

THE STENCH OF FREEDOM

(SELMA, ALA.; February 20, 1965)

On Monday, February 8, 1965, about 55 local people, 3 visiting Northern ministers, James Bevel, and I were arrested. After a speedy trial (held without benefit of legal counsel) were convicted of contempt of court and whisked off to the county jail. The following is a partial account of the eight days that ensued in the Dallas County jail and in a state prison camp.

We were ushered into the Dallas County jail at about 4:00 pm. On the way in, Rev. Ira Blaylock from Boston was attacked from behind by one of Sheriff Jim Clark's possemen; he managed to escape without apparent injury. After being subjected to finger-printing and photographing (accompanied by verbal insults and abuses), we were allejammed into a cell with about 25 men who had been arrested and convicted of the same "crime" a week earlier. This meant that over 50 men were being housed in an area I paced off to be 25 feet long and 12 feet wide. This cell contained a commode which was not enclosed, and a shower. We exchanged pleasantries with our fellow warriors and attempted to bring them up to date on the latest news from the outside, over dinner, which consisted of blackeye peas and corn bread. As the evening wore on into the night, the group settled down into some serious singing and preaching. When the jailor informed us at twenty minutes to nine that the lights would be turned off at nine, the search for sleeping space commenced. The men who had been jailed earlier had first call on the eleven mattresses, and the rest of us stretched out on the concrete floor, and on the metal benches. None of us had any cover.

The next morning, after eating our blackeye peas and corn bread, we were marched into a school bus and transported seven miles to Camp Selma, a state prison. The bus on which we traveled to Camp Selma had a normal capacity for thirty-two people, but when the possemen had finished herding us into the bus with their electric cattle prods, fifty-five of us had been crammed into the now bulging vehicle.

Before we were allowed to enter the compound, all beds, blankets, and mattresses were removed. The bed frames were stored outside, visible from inside our "prison." The mattresses were stored in the hall that led to the dining room. The compound itself was forty-seven feet long and nineteen feet wide. In one corner was a commode (not enclosed) that became stopped up at least three times a day, and almost always at night. As a result, people using the commode could not avoid walking in the overflow and tracking it all over the floor, on which we had to sleep. People were not allowed to take but one shower, so it isn't hard to imagine the sanitary condition of people sleeping in human discharge and not being allowed to wash.

Sleeping on the concrete floor was considerably worsened by two things: 1) We had an all night rain; 2) We had no heat. At night temperatures were in the thirties. Each night one attempted to develop a "sleeping plan": Do I sleep with my jacket on? (If indeed I had one) Do I place it under me? Do I cover up with it? Do I put it under my head? etc. I usually wound up using all of these, combinations of these, and variations of the combinations. But still each morning I woke up barely able to speak, and my entire body aching so that I could hardly walk. My difficulty in walking was contributed to in no small part by the inadequate diet provided.

We were fed beans and corn bread twice a day. The only variation in this diet was the type of bean--blackeye peas, navy beans, lima beans, and great northern beans. We were helped (if not fully sustained) by some local churches who sent food to us each night.

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One of the advantages of being "in jail" is that people can do a lot of talking, thinking, and listening. So after a few days I attempted some freedom school classes, with very good response. People talked about their lives, and ~~the governs their lives~~, and how much say they have in governing their lives. We talked about how Negroes got into the situation in which we find ourselves. We talked about the home of the first Negro slaves in America. We also defined words--words like ownership, stealing, and murdering, and people in this country who are guilty of theft and murder. People talked about money and who controls it, and who gives value to it.

After five days we were transported to the county jail to await release, which took three days. When we were released Monday evening at 4:30, most of us had only enough time to get a meal and go to 7:30 mass meeting, to continue dealing with some of the problems the country faces. Who really steals? Who are the real murderers? Who owns natural resources? How is it that we have so much "surplus" food and people are dying of starvation? Why do we keep talking about training people for jobs, when in fact jobs are on a fast decline? When is this country going to seriously deal with a guaranteed annual income? When?

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