

Information about my experience as a Civil Rights worker in the 1960's.

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I am glad to respond to your request for information about my involvement in the civil rights movement in the 1960's.

During my four years at Oberlin College, I was one of several leaders of a large college student civil rights organization. At Oberlin College we students were involved in the civil rights effort in many ways. We were part of a larger movement of students across the country who wanted to foster the ideals of American democracy by broadening the promise of equal rights for all. Along with many other students, I traveled three times to Mississippi to work with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. I co-chaired a special effort called "Carpenters for Christmas" to rebuild the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in Blue Mountain near Ripley Mississippi after it was burned to the ground as part of a campaign to prevent the Freedom Democratic Party's political campaign.

My first visit to Mississippi occurred in October of 1964, to work on the FDP "freedom election," when I worked out of the Holly Springs office near Rust College.



Holly Springs COFO Office

My second visit occurred in December of 1964, when I co-chaired a group of Oberlin College students, local citizens, and others, calling ourselves “[Carpenters for Christmas](#),” to rebuild the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in Blue Mountain, a church that had been burned to the ground because it was being used as a freedom school in October.

One of the things that we student volunteers did was to teach in so-called “Freedom Schools”, often in black churches. There were about 41 “[Freedom Schools](#)” across the State of Mississippi, in the summer of 1964. One of the purposes of these schools was to provide young black students an educational orientation to freedom that was not provided them in the segregated all-black schools in the South. Most of the teachers were student volunteers like myself: a number were arrested for contributing to the delinquency of minors by teaching them about freedom. One of the churches that provided a home for a freedom school was the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in rural Blue Mountain Mississippi, and it was one of the many churches that was burned to the ground because of its role in the civil rights movement.



Antioch Baptist Church After Fire 1



Carpenters Rebuilding Church Blue Mountain Mississippi

My third visit to Mississippi was at the invitation of families in Tippah County Mississippi, where I worked with my friend Stan Gunterman to assist local civil rights efforts.

When I returned to Oberlin College, along with my fellow student leaders, I organized a number of demonstrations in the north. on one occasion, we blocked the downtown traffic in Cleveland Ohio for which I was arrested; on another occasion we blocked an entire factory and a railroad train (for which I was not arrested). I'll tell you all about this as my story proceeds. Like many of my fellow civil rights workers in those days, I was also involved in the peace movement, which is another story for another day. I hope my story will help you understand what motivated young people to join the civil

rights movement and what our experience was like. But before I tell my personal story, I think we should discuss a bit of the background.

Historical Underpinnings of the Movement of the '60s. I would like first to remind you that the civil rights movement of the 1960's cannot be separated from the civil rights struggles which came before. During the First World War, black citizens served, fought and died in the Armed forces¹. Black men fought and died overseas. Black women began to work in the factories to fill positions left by men who had gone off to war.. When called again to serve in the Second World War, black citizens increasingly asked why they should be compelled to risk their lives to save a democracy that failed afford them fundamental rights. In 1941, for example, Philip Randolph² of the railway porters union planned a March on Washington in 1941 to protest against governmental hiring practices that excluded African-Americans from federal employment and federal contracts. As a result of the efforts of Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and others, President Roosevelt signed [Executive Order 8802](#), which banned discrimination in the federal government and defense industries in June 1941.



Randolph Meeting Poster

Congressional Resistance to Civil Rights. Notice that the steps towards integration taken by Presidents Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower came

¹ See for example, [African Americans and World War I](#).

² Read about Randolph at <http://www.aphiliprandolphmuseum.com/>

primarily through executive (Presidential) action, rather than legislation. Congressional leadership regularly opposed governmental efforts at reform, in part because the southern Democratic Party had a stranglehold on Congress. In the South, the Republican Party barely existed because, following reconstruction, blacks lost their civil rights through the institution of "Jim Crow" laws, and few whites supported the Republican party because that party it was still identified as the party of Abraham Lincoln and post-civil-war reconstruction.

For this reason, the southern Democratic Party had a virtual stranglehold over national elective office in the old South. Blacks were not allowed to register to vote throughout the Deep South. Instead of dividing into two political parties as they do now, white voters supported different factions of the Democratic Party, so that the real election occurred within the Democratic Party primary. Once a Senator or Congressman received the Democratic Party endorsement, he had a lock on the office, virtually forever.

Consequently, Senators and Congressmen from the South built up "seniority" in the United States House of Representatives and Senate. In contrast, in the North, the relative strength of the two political parties was more even. As a result, in the North democrats and republicans might be defeated from time to time, to be replaced by someone with no seniority. Under the seniority system, the most important congressional leadership positions, including committee chairmanships, automatically went to senior members of Congress. The committee chairs, in turn, controlled which legislation appeared before their committees. If a congressman wanted a hearing for legislation, he needed the cooperation of the senior leadership. Since the senior Congressional leadership was disproportionately from the Deep South, southern democrats had tremendous national power disproportionate to the size of their region.

And, this power rested on racial exclusion and segregation. Most of the deep southern states, then, were one-party states, and that one party was exclusively in the hands of an all-white power structure. And, because the seniority system gave the southern party so much power in congress it was very difficult to achieve significant reform through Congressional legislation.

The role of Terror in Segregation. You cannot understand the true nature of American segregation, unless you understand that it was based upon

terror. What do I mean by terror? I mean constant fear that any person who sought to change the system would lose his job, lose his farmland, could be beaten, jailed or brutalized, or would be lynched (that is publicly hung) This terror was not secret. It was open and known by all in the South. If you want to get a true sense of how terror operated in the Deep South, you should get a copy of the book called "**Without Sanctuary**," pictures of an exhibition of southern lynching.

You can view this exhibit on the web by clicking [on this link](#). However, the exhibits may be disturbing for some of you, and you should not view it unless you are ready to be disturbed. The exhibit includes a number of family pictures taken by ordinary people at public lynchings. Ordinary families would come to the public square, there to observe the unlawful murder of a black citizen as a public hanging. Some would bring picnic lunches. And some of them took pictures to remember the lynchings. Imagine, if you can, what it might have been like to know that you could be publicly murdered, right in your home town, if you said the wrong thing, or looked at someone in the wrong way, or claimed the right to vote or go to a good school. It is very difficult for us now to understand how it must have felt to black American citizens, living under threat of this terror. But it was real.

School Segregation. In the 1950s, many public schools were purposely segregated. The segregated schools open to black students operated with inferior funding, inferior physical plant, inferior libraries and instructional materials, less qualified teachers, and inferior course offerings. For generations, black high school students were subjected to a significant educational handicap in these under-funded schools. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court decided unanimously in Brown versus Board of Education that segregation was unconstitutional, overturning the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision. In that decision, the Court held:

Education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal

instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. *Brown vs. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 493(1954).

