

*Newton
County
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Meridian COFO

Newton County Report for June, 1965

Newton County is a rural county directly west of Lauderdale County. The total population of the county as of the 1960 census was 18,800. Of this 12,900 were white and 5,500 were Negro and 400 were others. This information was obtained from the CORE Southern office research bureau. Decatur is the County seat but very few Negroes live in the town. The majority of Negroes live in the southern half of the county and in particular in the town of Newton which is the largest town in the county. The city of Newton has 1,985 whites and 1,180 Negroes as of the same 1960 census. This same census gives the percentage of non-whites in the county as 33.6%.

The combined staffs of Clarke, Heshoba, and Lauderdale counties held a winter staff meeting with Dick Jewett concerning the possibilities of opening up surrounding counties which had previously been untouched. Since Newton county was the nearest unworked county from Lauderdale it was decided to send local Lauderdale people and one staff member to work the county. George Smith Jr. and two others began working the county in February, 1965. Work was begun in Decatur which is the county seat but which has very few Negroes. It was decided, however, that since there were few Negroes in Decatur that work would be done in the area of Newton which is a larger town south of Decatur and has a much larger Negro population. When work was first started in the town of Newton there arose a lot of trouble with the local NAACP which began telling the Negroes that they should not get involved with COFO since the NAACP said that it could do more for them. In reality the local NAACP was not doing anything for the local people and the people were not very enthusiastic about it.

Work was begun by canvassing the neighborhoods talking to the people in general about the problems in Newton and how things could be improved. The major problem seems to be the three garment factories which took Negro applications but nothing resulted from this in the way of jobs for Negroes except in rare instances. The big desire by Newton Negroes concerns obtaining good jobs.

There seems to be a growing interest in COFO and its activities since the NAACP has done nothing for them and they have become acquainted with COFO's work. From this growing desire to work with COFO result a desire by some Newton citizens to have a Freedom Rally. Mr. Knox Curry has proved extremely helpful along with Miss Luella Robinson and several other local people. We began talking to the Ministers about using their churches for the rally and even though a few of them had seemed sympathetic at first when word got around that civil rights workers were in the area the whites began putting pressure on the influential Negroes and the ministers began backing down.

Mr. Curry, along with other citizens said that he was not going to let anyone turn him around and insisted that the rally be held anyway.

Mr. Curry and George Smith and some of the local citizens got together and discussed the possibility of holding an outside rally. Miss Luella Robinson, who owns a great deal of land in Newton, said that she would be more than happy to let us use her land to hold the rally.

The rally was held on June 27th on Miss Robinson's field. We estimate that the crowd which gathered was between 100 and 150. The majority came from the town of Newton itself but the entire county was represented. We had speakers from Neshoba county and Lauderdale county but the main speakers were local Newton county people. Mrs. Crowell of Meridian ~~was~~ spoke about the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the local Newton County people showed considerable interest in its programs once they found that it was run by the local people in each county. One of the main speakers from Newton was William Earle Paine, a 18 year old, who had spent eight days in the Jackson city "compound" as a result of his participation in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party demonstration in Jackson June 14, 1965. The local people in Newton were impressed by his telling of his experiences and because of his participation in the demonstration interest has grown in the county for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Our impression is that the local people in attendance felt the rally was success and this is our belief also.

We are now in the process of setting up voter registration classes. Our hope is to keep the classes as small as possible because we feel that we can be more effective by moving around the town each nite, holding meetings in the local communities. The first class we had was held on July 1, 1965 and five eligible voters in attendance and two who will soon be eligible. We have contacted a number of people in the community who will allow us to use their houses for such classes and we hope to start holding meetings ~~rightly~~ starting next week, which is the week beginning July 5).

July 2 we talked with Mayor McHollan of Newton telling him that we were now working in the county. We talked with him for about 15 min. but he did not give us any specific answers about such things as the population of the county or the plans for desegregation of the public accommodations and schools in Newton and the county.

We are very enthusiastic about the interest which is shown by the youth of the county in civil rights. They are now attempting to organize a Newton County Youth Club and a planning committee met on July 2 to plan for a mass youth meeting July 4 at Miss Luella Robinson's house. This committee sees the main functions of the Club as centered around voter registration workshops, non-violence workshops and the testing of public accommodations in Newton County. This club will also serve as a strong force for canvassing.

Sincerely,

George Smith Jr.