

Canton

CANTON CORE, JANUARY, 1965  
CANTON, MISSISSIPPI  
GEORGE RAYMOND, DIRECTOR

POLITICAL PROGRAMS: The Freedom Vote

The MFDP attempted to get the names of Mrs. Annie Evine, Mrs. Victoria Gray, and Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and Aaron Henry placed on the official ballot of the state of Mississippi to run for congresswomen and senator on an independent ticket. The attempt failed, so the Negro had no way to express himself about whom he wanted to represent him. So the MFDP decided that they would have a mock freedom election that would take place October 30, 31, Nov. 1, 2. In Madison County the representatives of MFDP accepted the freedom vote. They got together and set up polling places all over the county, in the churches, homes, grocery stores, and other places of business. However, the number of votes cast was considerably less than in the previous freedom vote. The majority opinion of the Canton staff on the reasons for this was that not enough political education was involved and the people could not be impressed by the significance of what they were doing because they were given no chance to understand it. In other words, the emphasis was too much on getting as many signatures as possible in almost any way possible. Not only did this prove ineffective on the people, but also demoralizing for the staff.

POLITICAL PROGRAMS: The Congressional Challenge

After discussing the congressional challenge with some people from around the state and with officials of the FDP, it was decided that we would attempt to get 1000 Negroes to go to Washington the day the 89th Congress opened, when Mrs. Devine of the 4th Congressional District, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, Mrs. Victoria Gray of the 5th Congressional District would challenge the five congressmen elected in Mississippi. In deciding this it was said that we would go back into our local communities and explain the challenge to the people, and attempt to get them to raise their own money and means of transportation.

The program was explained to the people and within the three month period the people of Madison County raised enough money to rent a bus for \$450 (but the bus broke down before it got out of the state). There was enough money left over for gas expenses. About fifty people went from Madison County, Mississippi.

Depositions are also a part of the congressional challenge, and while this is being written lawyers are busy talking to witnesses who will give open testimony in relationship to being denied the right to vote, police brutality, etc. These people will testify in support of the three FDP candidates. This testimony will be given Jan. 25, 1962.

POLITICAL PROGRAMS: community organization

The staff in Madison County are in the process of a continuous organizational program. The method they are using is setting up house meetings, church meetings, precinct meetings, etc, with the sole purpose of getting people to talk about local problems, their problems, and anything they would like to talk about in hopes that somehow they can see that their various problems are somewhat related and that usually the solutions can be obtained with similar methods. We are really trying to get a program developed with the community saying exactly what it will be. This will provide them with the feeling of "I planned this and I'm going to work to see whether this program succeeds or fails. You see, we feel from talking to the

local people and to the staff that people are tired of people telling them what to do, because this has happened all their life. We feel that in Madison County at this point we must be advisory without a prosade program.

#### FEDERAL PROGRAMS: The ASCS Elections

In November Federal Programs in Canton became chiefly concerned with preparations for the ASCS elections. These preparations were initially thwarted by transportation limitations. The whole job of getting Negro candidates' names on the ballots was snafed because staff workers were unable to attend the meetings at which candidates' petitions were to have been drawn up. Finally, though, cars were rented, and as the December 3 election date drew nearer the entire Canton staff began to function with unprecedented coordination and sense of direction.

Staff workers moved into each of the 8 communities in Madison County (community boundaries were drawn by the ASCS) and began organizing for the campaign. The method of organization followed these lines: the staff worker contacted a few community leaders and spent a good deal of time making sure that they understood the voting procedure (which involved write-ins), the nature of the ASCS and the gains that a victory in the election could mean. The community leaders in turn began to organize canvassing teams among their neighbors to spread the word about the election and to get people committed to going to the polls Dec. 3. Staff workers met frequently with these canvassing teams and also attended other meetings about the election which community leaders called. The staff tried in most cases to act purely as resource persons.

In The results of this approach are hard to measure. The first hours of election day the Negro voter turnout looked more promising than the staff had expected in most communities. However by the time the polls closed - after 4 arr sts, several physical threats, one injury and innumerable instances of voters being deprived of their full voting rights -- the odds had turned against the Negroes except in one community where a Negro committee chairman was elected by a slender margin.

Since then various avenues of protest have been tried: we filed a report of the physical intimidation and violence with the Justice Department and another with the Civil Rights Commission. About 15 voters complained on their own to the state ASCS committee and about 1 had hearings before that committee; the results of the hearing were unfavorable. However those who did not have hearings received word that hearings were unnecessary because their votes had been investigated and determined valid after all. We also spent considerable time and some postage communicating the USDA, inquiring about formal channels of complaint. It seems, however, that there are no precedents for challenging an ASCS election, and we were left hanging in some confusion. We supported an abortive program, originating in the Jackson COFO office, to send a delegation of farmers to Secretary of Agriculture Freeman immediately. Our delegate was ready to go, suit case literally in hand, when Jackson called to say the trip had been cancelled; other counties had not come through. About 3 weeks ago USDA investigators finally appeared. They have been supplied with a thick folder of affidavits and reports (affidavits, incidentally, are still coming in) and through them George Raymond drafted an official complaint, copies of which, with a covering letter, are now circulating all over the United States, hopefully increasing Mr. Freeman's mail-intake.