But despite this decision from the highest court of the land, very little progress towards implementing that mandate occurred. Ten years after the Court's decision, schools that had been segregated remained largely segregated. During the 1950's and 1960's, the power structure in the south actively sought to frustrate and violate the Supreme Court's decision. Governors, legislators, school boards and citizens groups used a variety of tactics to delay implementation of school integration. Various secret or semi-secret organizations were formed to frustrate integration. Sovereignty commissions, citizens' councils, and groups like the Ku Klux Klan all worked to prevent integration. Organizations like the NAACP legal defense fund sought to speed up the process in federal courts, but generally the progress was frustratingly slow. People began to lose faith in the judicial process and the legislative process. They began to search for some other method to hasten the process of bringing about equality.

Impact of the Indian Non-Violent Revolution. There is one other strand from history that you need to understand as you consider the civil rights movement of the 1960's, and that is the impact of the Indian Non-Violent Revolution upon the thinking of civil rights leaders of the 1950's and 1960's. After the First World War, Great Britain was the predominant global colonial power. Its global domination reached to both ends of the African subcontinent, to the Indian Subcontinent, and to Southeast Asia. Its commonwealth included Australia and Canada. Its naval power was second to none. Yet under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, a non-violent Indian revolution began to make great progress in the Indian subcontinent. After the Second World War, this Indian revolution achieved complete independence from the British using a strategy of active non-violence. American Black leaders began to wonder if the brutal colonial power of Great Britain could be defeated in this way, might it not also work in the United States. Non-violent action especially appealed to protestant Christian

ministers who played an important part in the American movement. They combined Gandhi's ideas with the teachings of Jesus.

Students Begin to Practice Non-Violent Action in the 1950's. During the 1950's civil rights workers began to experiment with non-violent direct action. One such action occurred in [Montgomery Alabama](#) in 1955. Montgomery had a municipal law, which required black citizens to ride in the back of the city's buses. On December 1st of that year, Mrs. Rosa Parks, a forty-two year old seamstress, boarded a city bus and sat in the first row of seats in the black section of the bus. "When some white men got on the bus, the driver, James F. Blake ordered Mrs. Parks to give up her seat and move back. She refused to move, and Blake called the police to have her arrested. When Rosa Parks³ was arrested, the leaders in Montgomery's black community saw the incident as an opportunity for staging a protest against the city's segregation laws. Under the leadership of Reverends Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King and others, the black community decided to boycott the municipal bus system.

Black riders represented a significant portion of the transit system's revenues, and they could thus inflict economic pain in a non-violent way. The Montgomery bus boycott continued into 1956 and some white members of the community responded with violence. "Blacks riding in carpools were harassed by the police. Bombs were set off at the houses of both the Reverend King and E. D. Nixon. Finally, in November of 1956, the US Supreme court declared that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional, and the boycott was brought to an end⁴. The Montgomery bus Boycott received some national attention. But more importantly, it illustrated to ordinary black citizens that working together they could mount a sustained campaign and make progress. Also, the boycott gave Martin Luther King a position of leadership within the national movement."

Faubus Fights Little Rock Central High School Integration. The following year, after several years of litigation, pursuant to a federal court order, [Little Rock Central High School](#) was scheduled to receive black students. On September 3, 1957 Governor Faubus used the state national guard to keep nine black students from entering the school, a blatant violation of the Governor's duty to uphold the United States Constitution. When mobs threatened the students, President Eisenhower ordered 1,000

³ Read about Rosa Parks at <http://teacher.scholastic.com/rosa/>

⁴ See [Browder v. Gayle](#).

paratroopers and 10,000 National Guardsmen to Little Rock, and on September 25, Central High School was desegregated. In one sense, this represented a success for the school integration movement. But it convinced many that significant change would take decades if pursued through the courts. It took three years and presidential intervention with federal military forces to get nine students into a single school.

Lunch counter sit-ins inspire direct action. In the early 1960's southern blacks, including students, began more frequently to use direct non-violent action to integrate public accommodations. Much of the inspiration for these "sit-ins" came from the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth lunch counter sit-in led by Joseph McNeill, a black college student. Typically, the sit-in would involve a group of students who would "sit-in" at a segregated facility and refuse to leave until they were served.

In the south, there was pervasive segregation throughout all public accommodations. Restaurants and lunch counters required black citizens to order at a back window, where they could take out food, or eat outside on a picnic table. Blacks were barred from swimming pools. Segregation was not merely an inconvenience; it was a daily humiliation, part of a persistent reminder of powerlessness and political and social inferiority. Integration of public accommodations would symbolize the possibility of progress. In 1961, bus loads of black and white "freedom riders" began to ride buses to try to end the segregation of bus terminals. At many stops, they were greeted with threatening mobs and sometimes violence.

In 1963, civil rights leadership focused on Birmingham, Alabama, one of the most segregated cities in the south. Black men and women held sit-ins at lunch counters where they were refused service, and "kneel-ins" on segregated church doorsteps where they were denied entrance. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested, fined and imprisoned. In 1963, Dr. King, the Reverend Abernathy and the Reverend Shuttlesworth led a protest march in Birmingham. The protestors were met with policemen and dogs. The three ministers were arrested and taken to Southside Jail. Dr. King here wrote his famous "**Letter from a Birmingham Jail**", in which he complained about the lack of support from religious leaders for the civil rights movement:

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct

action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.....

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negroes' great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White citizens' "Councilor" or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

In 1962, a federal court ordered the University of Mississippi to admit James Meredith to that all-white university. President Kennedy ordered Federal Marshals to escort James Meredith, the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, to campus. A riot broke out and before the National Guard could arrive to reinforce the marshals, two students were killed. In 1963, black leadership organized the famous "March on Washington," in which several hundred thousand marchers listened to King's famous "I have a dream speech." But still, segregation predominated in southern schools and public accommodations. Still, blacks could not participate in the elective process in southern states.

Role of Young People in Historic Change. How did I, and others, begin to participate in the civil rights movement? Why were the students of those years swept into the tide of the two twin movements: against racism and war? *What makes people decide to get involved in fighting injustice? What makes them sit on the sidelines?* Why did Egyptians suddenly form a

great revolution in January of 2011? Why did the Germans not rise up against their totalitarian government?

We know today that there is still injustice of monumental proportion in our world. We know that children are sold into slavery; we know that working and living conditions for those who make our clothes, who grow our coffee, who assemble our toys, are unthinkably bad. Why do we at times do nothing about injustice, even when injustice cries out to us? What is it that allows us to live each day as if this suffering is not a part of us; what allows us to live normally in the face of injustice, poverty and torture at one time in history, and what is it that impels us to feel as though we cannot look away from injustice at some other time in history?

Why is it that in the 1960's we could call upon students to sit in against racial discrimination, and hundreds would put down their studies and block busses or trains; why in other times would a call to action go unheard?

Students and other young people played a very important part in many of the major movements throughout history, and they will in the future. Our two world wars were fought by soldiers most of who were young people. And students played a significant role in many of the major violent and non-violent revolutions in history. So, it would be a mistake to think of the young civil rights workers in the 1960's as if they were special in the sense that they participated in historic change. The student movements of the 1960's differed, however, because many of the activities were led, planned, organized and implemented by young people. Young people played a central organizational and leadership role in the twin movements central to the 1960's, for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam.

