committee will meet again on Tuesday to formulate more concrete plans for what they want to do.

In the meantime, voter registration classes and Freedom School classes are still being carried on. However, most of the emphasis has been on this steering committee and on getting the office (political) separated from the community center. It is felt by the staff in general that once the political office is separate and becomes a place where the local adults can come and talk without the interference of the community center, they will begin to feel more at ease in the office and will want to come there more often.

Sandra Watts  
Meridian COFO