

July 22, 1967

Dear Mom & Dad

Sorry about not writing and I may as well let you know now that I don't know when I'll find time to write again. I've been busy, busy, busy since getting here and so many things have happened to me since being here that I just don't know how to begin this letter. I've got enough stuff right now to write a book about my personal adventures in Mississippi and the Rubins — the family I'm staying with — really want me to write a book about Mississippi, 1960's style & if I find the time I just may. Let me say one thing in the beginning because I can ramble on for hours & forget many things I'd like to say — I am one of a vanishing breed & what I mean by that is that the civil-rights worker ~~fact~~ is over. I am the only civil rights (white) worker in my county (Simpson) & in the various trips I have made around the state, I have met only one other white civil-rights worker — a girl — who has been down here since '65. There are more than just the two of us (she works in Washington County which is about 150 miles from here) but we are a definite few. What I attribute our vanishing breed to is two things: A) Civil rights work was a fact and a fact

which has but the dupt like all fads (B) I think most
civil rights workers had the impression, that they
could change things down here & change them
overnight & the result — Disillusionment. To
put it in capsule form = Civil Rights Worker +
Mississippi = Disillusionment. Believe me, Miss-
issippi has not changed & what change there
has been is mighty superficial. Let me explain
this — Although every damn white politician in
Mississippi (and that's all there is, is white politicians)
has denied that there is starvation in this state,
by God, there is & I've seen it & heard much
about it. Last Friday a group of us went up into
the Mississippi River Delta section of this "fair" state.
The Delta as it is called is the cotton capital of the
world — that's all you can see for miles is
cotton, cotton, cotton. Well, you should see the con-
ditions some of these people are living in. As was des-
cribed to me by my comrade (the civil rights worker
in Washington County) Margaret — 11 people in one-
room "shack" with not one (not even a bed) piece
of furniture in the whole blessed place and the hus-
band has no job & can only get work on the cotton
plantation at long intervals & with very little pay
(sometimes 3 dollars a day — sometimes at the
most \$10 a day). And they say people aren't
starving to death in good ole' Mississippi. Another
thing to show you that Mississippi hasn't changed
is the Ku Klux Klan. Believe me they are a real

thing. Last week sometime, the Klan had a big rally in Rankin County which is the county next to Simpson. From what I heard they were all out in their finery — white robes and all. Heck Simpson County (my county) is one of the biggest Klan areas in the state & to show you how strong they are — every single one of the men — except for one — who is running for sheriff in this county is known to be a Klansman & even one of the gup running for governor is an avowed Klansman. Enough with the Klan. And murders!!! Well last week a negro kid was found stabbed to death on the southern end of my very county — But I guess you have enough problems yourselves with Detroit being in a riot & all. Speaking of Detroit (excuse my wanderings) from what I gather from being down here 3 weeks is that the Negro in the North although in some cases he may be as bad off as the Negro down here (although I doubt it) is less afraid to act violently than the Negro down here because Negroes in Mississippi except for the Rubins & some others are just plain scared of the white man (including me in many cases). The people here are scared scared of me because I'm a civil rights worker & they're afraid that Uncle Charlie (a popular term for white-man, down here) will see them & oh, boys, don't hurt ok' Uncle Charlie.

Just as an example of how scared these people are (and I could cite a lot of them) let me relate an incident of mine while I was out canvassing on a voter education drive — Please, excuse my wandering again. One day last week I was working in Magee (a town near-by) & I went up to the house of this woman & asked her if she was registered to vote — This was our conversation:

ME: Ma'am, my name is John Chee & I'm working with the Civic League of Simpson County. Are you registered to vote?

HER: No I'm not, and I don't want to either.

ME: (Trying the old soft-sell routine) Well, Ma'am don't you know that through the vote, you as a Negro, & all Negroes in general can help change the situation here in Mississippi?

HER: Yes, but I don't want to register & I will not vote.

ME: Ma'am, are you scared, because ~~there~~^{there} is nothing to be afraid of.

HER: No, I ain't scared (LIKE HELL) but I just don't want to mess with that sort of stuff.

ME: OK, Thank for the time but I do hope you'll reconsider. I'll think about it. [HUH!?!]