Role of Black Students in the South. Before I tell my personal story, I want to mention the role of young black students in southern states, because their story is more important than my own. Recall that I have said that in the South, a black person could be lynched, or lose their job, or their right to rent a farm, if they stepped out of line. That meant if they tried to go in the white entrance of a restaurant, or visit a white college, or sit in the first floor seats of a movie, or just look at someone in the wrong way, they might be subjected to a beating, or to some kind of retaliation. Young black students in the south lived under this regime night and day. If they tried to change the system, they could suffer severe consequences, and their parents could suffer consequences as well. There is a tremendous resource for study of

this time period, called the [Civil Rights Digital Library](#). You can visit this library on the web and see pictures of the young people who actually served in the freedom movement, read their letters, and get a sense of what they did, and why.

In the early 1960's a group of black students began to accelerate the movement for change. Most of these students attended the all-black colleges of the South. I am most familiar with Rust College, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, because I worked near that college in the mid-1960's. Long before any white civil rights activists visited Holly Springs, black students on the Rust College campus began to take small but brave steps toward obtaining their civil rights. At [Rust College](#), they did this with the support of the College President, a highly religious man who inspired students to take a stand, even at some risk. In 2003, I returned to Rust College to visit some of these former students; they are now Doctors, lawyers, and yes even elected officials. These are the true heroes of the civil rights movement, for they began to organize for change all on their own, without any significant notice by the press, risking arrest, beatings, and even death. When I finally came south in 1965, these young local people had been working for years to organize.

My Story

I entered Oberlin College in 1963, the year that John Kennedy was assassinated. Kennedy had called young people to service abroad through the Peace Corps. His famous lines "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," had begun to inspire my generation. Then too, I came to a college with a century and one-half history of agitation for social justice. Oberlin, as you may know, was one of the first integrated college in the United States and the first College to admit both men and women--both events occurring in the 1830's. Oberlin was started by abolitionist-missionaries from the east coast who wanted to create a new academic environment based upon "learning and labor." These missionaries perhaps believed that by creating a school in the West, that is Ohio, they could establish a new framework for a new society. They believed that society could be transformed through missionary zeal: Oberlin was reputedly the founding home of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. It was a way-station on the Underground Railroad. At the turn of the century, Oberlin sent a large group of missionaries to the Shansi province in China. A memorial arch stands on Tappan Square for the

Oberlin missionaries who lost their lives during the Boxer rebellion, and I will say more about this arch in due time.

[illegible]

In the spring of 1964, the Oberlin College NAACP mobilized to send students to Mississippi for Freedom Summer. These students were to conduct voter registration activities, to conduct classes designed to help blacks to pass the voter registration tests, to organize, and to provide support to COFO and SNCC. Oberlin College contributed a disproportionately large contingent of students to Mississippi Freedom Summer. As I have said, the so-called freedom riders of 1964-1965 were not by any means the first students to go south. For a number of years, brave mostly black students such as Cleveland Sellers, Andrew Young (later Mayor of Atlanta), John Lewis (now a Congressman), Stokely Carmichael, and many southern black leaders, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, had been laboring to build a grass roots structure strong enough to achieve racial justice and civil rights. Their activities had created an infrastructure of black freedom fighters already existing in the South. Now, they had decided to involve white volunteer students to assist them with a great push for change. The students would bring visibility; and by their visibility they would provide protection against violence, or so it seemed, by training the eyes of the media on freedom summer. The students would receive, and have received, more credit perhaps than they are due, for they were building on a foundation quietly created by others.

Before traveling south that summer many students on our campus attended special training on non-violent change. Those training sessions were a first introduction to a different face of America. Students were trained what to do when a policeman arrests you for picketing; what to do if someone spits in your face, or clubs you, and so on. They learned to resist police dog assaults, to withstand indignities without responding in kind. They learned to pull down shades in safe houses and sit out of the line of fire.

Freedom Summer was run by a consortium of civil rights organizations that called itself The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). It consisted of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and number of smaller local groups. The underlying concept of Freedom Summer--its largest contribution to the Freedom

Summer Project was "the organizing of blacks into a potent political force." Directed by Bob Moses, COFO launched a "freedom vote" in 1963 to prove to the federal government and others that blacks wanted to vote and would if given the opportunity. In mock elections throughout the state, some 80,000 blacks symbolically voted for Aaron Henry, a local activist running for governor, and Ed King, a white chaplain from Tugaloo College who acted as his running mate. The success of this freedom vote helped set the stage for the momentous changes that were to take place the following year. In 1964, COFO coordinated the efforts of all the civil rights groups that launched summer-long protests in Mississippi.

The story of freedom summer is well known. In those years, the white Mississippi Democratic Party excluded participation by black Mississippians. The Democratic Party was viewed as sort of a private organization, in control of its own membership. It allowed people in, according to its own rules, if you will, and blacks were denied participation. But since all of the successful candidates in Mississippi were nominees of the Democratic Party, membership obviously was critical to participation in the elective process. One of the primary efforts of 1964, then, was to integrate the Mississippi Democratic Party, or to create an integrated alternative, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.




When efforts to integrate the regular Mississippi Democratic Party failed, various organizations, including COFO, SNCC, SLCS and NAACP decided to create an alternative and integrated Democratic Party slate of delegates to the national presidential convention. The goal, then, was to convince the National Democratic Party to reject the Mississippi delegation to the 1964 convention, unless it opened the party to blacks. The state party offered up a variety of excuses for segregation. It was an expression of local control, of states-rights. They asserted that Blacks didn't really want to vote, after all; they weren't ready, they weren't literate; they just didn't care.

Freedom summer would disprove this thesis. It would register, or attempt to register voters; it would challenge voter literacy tests by showing that they were administered in a discriminatory fashion. It would show that blacks wanted to participate by creating an alternative Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) delegation composed of blacks and whites. That summer, students conducted voter registration campaigns, voter instruction, and organized for the Freedom election, which would occur in October.

In mid-summer, three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner, disappeared in Mississippi. They had been arrested near Philadelphia, Mississippi, and on their release, were kidnapped and lynched. Their bodies were later found buried in an earthen dam.

MISSING CALL FBI

THE FBI IS SEEKING INFORMATION CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE AT PHILADELPHIA, MISSISSIPPI, OF THESE THREE INDIVIDUALS ON JUNE 21, 1964. EXTENSIVE INVESTIGATION IS BEING CONDUCTED TO LOCATE GOODMAN, CHANEY, AND SCHWERNER, WHO ARE DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS:

ANDREW GOODMAN	JAMES EARL CHANEY	MICHAEL HENRY SCHWERNER
		
RACE: White SEX: Male DOB: November 23, 1943 POB: New York City AGE: 20 years HEIGHT: 5'10" WEIGHT: 150 pounds HAIR: Dark brown; wavy EYES: Brown TEETH: Good: none missing SCARS AND MARKS:	Negro Male DOB: May 30, 1943 POB: Meridian, Mississippi AGE: 21 years HEIGHT: 5'7" WEIGHT: 135 to 140 pounds HAIR: Black EYES: Brown TEETH: Good: none missing SCARS AND MARKS: 1 inch cut scar 2 inches above left ear.	White Male DOB: November 6, 1939 POB: New York City AGE: 24 years HEIGHT: 5'9" to 5'10" WEIGHT: 170 to 180 pounds HAIR: Brown EYES: Light blue TEETH: Good: none missing SCARS AND MARKS: Pock mark center of forehead, slight scar on bridge of nose, appendectomy scar, broken leg scar.

