

THOSE WHO CAME

Journal from
AFSC Voter Registration Project
Sumter, South Carolina 1966

Abby Young

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Dedicated to the Children of Sumter, South Carolina

“We are the children of tomorrow
We pray for our lives
Our loves
Our time of being
Make peace, our fathers, make peace.”

*--Written on the wall of
Operation Bootstrap community center
in Watts, Los Angeles, 1965*

Preface

A powerful Civil Rights Conference held during my freshman year at Pomona College brought major leaders from the South to speak to our primarily white campus in Claremont, California. The year was 1963 and these leaders were traveling the country to bring stories from the South and the Civil Rights Movement to students and the wider public. Their stories of courage and spirit in the face of hatred and violence shattered my sheltered upbringing overnight and uprooted me completely.

I became very active in the in the Civil Rights Movement from that time on, working in the urban Black communities in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and focusing my college studies on Race, Black History, and Political Change.

But I had never been to the South. A friend working with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Georgia encouraged me to come. I knew from his letters how difficult and dangerous this work was. I also knew that it was time to do my part. So in the summer of 1966, between my junior and senior years, I left for Sumter, South Carolina to join a summer Voter Registration Project sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. I kept a journal during the short time I was there, and excerpts from that time are remembered here.

Explanatory note: historically there have been many changes in usage to address the evolving sensibilities and realities on the issue of race in America—and rightly so. For editorial consistency, here the terms “black” and “white” have been used without capitalization, but this is open to change as we all change together

SOUTH CAROLINA, 1966

June 22, 1966

Why we are compelled to go South is somewhat of a mystery to me. But still thank God, we do. I question whether it is my place as a white Northerner to interfere. I think it is.

So I'm on my way to South Carolina to take part in an AFSC voter registration project. Sure I'm afraid. But afraid of the strangest things. I'm afraid of the raw-boned reality I'm going to meet. I'll see people hurting, and I know that will be hardest.

But I'm driven to go. I'd kind of forgotten why, but remembered for an instant this morning in the plane when I saw the sun rise. I watched it color the sky as it came slowly barreling up. I looked straight into it and it was molten light.

I remembered then how I had stared into this same sun one late afternoon as a freshman at Pomona College just after the Civil Rights Conference ended. The sun was burning into my eyes, but I remember I still stared into it very grimly. I was making a promise to myself at that time—a promise that I wouldn't forget the hurt and the pain of racism that I had just been confronted with, and that had shattered my view of the world.

And so I remembered that promise this morning and was glad.

June 23 – Columbia, S.C.

Coming into the airport in Columbia, I asked a soldier on the plane if any of those guys on the plane were going to Vietnam. "Coming back," he said. Suddenly I don't feel heroic at all.

It's hot. We are staying overnight with a local couple, Sharon and Dick Miles, in their four-room apartment. Our hosts are warm and welcoming, and no one seems to mind that it is pleasantly chaotic. Our AFSC project leaders for the summer are Bob and Margaret Welsh. They have a baby, nicknamed Squeaky. Squeaky is part of our project too.

As of tonight, there will be nine of us white volunteers coming together from around the country. Four more volunteers from black Southern colleges and universities will join us when we arrive in Sumter. Some of our group here have prior experience with the Peace Corps, Job Corps, tutoring inner city kids, or living in the South, but none of us really knows what is going to happen this summer.

As each member of the group arrives, I feel an underlying energy and spirit. The Movement is something visceral. It is a Movement-Toward. It is beautiful and young and brave, and we are all inexorably drawn by its magnetism. We have all sacrificed something to come.

June 24, Columbia

We had orientation today. A VISTA leader from North Carolina, Charles Webster, spoke to us about “moderate progress.” A young woman, Edna Smith, told us about her work with the “Speed-Up” Program for early childhood education. An older woman, Mrs. Libby Dean, gave a talk about her experience working to integrate and improve local schools for over twenty years.

From what I saw and heard today, a huge sea change has been rumbling underneath the surface for decades. At depth, the rumbling barely breaks a ripple on the surface. But now, I am down there too--feeling the rumbling and joining in with those who are moving and changing things from below. Up top, the image shivers.

Later, after dinner, we went to our first party as a mixed group. Lots of uneasy talk. It’s a strange world here. I feel completely raw.

June 24, Sumter

We left Columbia and headed for Sumter early in the afternoon. Already we’re impatient to get there. I saw the swamps go by, then miles and miles of trees. But how come every car looks so sinister? The hair bristles on the back of my neck. I smell violence—maybe not for me—but it’s in the land, and I shudder at it.

