

NESHOBA COUNTY

I am a third-year student at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C. I am in Mississippi assigned to the National Lawyers Guild as part of their summer program to render legal assistance to the Council of Federated Organizations.

From June 29 to July 25 at the request of the Council of Federated Organizations I participated in an extensive investigation of the destruction of the Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Mississippi, and the disappearance of three civil rights workers in that same community. The results of that investigation are as follows:
Michael Schwerner and James Chaney were frequent visitors to Philadelphia,

Mississippi, in the months just preceding their disappearance. Their visits were common knowledge in the white as well as the Negro community. On some of their trips to that area Schwerner and Chaney had been pursued through the rural areas of Philadelphia by Officer A_____ of Neshoba County. On Memorial Day, Michael Schwerner had spoken at the Sunday service at the Mt. Zion Methodist Church in connection with the Council summer program of Freedom Schools and voter registration. From that Sunday until Tuesday, June 16, Officer A_____ was frequently observed driving through the Mt. Zion area between Mississippi Route 16 and the Sandtown Road. Such excursions into the countryside were most unusual for Officer A_____.

At Mt. Zion, Tuesday nights were traditionally set aside for the leaders and stewards meeting. On those nights church business was disposed of and the collection for the pastor was taken. It was also on Tuesday nights that two of the missing men had been holding workshops in the Negro community in Philadelphia. The workshops were always held in a private home rather than at the Mt. Zion Church.

Tuesday, June 16, 1964, was the day the Democratic Party of Mississippi set aside for its precinct meetings to select delegates to the county conventions. As part of its political education program the Council of Federated Organizations had urged that registered Negro voters attend their precinct meeting and take an active role in the election of delegates to the county convention. Certain Neshoba County residents had intended to attend their meeting, but word reached them that Officer A_____ would be there waiting for them. Because of that tip and because of Officer A_____’s reputation it was decided that no one would attend the meeting.

Later that same evening the regular leaders and stewards meeting began as scheduled. There were approximately ten people in attendance. They had come in four vehicles, two cars and two trucks. The business was concluded about 10 p.m. and those in attendance began to leave the church. As they emerged from the church they noticed three strange vehicles in the church parking lot. In addition to that, 25 to 30 men, all armed, had formed a single line between the road and the church. These men watched the people leaving the church with great interest as though they were looking for someone. One man remained in a cream-colored 1964 Ford in the parking lot. He was described as a very large man wearing a broad-brimmed hat, kind of a cowboy hat, which was turned up at the sides. That man and that hat reminded several people of Officer A_____, and while they stopped short of a positive identification, it is clear that they knew who the man was, but fear of reprisal stopped them from making a positive assertion.

The Mt. Zion members passed by these men and headed to their cars and trucks to return home. Mt. Zion is situated on the Longdale Road which lies between the

Sandtown Road on the north and on the south Mississippi Route 16. Some people proceeded north on Longdale Road to get to their homes, while others turned to the south. As the south group, which was composed of four persons, two in a car and two in a truck, was proceeding home and while they were still a short distance from the church, they were forced to the side of the road by a pick-up truck. Five or six white men approached the Mt. Zion vehicles and ordered the occupants to turn off their lights. The people were then forcibly pulled out of their car and truck and questioned. The questions asked generally ran along the same lines: "What kind of meeting went on here?" "Where are the white men?" "We know they had meetings here. Have they been having them over at the old school?" With one exception all the people who went out the south route were beaten, either with fists or, as in one case, with a heavy blunt instrument. The most serious injury suffered was a broken jaw. After the beatings the people pulled themselves together and went home.

The north group was a little luckier. Their progress home was blocked by a cream-colored 1964 Ford which was drawn across the Longdale Road in such a way that prohibited traffic from passing it. The two vehicles in the north group stopped. The car and the pick-up truck were approached by white men and ordered to turn off their lights. As were the prior group these people were also questioned about white men at the church and the nature of the meeting held there that night. In addition they were asked questions about pamphlets, and their assailants indicated that they had copies of certain publications. After a short time the north group was permitted to continue home. None of these people were beaten.

People were unwilling to make positive identifications of their attackers, but the other details they did relate seem to indicate that they well might know. Two persons, for instance, remember quite well seeing a policeman's uniform. Others recall seeing a huge broad man in a wide-brimmed hat sitting alone in a car in the church parking lot. One man remembers being searched very methodically, as if the person knew well what he was doing. Still others remember that the uninvited guests came in at least three vehicles, those being a cream-colored 1964 Ford sedan, a 1962 black and white Buick sedan, and a green 1964 Chevrolet pick-up. Everyone recalls a gunshot, and all remember that none of the cars had license plates. Fear might well be keeping the Mt. Zion congregation from revealing the names of their attackers. This opinion seems justified in light of the fact that at least one of the victims of that night's raid was taken to town a few days after the incident by Officer B_____ and was detained there for a period of three hours. Another person was paid a visit by two men, one of whom identified himself as _____. He told that person that if anyone was telling lies about the church burning and beatings they would go to the state prison.

People in the Longdale area who were not at the church that Tuesday night reported

an unusual amount of vehicular traffic on the usually quiet Longdale Road. One person sighted five cars heading down the road towards the church at a little after 11 P.M. at a speed of 45 to 50 m.p.h.

One man who lives in that area noticed a glow in the area of the church between 12 P.M. and 1 A.M. He immediately left his house to see what was afire, but his search was blocked by a car at the north end of the Longdale Road, the description of which car he could not give. Another local resident was awakened by a car outside his house at approximately 2 A.M. As he looked to see what the car was doing he noticed a glow in the sky in the vicinity of the church. At the time he thought to himself that it was the church, or perhaps two nearby houses. Many local residents also pointed out that there was a heavy rainstorm the night of June 16.

At the church site itself all that is now to be seen are a few bricks and some twisted metal roofing lying where it fell. There is not one piece of timber left, charred or otherwise. All that remains is that metal and some ashes. The destruction was so complete that one wondered if this was the work of a wood fire alone. The surrounding trees for at least 100 yards in three directions were scorched. The church itself was located in a heavily wooded area and it seems a fire of the size of the one that engulfed Mt. Zion Church should have spread. But it did not, which gives rise to the impression that it was tended so that it would not.

A short distance from the church and just to the right of the Sandtown Road is a forest fire tower. That station is manned from the hours of 9 to 5. Fires which occur during periods when the tower is not manned are called in so that they can be recorded. The regular ranger in charge of the station was on vacation the night of June 16, and the log kept there discloses no fire in the area that night. He did say that if he had been the one in charge that night the church fire would have been recorded.

The above account is an accurate, complete, and true description of all the information obtained by me during the aforesaid investigation.

SIGNED: *Michael F. Starr*