SHOULD YOU HAVE OR IN THE FUTURE RECEIVE ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING THE WHEREABOUTS OF THESE INDIVIDUALS, YOU ARE REQUESTED TO NOTIFY ME OR THE NEAREST OFFICE OF THE FBI. TELEPHONE NUMBER IS LISTED BELOW.

FBI Poster Missing Civil Rights Workers

I first travelled south in October of 1964 to organize for the freedom election itself. Any Oberlin student who traveled south needed a parental permission slip. Keep in mind that I was asking my parents to go to Mississippi shortly after three students had been murdered for doing just that: they had been found buried in the base of an earthen dam. Other students had been jailed, beaten, or harassed. So this was sort of a big deal, as you can imagine. I rummaged through my old papers: Here is the letter I wrote to my parents thanking them for letting me go.

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September 1964

Dear Family:

I am quite proud that you came to an agreement on the Mississippi project. It is something I felt I had to do and would have been miserable if you had refused. One of my friends didn't get permission. It came as quite a shock and he had trouble keeping from crying.

The purpose of the project is to document the existence of a large group who would vote if they were allowed. It is in this sense an experiment in political science. Further, it is of teaching value, because it interests Negroes to vote and teaches them how to vote.

There is a danger involved. COFO (Congress of Federated Organizations) has asked for federal protection. Fortunately, the project will take place only in Negro districts. It is possible that I will be arrested, but unlikely. I will be staying in a Negro home there and will be paying them \$5 for the week. I will write you every day, but do not call me. If there are any problems, I will call you. My next letter will give definite time of departure, etc. I am trying to study ahead to ease the workload. I'm going to ease off on theater until November

when I'll be technical director for Trial and
Sorcerer by Gilbert and Sullivan.

Love Jerry

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By October, I was in Mississippi, working out of the Holly Springs office of
the COFO, the Congress of Federated Organizations in Northern
Mississippi. Here is a short letter I wrote my parents from Holly Springs:

Holly Springs
October 21, 1964

Dear Family

Work here involves the farm elections, Freedom
Democratic Election, and building a community
center. The purpose of the farm election is to get
Negroes on the sharecropper's board which makes
cotton allotments.

Mike (my brother), an interesting project would be
to have Marshall High School adopt a Freedom
School in Mississippi. You would exchange letters
and send school supplies and books.

Lynn (my sister): Sidney Pratt could also adopt a
school. In the main office is a sign that says
FREEDOM; good luck from Minnesota. Many
freedom schools would exchange freedom pictures
and stories. If you would like to adopt a freedom
school, write:

Jessee Morris
1017 Lynch Street
Jackson, Mississippi

With Love and Yours for Freedom

Jerry

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My work in Mississippi in this first trip south consisted largely of visiting groups of sharecroppers in rural Mississippi to get them ready for the election. We conducted freedom schools. Some sharecroppers would be brave enough to try to register to vote in the real election. This involved significant risk. They could lose their jobs or their farm-leases; they could be assaulted or even killed. Others would participate in the alternative election. In October of 1964, the Holly Springs COFO office was a small home turned into an office. Rust College was nearby. Rust College was established in 1866 by the Freedman's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. A link bonded many Negro colleges of Mississippi and Oberlin College, for Oberlin had supplied them with a number of the early college teachers. When we arrived in Holly Springs, we received instruction on the rules: we had to keep the shades down; we couldn't stand next to the window so that our shadow gave away our location. Klan members or others had been known to fire at shadows or visible figures in the window.

Who was there with me? I had forgotten all of the names. But when I returned for a reunion in the fall of 2003, there they were. There was Cleve Sellers, a deeply religious and committed man, now teaching at a North Carolina University. Cleve is one of the greats of the student civil rights movement. He ran the Holly Springs office. There was Ivanhoe Donaldson, Bob Smith, QZ Nunnally, and many more. There was Charlene Hill, an 18 year old girl, skinny as a rail, who had just graduated from the all black high school; she lived over near the Antioch Baptist church and was helping organize Ripley County. There was David Kendall, who later became President Clinton's lawyer in the whitewater and during impeachment proceedings. . There was Karen Kuntsler (Goldman) the daughter of the famous Civil Rights lawyer William Kuntsler. There was Aviva Futorian, from Chicago. There was Marge Merrill, a young white student who worked in Ripley County too. There was Will Colum, a tenth grade black student, already working tirelessly in the movement. Will is now a prominent black lawyer in Alabama. There was Karen Dahl, an activist nurse who sort of mothered the Holly Springs office, and now lives in Minneapolis. And there were many more whose names I forget.

There were rules about white women appearing in public with black men. In those days, in Mississippi, black men did not appear socially with white women. They did not date; they did not marry. Black men were lynched at times for appearing friendly towards a white woman in the wrong way. A system of terror existed designed to keep the races separate. Black citizens had separate drinking fountains, separate schools, separate places to ride on busses. They didn't have access to federal farm benefits. Their schools were poorly funded: many of the teachers were only high school graduates. The books in the schools were leftover books that had been used in the white schools and discarded.



This was a way of life I had never seen before. I didn't realize that black citizens couldn't vote; couldn't run for office. Many small restaurants had a "colored" window. Whites could enter the restaurant and sit at the tables, but black families had to go around to the back and order take out, or sit on wooden tables outside.

I began to wonder how this could be going on in America. Why didn't I read about this in the newspaper? When people were lynched, why hadn't the newspapers and televisions reported it. It made you question everything you thought you knew.

Stokely Carmichael showed up while I was there. At that time, Stokely Carmichael was a prominent leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating

Committee (SNNC). He was headed for Greenville, Mississippi where Fannie Lou Hamer was going to speak that night in a church. He had room for one in his VW beetle, and I grabbed at the chance. We drove into a more dangerous part of Mississippi. Stokely kept a blanket in his car, so that when a white person drove with him, you could duck under the blanket so that nobody would see a white and black person driving together. At times, Stokely made me duck under the dashboard, so that nobody would realize that a black man and white man were driving together; he didn't want to be arrested or worse. Stokely had been arrested many times and beaten up as well.

At my 2003 reunion, I met a black man whose job it was to drive civil rights workers from one place in the south to another. He worked out of the Atlanta Office. His job was really dangerous: when he drove through one town, if local people noticed who he was, they would call ahead and try to see if someone at the next town could catch him, and many times he was chased through rural Alabama, Georgia or Mississippi. Here is a picture of Stokely Carmichael.