#### FEDERAL PROGRAMS: the Farmers League and Madison County Cooperative

At present there is no one in Canton carrying on federal program work. This

is unfortunate not only because of all the untapped potential in this area, but also because ~~XX~~ the promising products of past work are being neglected. The most serious neglect is of the Farmers League and the Madison County Coop. The first, which has been the most dynamic local organization Madison County Negroes have ever seen, is slowly settling into stagnation; the second is on the verge of losing its charter for want of a business manager or someone with a lot of time to spend and a lot of experience and technical knowledge to back him up.

#### WELFARE

Madison County periodically receives large shipments of clothing and food from northern supporters. These are supplemented, too, by small boxes which frequently come in the mail from various individuals. Occasionally, too, the county receives part of the shipments which are sent into Jackson C.F.<sup>U</sup>. There is no question about the need which such supplies can partially fill. But there is an overwhelming question about how they should be distributed. The Canton staff unanimously agrees that distribution from here on out must be the responsibility of the local community, not only because there are insufficient staff workers and facilities to handle it, but also because the Freedom House should not become a symbol of do-gooder-give-aways. We have begun conversations with local people and are planning a meeting in the immediate future to formulate a county-wide welfare program. We anticipate that several large problems will develop: one will concern the places of storage and distribution, none of which the staff wants in the vicinity of Freedom House; another, very touchy one will concern the merits and disadvantages of using clothing and food to "encourage" people to take part in the movement. Whatever the solutions and final decisions, this is a pressing issue which the staff is determined to see resolved soon.

#### VOTER REGISTRATION

No organized approach to voter registration has been tried since the end of the summer project. This is mostly because energies have been channelled into the MFDP program, the ASC elections, and, most recently, the staff's work on grass roots community organization. In one community where a staff worker has been living for about a month, holding small "tea parties", discussions with the local people a locally-initiated, locally-planned voter registration campaign is taking shape; nothing dramatic, no freedom days (the people have explicitly vetoed them, in fact), just a few people a week going to the Court House and perhaps (this is still in the discussion stage) the setting up of preparatory workshops. Here, the Canton staff believes, is an example (and there are others) of how the local people can sense and meet their own needs in their own ways, fully understanding what they're about and why it's important -- a picture far preferable to that of staff workers telling them what is good for them and leading them through the paces without even giving them a chance to grasp the nature and significance of what is happening.

#### INCIDENT REPORT

Except around ASCS election time the frequency and degree of harassment have dropped off considerably. Martha Wright did spend a day in jail during the freedom vote. She was picked up for "distributing leaflets without a permit," but her case was dismissed on the grounds that it was her first offense (interesting, since the prosecuting attorney knew it to be her 2nd offense -- she has a trial in the federal courts on the same charge from this summer). Around the same time Bill Foreyt was given a traffic ticket for illegal parking when his jeep stalled on him; he pleaded not guilty, was his own defense, and won the case! The same day George Raymond was jailed for interfering with an officer when he pulled up

to see what kind of trouble Bill was having. His case has been removed to federal court.

Just before the ASCS elections a local canvasser, Mr. Cleophus Lockett, was shot at from a passing car while walking down a country road. He was unharmed. Also, Tom Samsay, who was coordinating the elections, received 2 illegal traffic tickets in the week before the election. In one instance police tailed him out of town to charge him with speeding, even though he was driving 5 miles under the limit. Then, on election day, 4 persons were arrested on charges of "disturbing the peace in a public place," "disobeying a police officer," and "trespassing." Three cases have now been removed to federal courts. The fourth, George Reynolds, was tried in absentia, found guilty, fined \$100. He has now appealed the case.

Also on December 3 Mary Rich had his case broken by a small mob at one of the polling places. Martin Crawford was threatened at gun point at another; Eric Orr was hit in the face at another; Earnest Chase received threats at the polling place where he worked, but they didn't materialize. Also, at least one voter was threatened with a rest if he voted for the Negro candidate.

Since the election a bullet has been fired into the home of another of the chief canvassers, Mr. Walton Stokes, and a phone call to Freedom House reporting the beating of the successful Negro candidate was made, but it turned out to be a hoax.

#### THE COMMUNITY CENTER

The Community Center in Canton is closed and has been closed for about two months. The staff met and felt that it was best to close the center. At that time, Martha Wright and Jo Ann Coisan were working there daily. Some of the problems they encountered were the unrealness of the young people, who are the determining factor of whether the center succeeds or fails. Through long staff meetings and discussions with local people and staff people, it was a consensus that the only way the community center would succeed and progress in Canton would be through the people themselves not only showing a desire for it, but also doing most of the work in constructing and building it. And this has been the case in Canton. The center was merely a place where they could come and have dances and steal what they could. However, there were a few kids who used the library effectively. A few young people and several adult community leaders are presently discussing what should be done next. The staff is hoping that their decision will call for much more community involvement.