HER: Well, I'll think about it. [HUH!?!]
Well I hopped back in the car a little discouraged & why I was discouraged I don't know because she was about the 110th unregistered person I had talked to that afternoon) & I told Mrs. Rubin what had happened (I work with her most of the time) & she told me not to worry because she had tried to

to get the woman to register ^{III} times & she hadn't & besides
the woman worked for a whiteman as a cook & if she
registered & voted ole' Uncle Charlie might fire her
(for all she's getting paid, she'd be better off if she
did quit) Oh well!!! While I'm rambling (which
is about all I've done in this letter let me say
this. This job can get terribly discouraging. Oh,
I must admit that the rewards for my work
are great & I'm terribly happy most of the time
— things can get mighty discouraging let me
explain. Actually, in all truth I am a misfit down
here. What I mean by this is I'm not a misfit
because of me personally but because of what I
represent. I am not accepted completely by the
Negroes (there are many exceptions) because no matter
what I am white. There were times in my first few
days down here, where I wished I could shed my
skin for some dark skin, but I got over that. I am
white & there isn't a whole hell of a lot I can do
about it. I am here to help. In my three weeks, I've
grown totally color-blind. I love these people & they
love me and I look on them as I'd look on & love
any human being. But to get back to where I started
Cand to stop founding preachers, there are many
times when I am not accepted & even hated by
certain Negroes. As to the white community. Ha!!!
→ It's all one way there. They just hate me. It's
as simple as that. Again here I could go on for
hours relating incidents where I've seen real hatred
for me personally. As Mr. Rubin keeps telling me

"It hite people hate you because you're white, and you're trying to help the Negro. Negroes are afraid of you because you're white & many of them just can't believe that any whiteman would want to help them." That's it in a nutshell. Oh, don't get me wrong, not all white southerners are the same. No, only about 99 ⁴⁴/₁₀₀ to which in my rough estimate is a quite a sizable number. I'm sorry but I'm just too tired to go on. By the way, this is Wednesday night, not Sunday night. I started Sunday but people kept coming over asking me to show them how to vote & I couldn't continue & haven't had a chance since then — sorry, but will try to continue tomorrow, if all goes well.

July 30, 1967
Well, again I must really say that I am sorry that I just haven't been able to find time to write because I imagine that you are probably quite worried about what's happened or happening to me. It's almost 12 midnight, & I have to get up at 6 so what I write tonight will be all I write & then I'll start another letter as soon as possible. First of all, before I get started, let me say that I'm not sure when I'll be coming home & it's not because I don't want to come home but because I'll probably be needed down here very badly until Aug 29 and since they need me so bad, I really figure that I should try to help. I hope you understand.
Well, before I finish this letter let me just briefly sketch out for you the events that occurred

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yesterday because yesterday was the most interesting & scary day of my life. Before I begin, let me explain that I know that you probably worry about me because I am prone to do some awful rash things but as I learned fast here you have to be reasonably careful down here because, believe me, this is another world. And I am careful, but due to the nature of my work & the fact that I am a Northern White Civil - Rights Worker there are certain dangers in my job. Now with all that rot I probably scared the heck out of you but don't worry, as Mr. Rubin said to me the first night here, "John, this is the way it is when you're in trouble, we're in trouble. Most of us who care & appreciate what you're doing will stick behind you no matter what may happen." And believe me that is a comforting thought sometimes. Anyway, before I ramble, I planned to tell you about yesterday - Saturday. I would say that Saturday was quite a big day for us. To start from the beginning, I was supposed to go to a meeting in Columbia, Miss. but I decided to go with a group of Negro kids into the booming metropolis of Meridenhall (pop. 1,900) to integrate the cafe's in town (3 of them). There were 7 of us - 2 whites, 3 guys & two girls & believe me although the oldest one is only 18 they are the nicest & bravest bunch of kids I've ever met in my life. Anyway, the group of kids was already to go but were a little afraid at first until Tony (a white newspaper photographer) & I got with them. I just looked at them & said (excuse me if it sounds like I'm bragging) "Man, I'm getting hungry. (I had no

breakfast & it was around noon) so let's go find a place to eat. "So off we went. The first cafe was fine. Not a speck of trouble at all. They served us & served us well. Of course, all the other whites in the cafe just sat & stared at us giving us what I call the "hate-stare" & people passing by just staring in the window like there was a zoo inside but you get used to getting looked at as if you were a monkey or something. Well everything went well & I figured we'd have smooth running for the rest of the day — I thought. The second cafe we went into was where Shell began to break loose. Tony & I had gone into this cafe the night before (before they knew we were involved in civil rights work) & were served well. Well yesterday was a different story. He had all planned to go in & order Malts but since they didn't serve Malts we all ordered Cokes. He was served & the girl pushed the bill on the table & left — in a hurry. Well I casually picked up the bill and my eyes almost popped out. I had ordered 4 Cokes and can you guess what the bill was — \$2.00 (2 dollars) — No kidding. I looked at it & almost broke out laughing & said to the other guys in our group, "Man enjoy this Coke because this is the most expensive Coke you ever drank in your whole life." Let me explain, this is no joke, we paid two dollars for those 4 cokes. That's what these white so & so's do when a Negro comes into their place — overcharge. Even though this is strictly illegal, they do it in hopes of scaring the colored people away from their places. My God, just think if you had to pay 50¢ for a coke (a small bottle yet) — you