Stokely Charmichael

In any event, Stokely drove me to the church and there was a large crowd assembled. I seem to recall that Fannie Lou Hamer was late, and Stokely gave an extemporaneous speech to warm up the crowd. That man could talk; he had the place rocking. And then Fannie Lou Hamer⁵ spoke, and as

⁵ "Fannie Lou Hamer, known as the lady who was "sick and tired of being sick and tired," was born October 6, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi. She was the granddaughter of slaves. Her family were sharecroppers - a position not that different from slavery. Hamer had 19 brothers and sisters. She was the youngest of the children. In 1962, when Hamer was 44 years old, SNCC volunteers came to town and held a voter registration meeting. She was surprised to learn that African-Americans actually had a constitutional right to vote. When the SNCC members asked for volunteers to go to the

she spoke, I began to realize, I think we all realized, that we were sitting there in a church in the pitch black, with no security, and that we were sitting ducks. And that tension and the eloquence of Fannie Lou Hamer and Stokely Carmichael, and the singing bound us together in a way I can never forget.

That night, we sang freedom songs, songs that I can still remember, white and black together. We sang **Paul and Silas Bound in Jail:**

“Paul and Silas bound in jail, could find nobody to go his bail; keep your eye on the prize, hold on”;

and **“We’ve been ‘buked and We’ve Been Scorned....”**

“We’ve been ‘buked and we’ve been scorned, we’ve been turned around sure as your born. But we’ll never turn back; no we’ll never turn back, until we’ve all been freed.”

And many people in the crowd really had been jailed, or ‘buked and scorned’. So the song was much more meaningful. Near the end of October of 1964, one of the churches that I worked at was burned to the ground because it was being used as a voting station. Here is an old picture of the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, right after it was burned down.

courthouse to register to vote, Hamer was the first to raise her hand. This was a dangerous decision. She later reflected, "The only thing they could do to me was to kill

me, and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember." When Hamer and others went to the courthouse, they were jailed and beaten by the police. Hamer's courageous act got her thrown off the plantation where she was a sharecropper. She also began to receive constant death threats and was even shot at. Still, Hamer would not be discouraged. She became a SNCC Field Secretary and traveled around the country speaking and registering people to vote. Hamer co-founded the t

Dozens of churches were burned during this time period. A few were bombed. I'll say some more about in my next "chapter."

When we returned from Mississippi that October, we brought back stories to tell. We had assisted the Freedom Democratic Party in the vote for the candidacy of Fanny Lou Hamer and Aaron Henry, the head of the Mississippi NAACP. Jeff Berlin, another student from Oberlin, worked in Indianola. While he was there, there was a fire in the freedom school and tear gas bombing in one of the homes where students were staying.

Students learned about the economic sanctions levied against black Mississippians who worked with us. Some were blacklisted from employment; some had their property

destroyed or vandalized. In some areas, whites drove with stickers on their cars: "All in one day, November 1" which was taken to be a death threat.

This church burning was just one of many incidents during that time period. Here is a copy of an "incident report" from the Atlanta Office of SNCC describing some of the things that happened in just a few days during October in Mississippi. Notice the number of people who were arrested for trying to distribute campaign literature for President. Notice that one person was arrested for "contributing to the delinquency of a minor for taking a young person along with him to try to convince black people to vote (called canvassing). These incidents, which fill up pages of similar incidents are examples of what happened to freedom workers; arrests for traffic offenses that they did not commit, trips to jail, threats and intimidations, and worse.

30. Carroll -- Benjamin Graham and Christopher Williams
 vassing on plantation. Charges of Trespassing
Belzoni -- Richard Simpson and Curtis Lee, 11 M
 canvassing. Miss Lee held for several hours and
 charged with contributing to the delinquency of
Iuka -- Clifford Trice arrested on charges of
 tried to break into the trunk of his car, but s
 the car was rented.
Ocean Springs -- Dicky Flowers arrested for rec
 31. Holly Springs -- Antioch Baptist church burned
 Freedom Democratic Party meeting had been held
 The church housed a freedom school and was to b
 polling place.
Greenwood -- Police entered Blake's cafe, Freed
 ing they were checking on illegal liquor sales,
Belzoni -- Curtis Lee reported that police chief
 sigh complaint against Graham, (see 10/30)
Ripley -- Cleve Sellers and Francis Mitchell st
 while going to investigate burni^{ng} of Antioch
 The area is closed off. Mitchell arrested for
West Point -- John Bell, Robert Gilman, Fddie
 ing printed matter without a permit". Edward
 tags and improper drivers license

On November 10, 1964, Martha Honey, a fellow Oberlin Student, and I wrote the following article in the Oberlin Review, the College newspaper:

XXX
 "Oberlin students, faculty, alumni and churches
 and townspeople responded to urgent requests for
 funds for Mississippi with \$1600. Students
 contributed the largest proportion--approximately
 \$900. Fifteen minutes after the arrest of four
 College students in Meridian, Dascomb [a
 freshman dormitory] had raised \$95. Individual
 contributions were as high as \$50. All
 participants in the project are deeply grateful for
 the support shown by the campus.

Two hundred dollars was rushed to Meridian the afternoon of October 30, just six hours after the students were picked up for distributing voter registration literature without a permit. Sophomore Joe Gross, one of those arrested explained, "It was fortunate that the money arrived when it did. We were put in a cell with several rednecks, one of whom was drunk. When informed that we were civil rights workers, the drunkard threateningly waived a metal pipe at us. Although we were able to calm down our adversaries after much discussion, we certainly did not relish the thought of a whole night with them.

Joe and the three other arrested students, Sue Gulick, junior Rick Lowenstein, and x63 Jerry Kamerer, are now out on bond.....Most of the money will be used for a new project in Lafayette County near Oxford, which Alex Jack helped set up. An abandoned school will be converted into a community center with a library recreation room, meeting room and kitchen. Hopefully, the community center will become the focal point for all civil rights activity in the county. Presently, Negroes of Lafayette County have nowhere to carry on social and political functions. "

Chapter Carpenters for Christmas

In my last "chapter", I had left off with our return from the freedom election at the end of October. I had intended to return to my studies and catch up on my homework and class work. But, in November and December, I wound up working on "Carpenters for Christmas." My studies would have to wait.

As you may know, black churches played a central role in the freedom movement. Black churches were really the one institution that black people controlled. They could meet there; they could speak their mind; they could

organize and feel free. And so, when segregationists wanted to strike a blow they often attacked a black church. More than 40 black churches were destroyed during this time period throughout the south. Yet nobody had really done much of anything. Think, if you will, what this means; churches destroyed here in America; houses of worship. Yet the state, local, and national government did little to stop this travesty. If I told you that 40 churches were destroyed in France or Turkey or Albania, you would say "what monsters, why do these people allow this to happen." Yet happen it did here in the United States. Sometimes churches were burned to the ground in the middle of the night. Sometimes they were bombed with people inside. I had not really realized that this was going on, before I traveled south.

