

? PROB. AUGUST  
July 17, 1964

COFO Project in Meridian, Mississippi

Summer 1964

by Bob Gore (I think)

This report is "comprehensive" only in the sense that it will attempt to cover the period of time I spent with the Meridian Project, June 25, 1964 through August 14, 1964. It will deal with the three major aspects of the project; Political Programs, Freedom Schools and Community Centers. Under these three major headings, we will include the following: (1) description of activities, (2) personal observations, and (3) recommendations. While every effort will be made to make the first part (description of activities) objective, no such claim can be made for the last parts. In fact, it should be clearly understood that my own predilections and biases are operative in the latter parts.

It should be understood that as Project Director, I was attempting to make some kind of coordination with each area of operation. I was not nearly as successful as I had hoped in keeping an absolute dossier of information on each phase of the operation, therefore, there may be some unnecessary generalities.

FREEDOM SCHOOLS

(1) Description

A Freedom School was established at 31st Avenue and 16th Street in Meridian, the site of the Meridian Baptist Seminary. This is a three-story building with numerous classrooms on each floor. According to one of the regular teachers at the Seminary, minimal classes are held there during eight months of the year. Only the lower level is used for these generally.

The coordinator of the FS was Mark Levy of New York City. Mark is a Queens College senior and was assisted by his wife Betty, who recently completed her matriculation as a student of the Graduate School of Education, Harvard. Both of them were chosen as coordinators for the Meridian FS at the orientation session at Oxford, Ohio.

The school day ran from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. While the general FS curriculum was used, it was adapted to fit our particular project. Classes were held in general studies such as the social sciences, as well as in languages, music and a specialized course titled Freedom. This latter course was designed to aid students in understanding the freedom movement and what it means to them and their relationship to their community. Art classes were ably handled by several teachers sent to us by the United Federation of Teachers in New York City. A drama class was taught during the last few weeks by a teacher who is also an actress.

It was attempted to keep the classes at the FS confined to those 12 years old and up. Young folk were presumably taken care of at the Community Center, some 20 blocks away. The Fs had a library of some 7-8,000 volumes. Additionally, there were subscriptions to various national newspapers and magazines which introduced students to ideas which they had not previously met.

### (2) Observations

The Freedom Schools served a number of functions, not the least of which was that the students were able to achieve a high degree of exposure to substantive materials heretofore excluded from their educational experience. Among these was contact with sensitive whites. Most of the white persons in the experience of these students were either paternalistic or hostile. In the FS situation, they met young white people who, on the one hand were helping them from a fraternal level. Also, they were given a wide latitude of personal expression which is latent--if at all evident in Mississippi public schools (or any public school, for that matter!). These things seemed to have a profound effect on the students. They tended to react positively, by and large. Naturally, there were also negative effects, such as the taking advantage of the freedom of expression which they were granted. I suspect that the pejorative aspects of the experience were minimal compared to the positive aspects.

### (3) Recommendations

It would appear to me that we should try, in some manner, to continue the Freedom Schools throughout the year. I admit that this will present a hardship, not only on teachers, but on students as well. Rev. Inge, who is in charge of the Meridian Baptist Seminary, seems inclined to want us there. I recommend that we strongly encourage him to let us use the building for Freedom School purposes throughout the year. This will have to be worked out in terms of the schedule of the Seminary and the availability of students--who have other things to do during the regular school term. We certainly can offer them classes in arts and crafts, drama, "freedom" and several other areas including remedial work which should be beneficial to the students, the FS teachers, and the community at large.

## POLITICAL PROGRAM

### (1) Description

The political program was geared toward registering people in the Freedom Democratic Party, in the main. While some regular registration efforts were made, these were minute. COFO decided that the challenge to the "regular"

Mississippi Democratic Party at this time was much more important than regular registration.

During the two months we worked, we were able to register almost 4,000 persons in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Most of these registrations came from Meridian proper. We had six counties to work: Lauderdale (Meridian is the county seat), Kemper, Clarke, Newton, Jasper, and Neshoba. We held precinct meetings in Lauderdale. We were able to get delegates to the National Democratic Convention from all six counties.

One of the most salient features of the Lauderdale County operation was that we were able to set up a precinct system throughout the city of Meridian and in parts of the county. These precinct levels of operation will be used for ultimate break-throughs into the "regular" Democratic Party structure. We were able to get local persons intimately involved in the "political process" based on the concept of the power of the status quo. Hopefully, this will continue.

#### (2) Observations

It would appear that no matter how naive we were in political organization, we were able to get across a certain political expediency to a large number of people. Most of those whom we confronted with this idea--and with whom we were successful--were those who heretofore had had no truck with real politics. We were also able to at least confront people who were of status quo mentality, with the proposition that the MFDP was something quite separate from the usual "politics."

#### (3) Recommendations

I would recommend that we continue our stress on the MFDP, but that we integrate this concept with the necessity of driving a meaningful wedge between the newly-registered Negro voter and the old-line Democratic Party. This can be ~~done~~ partly through the MFDP, but must be coupled with voter education relative to what the Mississippi Democratic Party is, and what it can be with participation of all of the people--primarily the Negro people.

### COMMUNITY CENTER

#### (1) Description

The Meridian Community Center has been a vital source of education and inspiration to the Meridian Negro community. Children have received there, many things which they would never have received in either the home, the church, the schools or the community. Again, as in the Freedom Schools, the children have been exposed to things they have never before experienced. In addition to

listening to the Beatles, they have listened to Bach and Berlioz; and they have liked it. There have been reading classes where the teacher read to the children (under 12 for the most part) and where the children read to the teachers. They have been taken on trips to the park, to the swimming pool and on other excursions which previously no one had the time nor the inclination to do for--or, rather--with them. They have also had lessons in sanitation and attempts have been made to give them some idea of what an integrated living system is--integrated from a view towards living with other people rather than living with people from a different ethnic group.

## (2) Observations

The Community Center has served what may be the most valid function of all of the areas of concern. This is because we are reaching people at an age of flexibility; they can grow with the ideas which we believe to be valid; they have not yet been brainwashed into submission to a system which capitalizes on submission. Attached is a list of observations and recommendations with which I heartily concur. They were drawn up by a friend who has worked in the field of community centers for more than a decade, Mr. Thomas Lassiter of Kansas City. In addition to his recommendations, I would hope that we would consider establishing community centers in rural areas which, though less luxurious than Meridian might be able to accomplish, may still be able to do a great deal in Mississippi.

## CONCLUSIONS OF SUMMER PROJECT

The Summer Project has been much more of a success than was conceived in moments of my wildest speculation. Though the millenium has not been forthcoming in Mississippi, the very fact that Bob Moses and Dave Dennis--along with their colleagues in COFO--conceived of the idea and actually carried it out is significant. There are three areas which I will mention briefly.

### STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

As we know, most of the volunteers this summer were white students. This has a value, but it has drawbacks from my point of view. To begin with, those of us who are Negro have certain built-in prejudices against whites, no matter how much we deny them. We--collectively through the years--have been brutalized by a dominant white society so long that we cannot help but have reservations about the sincerity of white folks--even if we are relatives! By the same token, the white students who came to Mississippi this summer have certain prejudices which are built-in. Somehow, all of us--black and white--have to accept these vagaries and begin to deal with them. To me, this is one of the greatest lessons of the Summer Project; we were forced to deal with