wouldn't want to go back either. While we were in the place, the owner tried to put her curtains down so that no one would know that she was serving colored people. And, boy, did we laugh when the blinds wouldn't go down. Anyway it was in this place that people began to curse us rather violently but just like the "hate-stare" you get rather used to it. So after we got out we decided to hit the next place & this is where the action really got wild. We went in & sat down & were served but the man who served us was really trying to give us a hard time. Well, then the customers start to let loose. Some old guy (excuse the expression old - Dad) who was 56 really started to get hot. He started calling Tony & I "Shunks" & "Bastards" and a few other friendly expressions not fit for any place but the walls of some public toilet. The old shit-head wanted to fight Tony & I & wanted us to go out in the street with him. Well, we ignored the pig & got out & soon as we could, only on the way out we made our big mistake. While one of the Negro kids got up to pay late & when we left, thinking he was right with us, he was still inside. That was happening we were to soon find out, was that the owner charged him double & he didn't have enough money to pay so the guy called the cops. We realized our mistake & Tony & I headed back to see what was wrong. Just then the friendly Mississippi cops pulled up. They got in before we did & the owner pointed at us as being the troublemakers. Meantime a crowd started to gather around us & the cops. Well, we paid the extra money & while all the people (esp. the old man) were telling the cops all about us. For just about 1/2

a second & thought that the cops were going to help us.
How!!! It had a fool I can be!!! The cops broke
up the crowd & then one leaned over to me & started
whispering. I'm not trying to scare you & excuse his
filthy tongue but I'd like to quote his conver-
sation to you in whole:

Cop: You filthy low-down, mother-fucking son-of-
a-bitch

Me: No reply. (It had could I say to such a cordial greeting)

Cop: Where are you from, you bastard?

Me: Michigan.

Cop: What are you doing down here? Stirring up trouble?

Me: I'm with a voter education drive.

Cop: You son-of-a-bitch - you're just down here to
get you some Nigger women.

Me: No reply. I'd like to take your head & smash

Cop: You know I'd like to take your head & smash
it into that brick-wall (I was leaning against
a brick wall)

Me: No reply.

Cop: You think I won't do it?

Me: I'll believe you'll do it.

I doubt if he would have, although you can't tell
but just then the manager called him over & so
Tony & I took off & hopped into our cars & took off.
I didn't get more than 5 blocks before the same
cops pulled us over. They made our driver, a Negro
kid named Reggie get out. They cursed him soundly
& arrested him on a trumped up charge of reckless
driving & took him off to the courthouse. They also
made the rest of us go up to the courthouse &
when we refused to answer any questions before seeing
a lawyer, they let us go. About two hours later we got

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Reggie out on bond & he has to be in court Tuesday morning. We're all hoping that he gets convicted because then we can appeal to a Federal court & with six witnesses in his favor we've got a good chance to really get these dogs. Well, after that I thought that nothing more could happen but again I was wrong. The Klan struck last night. I won't go into detail but Tony & I & a large group of Negroes waited outside a Negro home with guns waiting for the Klan to re-appear. We waited until 2:30 & when they didn't show up again we went to bed. Since its election time we expect to have many more sleepless nights.

Reading over what I just wrote, I don't really know whether I should mail it or not, because it may just scare the peckers of you. But I guess I will not to make myself look like a hero, which I am not, nor to show you how bad I have been treated but really to give you a mild view of what a state of hell each & every Negro in Mississippi goes through. I am white & that makes all the difference in the world. I can go home & get a good job & be treated fairly just because I am white-skinned. There is no such advantage for the Negro. I only wish that there was more I could do to help.

Gotta to go. Please, please don't worry about me. I am well & eating like a horse. I haven't had any "TARAPI" nor guts but have had butty beans, black-eyed peas & water-melon, water-melon, WATER-MELLON (the people here are crazy about it - I am not). If you'd like pass this letter on to anyone who may still remember me back up North or better yet read it to them so you can fill

in "hecks & clangs" for some of my rather coarse language
I know (& it really hurts me as it must you) that it
was very thoughtless of me 'not to write sooner &
I won't excuse myself, just please, please remember
that I love all of you from the bottom of my
heart & being here makes me love you more.
Regards to Tom, Aunt China & Uncle Alfred, Grandma
& everyone else 'including the gang of good ole'
Yale Rubber. — I hope all is well & fine
with you all (part of my southern drawl) Pray
for me

With all my love & a
million apologies —

John

P.S. Please save this letter.