When we returned from Mississippi in November, we learned that one of the churches, which housed our freedom schools, had been burned to the ground. The church was in Tippah County, the home county of William Faulkner. I felt that this church had been burned to the ground, in part, as the result of the work that I had been doing there. I felt responsible. I could not believe that the police, the FBI, the governor, the President, were doing nothing. It didn't even make the newspapers. A church burned to the ground!!!

My good friend Marcia Aronoff (who later worked for Senator Bill Bradley, and now works for the Environmental Defense Fund) talked to folks at the Freedom Democratic Party. A number of other churches has also been burned or bombed. They felt, and we felt, that something needed to be done; perhaps if we could rebuild one of those churches, it would draw attention to what was happening. It was decided to pick the church in Ripley Mississippi, the County where I had been working.

When we went south, little things forced you to make little decisions, that we were not used to make. There was a white drinking fountain and a black drinking fountain. There might be a white and black restroom; blacks might be required to use a back window at a drive in or restaurant. If you were white, how easy to just use the white drinking fountain; how natural to enter the restaurant and eat normally, without thinking of the family in the back receiving service in a humiliating way. As a white person, would you make an issue of each of these petty discriminations; would you go to the black service counter in the back, or use the Negro drinking fountain. Bit by bit, one could easily become a part of this system, gradually becoming a

collaborator with a system with which you yourself might technically disagree. What if someone was lynched; if you raised an objection, you might yourself then be subjected to scrutiny. How easy to avoid responsibility and just keep your head down. We didn't want to become a victim of this process by which we gradually began to accept more and more terrible things as just part of life. The South maintained a system of terror, I believe, because "good people" stood silent. There were many in the South who felt that discrimination was probably wrong, or who disagreed with the use of terror to maintain that system on the one hand, yet stood in the background and utilized terror to maintain the structure of racism. In my opinion many, if not most, of the white citizens of Mississippi were really no different from those of us in the North; they did not endorse terror, and indeed they were no more racists than most of us in the north. In fact, many had grown up with blacks and had formed good friendships with their black peers, whereas most of us had never had a close enduring relationship with a black person. The difference was that our white peers in the south were part of a society in which moral people had come to terms with the violence and terror, which was part of their society; to divorce the worst consequences from their minds, as if it were not there. We had to accept responsibility.

I simmered and stewed, and I know that other of my student peers did as well. I had been raised to take responsibility for my actions. I was up here in the North. Those sharecroppers who lived in Mississippi, many of whom still had no electricity, who lived in small one and two room homes, had lost their church, and nobody was doing anything. Marcia and I, and Joe Gross, and Martha Honey, and several others got a small group of students together, and we decided to take on this project. We would raise some money. We would go back down to Mississippi for Christmas, somehow, and rebuild the church. We found a few students who had parents who were carpenters; they agreed to come. We found a local black contractor, named Burrell Scott, who was a master bricklayer; he agreed to come too. Some faculty members agreed to loan us their cars. But we still needed a lot of money.

We started to raise funds, but the money trickled in slowly. And besides, I began to think that something bigger had to be done. If we rebuilt this church, but 40 more were burned down, what would this really accomplish? And for people in the North, how easy to ignore what was going on in the South; to dismiss it as simply the necessary difficulties of coming to terms with slavery and the gradual melding of two cultures. It seemed to us that the act of burning a church, and the social act of tolerating that destruction,

had the potential of causing people to revisit what had become of our society. And the act of rebuilding that church, white and black together had redemptive potential. It might cause leaders in the community to look themselves in the mirror. Many Black churches could not buy fire insurance from casualty companies, because the risk of arson was so great. We should rebuild the church, but we should make a contribution also to the larger problem.

We tried to raise money with a mailing. We called the project Carpenters for Christmas; our initial mailing was typed on an ordinary typewriter; viewed with hindsight, except for the line drawing, it hardly seems impressive. We had contacted the newspapers, but we didn't seem to catch on.

I didn't really know how the newspaper business worked. One day, I got a greyhound bus ticket for Cleveland (Oberlin students were not allowed cars); I wrote up a press release and traveled down to the Cleveland Plain Dealer, without an appointment. I wandered into the newsroom and talked my way to a reporter. I told our story and left my press release with him. I was hopeful that perhaps we would get some coverage out of that. The reporter seemed mildly perplexed that a student would show up from out of nowhere, but indicated that perhaps he would do something. I went back to the bus depot and returned to Oberlin.

The next day, however, we were amazed to see our story in banner headlines, on the front page of the Cleveland Plain Dealer. The reporter at the Plain Dealer had decided to latch on to our story; perhaps he supported us and wanted to give us a boost; perhaps he was busy and saw my press release as a shortcut to getting a story in for his deadline. It was a Christmas story: Jesus was a carpenter, and here were a bunch of students not protesting, really, we were doing something positive. Somebody put us on the front page, but more than that, somebody dropped it on the AP wire, and we were overnight a national story. Newsweek, the New York Times, and the major news networks picked us up as a national story. Now we were in business. We started to raise some real money; checks came in from all over; and the publicity made us real.

We received donations in kind; and just as important, we picked up some volunteers. I was a theater carpenter. I built sets for shows, set up lights, ran sound and so on. I could build a fake ship for HMS Pinafore, but I had

never built a real building. And I must confess, my other student friends in the civil rights movement tended to be short on carpenter skills. So when we said we were carpenters for Christmas, we were taking a big risk. We needed volunteers who could actually build a church with bricks and mortar, put up an A-frame, and install electrical lighting. The publicity was a big help in causing volunteers with skills to come forward.

We all needed transportation to Mississippi, and that was no easy task. Oberlin had a lot of unusual constraints because of its special view about community. Since the College was attempting to promote an internal bond of self-sufficiency among the community of students, it had adopted a variety of policies--which generally were supported by students--which made our community different. We Oberlin students weren't allowed to have cars, so we weren't driving around every day. The idea was that if we had cars, we would be looking outside the community for entertainment and for community, when the entire goal was to create a self-sufficient community of students. For the same reason, fraternities and sororities were not permitted at Oberlin. The College believed that fraternities and sororities created an exclusive atmosphere, which contradicted the mission of the College, which was to include all members of the community.

In any event, we couldn't run around and find a bunch of cars from other students: we had to scrounge around the small town to find loaners, or someone to give us a ride. I took calculus from Professor Wade Ellis, a black professor of mathematics. Dr. Ellis was a wonderful teacher and a fine person. He was one of those many people who chipped in to help our venture from the Oberlin Community. Dr. Ellis had a really nice car, and he offered it to for the trip to Mississippi in December. Four students headed off through Kentucky and Tennessee to northern Mississippi in Dr. Ellis' car.

We traded off driving, and I found myself driving just north of Paris Tennessee in the middle of the night. As a Minnesota driver, I was used to driving in 30 below zero weather; but this Tennessee driving was something else. It had been above freezing during the day, and now at night it began to rain, and freeze. As my three companions slept, I suddenly hit a stretch of glaze ice: on either side steep banks dropped sharply down. Dr. Ellis' beautiful new car spun 360 degrees around on the ice, slid sideways toward the embankment.....

