

Thursday, July 15. 1965
Waverly, Virginia

Dear Friends of SCOPE:

Monday, June 28, the Santa Barbara SCOPE chapter moved in with three Negro families in the town of Waverly in Sussex County, Virginia. Although we had hoped to enter Prince Edward County, a lack of housing there left us a choice between going to a well-organized county or attempting to enter Sussex County, described by SCLC Virginia Field Secretary, Herbert Coulton, as "the worst county in Virginia.

The Negro leaders in Sussex had not replied to any of Mr. Coulton's letters about the SCOPE project. We investigated this mystery and discovered the answer: there were no Negro leaders in Sussex County. We couldn't pass up this opportunity for organization, so we drove into Waverly one night, secured a meeting place and then walked from porch-to-porch in the Negro neighborhood inviting people to our meeting. The people came in large numbers, probably because there's nothing to do on a Wednesday night in Waverly. After a lot of talking on our part and an hour of complete silence on their part, we finally gained acceptance for our project, as well as some temporary lodging. Since that night, many barriers have been broken and we now feel we are fully accepted by the Negro community. Before I mention our problems and accomplishments here in Waverly, let me give you a little background information on Sussex County.

Sussex, one of the Black Belt counties of Southside Virginia, has a voting age population of 6428, of which 58.2% are Negroes. However, the whites have a 2 to 1 advantage in registration because 92.4% of the whites are registered as opposed to 34.6% of the Negroes. There are no Negroes at any level of government nor are there any Negro police officers or city employees.

Sussex has been declared 100% eligible for War on Poverty funds. Thirty-three percent of the Negro families earn less than \$1,00 a year and 80.3% earn less than \$4,000. Those figures include the earnings of both husbands and wives. Here in Waverly, the women work primarily as maids for which they receive 50¢ an hour. The majority of Negro men in Waverly have only two places to work: Gray's Lumber Mill and Grayco-Gray's plant. The top wage for Negroes after a lifetime of work for Gray is \$1.40 an hour. (I'll discuss Mr. Gray at length in a few minutes). Unfortunately, the white power structure has held up all efforts to bring in Federal aid.

The educational level falls in line with the economic and registration statistics. Forty percent of the Negroes have less than five (5) years of education and only 17% have finished high school. Of course, you can't expect a college graduate to come home to Waverly and drive a truck for Gray.

So much for a numerical look at the county. What about the people? Unfortunately the human side isn't much rosier. But rather than discuss some of the problems of being a Negro in Waverly, I'll get to the root of all the problems here: State Senator Garland Gray.

The "Great God Gray" is an avowed segregationist and a powerful figure in the Conservative "Byrd machine" of Senator Harry Byrd. Gray owns, as I mentioned, a lumber mill and plant. He also owns a large number of slum dwellings, most of the land in Sussex County, the only bank in Waverly, and quite a few of the people, Negro and white, in the county. He is a true monopolist, having kept all other industry out of Waverly, his home town. When his mill workers voted to unionize ten years ago, he closed the mill for six months. Gray remains invincible because of his two sources of power--his millions of dollars and his powerful senate seat.

This year Gray was opposed in the Democratic Primary by a young liberal Civil-rightist who was immediately branded as a "Communist nigger-lover." This brave young man was Gray's first opposition in twenty-two (22) years. Gray won that first round and thinks his troubles are over. He doesn't know yet that he will be opposed in November by the president of the Virginia SCLC, a Negro Baptist minister. He'll probably win again, but an increased Negro vote can put him out in a few years.

Fear of Gray has been our biggest obstacle in getting Negroes registered. People living in Gray's shacks are afraid of losing their "homes." Others fear economic reprisal at Gray's bank. For the most part, these fears are unfounded but it is difficult to convince the people of this fact.

Another problem is the county registrar. His office is open the first Monday of each month from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., not exactly an ideal time for working people. Of course, this is simply one method of preventing Negroes from registering. Since the office was closed in July due to the primary, we have only one day this summer to register Negroes. A team of Civil Rights lawyers is now planning legal action.

Our third major problem, in addition to fear of Gray and an uncooperative registrar, is a general state of apathy among most of the Negroes, probably because, until now, the Civil Rights movement has bypassed Sussex County. However, our mass meetings are attracting more people each week.

On the brighter side, we have been very successful in the Community Organization aspect of the SCOPE project. In Waverly, we have formed a student organization and hope to do the same with the adults at tonight's mass meeting. Our biggest accomplishment has been at the county level. We have formed the Sussex County Improvement Association which represents all six districts in the county. This is the first county-wide organization of any kind among Sussex Negroes. The SCIA will prove invaluable in getting Negroes into office, improving

living conditions, and bringing the War on Poverty into Sussex County.

Tuesday night, July 13, we shook up the entire white community when fifty (50) Negro adults went to the town council meeting with a petition demanding sewers, paved streets, street lights, sidewalks, police protection, and fire hydrants. Some significant results were obtained, although the town police sergeant said he doesn't feel like getting killed in the Negro neighborhood for the salary he's getting. No. I don't think we'll have any problems with police brutality.

In closing, let me emphasize that Virginia is by no means a northern state. The only difference between Virginia and Alabama is the manner in which the whites express their hatred toward, and fear of, the Negro. Here, discrimination is more subtle. The Negro is kept "in his place," through economic pressure. Thus the vote, not the demonstration, is the best tool to break these chains of economic slavery. I'm sorry that we won't see the chains broken this summer. It won't be easy to return to California knowing that my friends in Waverly must live at least one more year with their pit toilets, their \$5.00-a-day jobs, and Garland Gray.

Yours for Freedom,

Lanny Kaufer
LWK

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