Our car slid to the edge of a ravine; the wheels caught in a ditch, and we avoided catastrophe, but just barely. Professor Ellis' car was damaged. We had to be towed to Paris Tennessee, where it was repaired, then on through Memphis to Ripley, Mississippi.

The church was in a rural part of Tippah County. Dirt roads wound through the trees and cotton fields, which of course were empty during the winter. Across from the church site was an old one room shack, which had once been a one-room store. Four of us decided that we would sleep in that shack at night to "guard" the church. We didn't want the church to be burned again. So we laid out our sleeping bags on the floor around an old wood stove. Other students stayed with sharecroppers in their homes here and there along the road.

We all pitched in on the church building: foundation, bricks, A-Frame. In the meantime, reporters and news media were visiting us all the time. The evening news carried us several times, and there were regular stories in the leading newspapers. As Christmas approached, a national discussion began on how to prevent church burnings and bombings. Other student groups formed to assist with other churches. A group formed to work with insurance companies to get insurance for black churches.

At night, we four traded watch; each staying up for about two hours. This led to what I would describe as a teenage adventure. It was kind of gloomy and lonely in that shack. We were on an old dirt farm road. Sometimes a car would drive by and stop its motor running. We could see people looking in, and it made us pretty nervous. We ourselves had our car sitting next to the shack. One night, while I was on watch, a car pulled up and started to shoot guns or firecrackers, or something. There were three guys in the car. I was nineteen; young and foolish. I decided to go out to our car and get a better view; I was going to get their license plate, so if something happened, we would have identification. I slipped into the car to take a look, but they saw me, and started to back up behind me. I couldn't get out of my car without being in plane view. So I turned on the motor and headed down the road. I was just trying to get out of the way. But they followed. I didn't want to drive into somebody's home, and risk them, so I beat it down the road, with these guys in pursuit. Then more shooting sounds. I began to feel more and more stupid. What was I doing out here in this country road in the middle of the night. I stepped on the gas. Pretty soon, I came to a corner store with a small parking lot. I turned into the parking lot, did a U-turn, and

started heading back in the other direction as they came upon me. Just like in the movies, eh. As they entered the intersection, they realized I was going to get away; I saw somebody point a gun in my general direction and I heard a shot. But I don't know if they shot at me, or were just having some fun at my expense.

The next morning, the newspapers carried the story. My parents learned that I had been chased and shot at by reading it in the local newspaper. Then they started to get some hate mail; from people who didn't like what I was doing. The FBI came and interviewed the others and me. They said they were going to keep an eye on us every once and a while. Nobody wanted anything bad to happen; it wouldn't look good on television.

After the coverage Stokely Carmichael drove up and held a meeting; remember I had met him previously on the drive down to see Fannie Lou Hamer. Stokely was upset, because the shooting incident had drawn attention to students from Oberlin. He was coming to believe that the freedom movement needed to focus more on local leaders. But the shooting evidence drew attention to the church burning problem once again, and played a part in getting people to think about how to protect houses of worship in the South.

For the next few days, we kept working on the church. On Christmas day, the minister, Reverend Spight, conducted the first services in his new church; and the services were filmed and carried on the national news. Carpenters for Christmas had accomplished its mission; it had rebuilt the church, and caused people to think a little bit about what we had become as a nation.

I returned to College, far behind in my studies. I had spent much of October getting ready for the freedom election, November and December preparing for Carpenters for Christmas, and my Christmas vacation building the church. I was emotionally unprepared to get back to my studies, because of my two adventures. Studying seemed so tame; instead of studying history, we were making it. how to study when you had been involved in so much excitement. Also, the success of Carpenters gave us stronger links to leadership of other organizations such as NAACP and SCLC. We were involved in a number of civil rights demonstrations and sit-ins in the north in our second semester. For example, we worked with the Cleveland NAACP to organize a protest of segregation in trade unions. Cleveland Ohio was, as

I recall, approximately 40% black. But in the construction trade unions, out of about 13,000 union members, only about 13 were black. When the federal government began to build the federal building in Cleveland with an all-white workforce, we joined the Cleveland NAACP to picket and sit-in. We blocked the construction trucks from entering the worksite. I was arrested with a bunch of other students and Cleveland residents. But the demonstrations resulted in an agreement with the federal government and trade unions to provide construction job opportunities to blacks.

Later, we organized a demonstration at the Hammermill Paper Plant in Erie Pennsylvania with Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLS) because of Hammermill's support for the City of Selma during the March on Selma: You may know about Bloody Sunday. An Encyclopedia entry states: "After the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson during the voter registration drive by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) it was decided to dramatize the need for a federal registration law. With the help of Martin Luther King and Ralph David Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), leaders of the SNCC organized a protest march from Selma to the state capitol building in Montgomery, Alabama. The first march on 1st February, 1965, led to the arrest of 770 people. A second march, led by John Lewis and Hosea Williams, on 7th March, was attacked by mounted police. The sight of state troopers using nightsticks and tear gas was filmed by television cameras and the event became known as Bloody Sunday. Martin Luther King led another march of 1,500 people two days later. After crossing the Pettus Bridge the marchers were faced by a barricade of state troopers. King disappointed many of his younger followers when he decided to turn back in order to avoid a confrontation with the troopers. Soon afterwards, one of white ministers on the march, James J. Reeb, was murdered."

Our demonstration against Hammermill occurred because Hammermill had decided to build a paper plant in Selma, and announced that new plant building on the day of Bloody Sunday, as a show of support for the leadership of the community. The Mayor of Selma used the announcement of the plant opening to convince Selma white citizens that they didn't need to worry about the attacks on demonstrators. He said that a major northern business had endorsed the Mayor's vision. In those days, many southern companies maintained two levels of wages, one for whites and one for blacks. In other words, black employees might do the very same jobs as their white counterparts, yet receive wages significantly lower. He made it

appear that Selma could grow economically, while ignoring the economic security and political rights of blacks.

We organized a sit-in demonstration at the Erie headquarters of Hammermill Paper Company. We worked with one of Martin Luther King's top leaders, C.T. Vivian. We asked Hammermill to become an active force for freedom and justice in its new community Selma. We asked it to agree to provide equal wages for blacks and whites, to support quality schools for the children of its black employees, and to urge the business community in Selma to support the right to vote. When Hammermill refused, hundreds of Oberlin students traveled to Erie. We blocked the railroad tracks going into the factory and the plant entrances. Ultimately, the Chief Executive Officer of the company invited us in to talk. We met for several hours that day, and our meeting ended with an historic agreement between SCLC and Hammermill, in which the company agreed to pay equal wages for equal work and agreed to promote quality schools for black children in Selma.

Organizing these efforts, however, took me away from my studies. I went from being on the dean's list in my freshman year, to being on academic probation in my sophomore year. My grade average went from A- my first year, down to below C- in my second. It took me the next two years to get my grade average up to the point where it wasn't totally embarrassing.

That summer, I was invited by leaders in Tippah County to return to work for their local organization. Here is a copy of the newsletter from the Holly Springs Office that talks about the summer project that I would be working on.....

church had been used weekly for freedom school and voter r
as usual it was probably no accident - though, as usual, t
who might have done it. The local people really want to r
of course, they don't have enough money. We're also sendi
new Antioch Church which the Oberlin kids rebuilt during C
other picture is the Baptist College that was burnt last s
organizing meetings.

Might as well get all the bad news over at once.
ing Saturday to go to school in California. They have the
finished and it will be printed by the next newsletter. W
a copy. We hope everyone thinks it is worth a little mone

James Batts, a local Benton County Negro, has gone
We lost 3 workers but gained 4. Chuck and Sherrie Wanner
Ron Carver and Eddie Mackey came from other projects. Kat
Pappeiner have just spent a week of their honeymoon with u
on their way to California. It seemed like the good ol' d

A number of the old staff have been asking us if t
like the one we had last summer. Plans for Mississippi ar
run through FDP rather than COFO. Partly because some peo
with the way last summer's project evolved through the yea
is that we feel that the local people are ready to organiz
supply some knowledge and skills (and time) they don't hav
charge of operations. Workers will live with local people
houses. Local people will decide what programs the volunt

My friend Stan Gunterman and I traveled to Ripley, and we spent the summer there. Our main local assistance came from local High School students. Wilbur Colum, a tenth grade student, accompanied us to meetings, introduced us to local black citizens, and himself spoke at meetings. Charlene Hill, a high school senior was also very helpful, and a true local leader in the civil rights movement. Think about this: their parents allowed Wilbur and Charlene to risk their lives by helping 19 year old college students. Wilbur and Charlene and a group of other students talked us into integrating the Ripley outdoor swimming pool. They organized a group of black students to go swimming in the local pool. When we arrived, a group of young burly looking whites surrounded the

pool, looking like they might attack us at any time. Think of the bravery of these high school students!

As you know, in 1954, in the Brown versus Board of Education decision, the Supreme Court had ruled that segregated schools were unlawful. But throughout the country, school boards actively resisted that decision. In Tippah County, the school board maintained two school systems, one for black students and one for white students. The black students school ran on "split-session," with a break during cotton-picking season. The students went to school during the heat of summer, without air condition. Then they broke during the cotton-picking season; school would recess for a significant period so that all of the students could go out and pick cotton with their families. The school district argued that the segregated schools had nothing really to do with racial segregation: it was merely an accommodation to black families desire to have their kids picking cotton. They needed two different schools, because the kids were on two different schedules.

Early that summer, we met with a group of sharecroppers. They said that there number one goal for the summer was to end school segregation: they believed that school segregation resulted in unequal distribution of resources. Many of these farmers knew that by sending their kids to a regular session school, they would be making a tremendous financial sacrifice: they needed the money that came from everybody picking cotton. But to them, the sacrifice would be worth it. They realized that a decent education was everything: and they were willing to make a sacrifice for their children's long-term welfare. Their schools didn't receive enough money to have textbooks, libraries and qualified teachers.

They didn't have the money to pay for lawyers; they wanted to help themselves. They decided that they wanted to boycott the schools, until they were integrated. The idea of the boycott was three-fold. First, they hoped that white leaders in the community would do the right thing, if pressed. Second, they hoped that publicity coming from the boycott would put public pressure on the community. Third, they recognized that the schools received money based on student attendance. They hoped that by boycotting, there would be financial pressure to change.

For a variety of reasons, including I think the boycott, the County schools did integrate eventually. A group of powerless, poorly educated,

sharecroppers had achieved, by organizing themselves, integration of a school system, when over a decade of litigation in other communities had not achieved that result. That summer, a group of high school students asked us to help them integrate the swimming pool. Ripley had only one public swimming pool--it was for whites only. When we came to the pool, some pretty tough looking guys surrounded us. I was pretty worried. But these brave students entered the pool and swam.

Well, I've probably given you too much information. I hope its been helpful. What has happened to Ripley and to Mississippi over the years? In many communities throughout the south, persons opposed to school integration built private schools so that they could maintain school segregation. Rather than making good public schools for all, they decided to pull out of the public school system. In many communities, whites began to move to other neighborhoods and using housing segregation to achieve school segregation. But in Ripley, the schools remain integrated to this day; the white community decided to invest in their public schools and to make school integration work. There are no local private schools, I understand; everyone attends pubic schools together.

Wilbur Colum, the young high school student traveled north to finish high school in Oberlin. He went on to become a prominent Alabama lawyer. He once represented a white male who had been denied admission to an all female nursing school, and Wilbur won that case in the United States Supreme Court. Wilbur is fairly wealthy; he bought a publishing company which publishes black romance novels, by which device he seeks to encourage reading. Ripley Mississippi has had a black sheriff; Holly Springs a black Mayor.

When I returned to Holly Springs for a reunion in 2003 I met many of my old friends, including Wilbur Colum. Here our picture. I'm on the left, Wilber on the right and his mother in the center. Here is a link to Wil's [law office](#) where he practices today.



We went back to the old church, as I have said. It is still an active congregation. They've added on a bit, and some of the same families attend. The road leading to the church is now paved. They gave us a grand celebration, fed us until we could not eat any more. And then we had ceremony, and they let me speak to the congregation. They said we were heroes, but I told them that the real heroes, the real civil rights workers did not look like us at all, graying and elderly. No, they looked like the youngsters in the teenage choir. For the movement in those days was composed of youngsters, from 16 to 22, just like you.

Where are some of my friends and co-workers.

Marcia Aronoff, who was co-chair of Oberlin NAACP, became the legislative assistant to



Marcia Aronoff

Senator Bill Bradley, and she assisted him in his presidential campaign. She now works for the Environmental Defense Fund. Martha Honey, who I mentioned above, became an activist in Central America, and now works for a left-wing think tank in Washington, D.C. My good friend Joe Gross joined a commune, and then went to law school.



Joe Gross

He is now retired after working in the general counsel's office of a major national accounting firm (not Arthur Anderson). I became a high school teacher and taught high school math and social studies for five years. Then I went to law school; I now practice law here in St. Cloud Minnesota.

Wil Colom, practices law in Mississippi and Alabama. His website tells his story: He is the founding, senior partner of the Colom Law Firm, with offices in Columbus and Jackson, Mississippi and in Atlanta, Georgia. As a young lawyer, barely five years out of law school, he argued Mississippi University for Women vs. Hogan before the Supreme Court, successfully establishing the major precedent abolishing single-sex, state supported education. From there, Mr. Colom has gone on to become a nationally recognized trial lawyer and, during a distinguished twenty-eight year career, has successfully litigated many major cases and protecting the rights of his clients in such diverse proceedings as those involving the drugs Duract and

Phen-Fen, the First Family Finance Company, and Kerr-McGee's Forest Products Division. Wil was a co-founder of the Mississippi Innocence project



Best regards