Sumter is a small town. Its one main street has many shops, with side streets that are filled and busy. Out past town we went, over the tracks and into the black part of town.

We are staying in the parsonage of the Second Presbyterian Church. It has been loaned out to us for the whole summer. Sunday School classes had to move to the basement of the church next door, but that’s all right, they tell us.

As we arrived, the local kids were immediately around us and shyly underfoot, saying yes ma’am, yes sir to us all. I felt very awkward and yet so pleased.

The ladies of the church came over to bring us supper, each one coming in with a wide smile, carrying a dish. We shook hands up and down, smiling and saying our names over and over. They brought us a true feast: potato salad, fried chicken, sherbet, mints, cookies, and koolaid. We were all so glad simply to be here.

The kids still couldn’t get over us. After dinner, we played ball and laughed together, getting used to each other.

The house is beautiful. It is a two-story parsonage with big bulky furniture and plaster coming off the walls and ceilings. Sunday School signs are still on the walls. The women all share one bedroom, and the men another.

Gathering for our first group meeting, our project leader Bob told us that the Friends practice what is known as “searching for the truth.” That means you need to hear each

person's say and put yourself inside each person's skin and listen. So all the voices in our own group must be heard and considered before making any decisions. Just as we need to hear and listen to all those we will be meeting on the outside.

A poster in the women's bedroom says:

The Task of the Church: Witnessing

1. *Witness to specific situations*
2. *Witness is based on hope*
3. *Witness is made possible by the spirit of God.*

We are here to witness too.

June 26, Sunday, Sumter

I went to Mount Pisgah AME church with Louie D., a Sumter resident and one of our local leaders. Reverend F.C. James, was presiding. It was a magnificent service with lots of singing. The congregation harmonizes to the hymns with voices that swell into a huge gust of sound. Then the sound dies out and gathers strength for yet another surge. It was grand.

Lord I want to be a Christian

In my heart, in my heart.

Lord, I want to be more loving

In my heart, in my heart.

Later in the service, Reverend James introduced Louie and me and gave our summer project a pitch. Heads turned.



That evening we went to a mass meeting at a school gym in Clarendon County in support of Reverend Hunter who is in a run-off election tomorrow. He is running again for the South Carolina House of Representatives, after losing the first election by only 69 votes to a white opponent. People stared at us white newcomers. A woman held my hand tightly as I beamed into her face. She said, "You know, it's not often we see such a friendly face,"

One of the speakers told this story:

"A mother," he said, once lost her son in the wheat fields. She did not know what to do. She called her neighbor and together they went through that field looking for the child. But night fell and still they could not find him. The mother returned home, her heart heavy. That night she prayed to the Lord. And the Lord that night whispered in her ear: 'Tomorrow, go forth, and call all your neighbors from all around. Then you all join hands and walk through that wheat field, till you find the lost child.' So early the next morning, the mother rose and she called together all her neighbors from all around. Then they joined hands and together walked through the field. And suddenly one of them cried 'I have found the child!' And there was great rejoicing."

When the story ended, the speaker said, “We must all join hands till we find that child.” We have come to join those neighbors and find that child.

June 28, Sumter, Manning

This morning nine of us picked up and went to Manning to help bring in voters for Rev. Hunter’s election today. We arrived at the AME church early and sat around impatiently. It was our first day of canvassing and we were all excited to get going.

My first assignment was to visit two neighborhoods with three young girls from the community--Rosalie, Bertie, and Celestine--each about fourteen. We walked along quietly together. The first lady we went up to was sitting on her porch, swinging back and forth in her chair. “Ma’am,” said one of the young girls, “have you voted today?” She shook her head slowly. “Are you registered yet, Ma’am?” Again, she shook her head slowly “Ain’t going to.” We thanked her and walked on.

Hot dusty roads all morning.

What I saw that first day was difficult to absorb—unpaved dirt roads, small shacks, dusty gardens, gates and fencing falling down. And everywhere, children—clinging to their mothers, peering up at us with huge eyes, or hiding behind doorways. Got a few stares from white men driving by. Lingering and piercing.



Back at the AME church I met Barbette B. and Brenda B. who had volunteered to help us canvas. They are both just sixteen and told me they have done “much of this kind of thing” before. Brenda has a great, quick smile, and she and I started shyly talking. After a while, she told me about some of her experiences—the guys being rolled, the girls being terrified, how she’d lost a tooth “doing this kind of stuff,” and how she figured if she was going to die, she was going to die. I was stunned by her courage and her story.

We went out to lunch, Brenda, Babette, and me. We stood waiting and talking outside the window of the take-out place amid stares and stalling from the indoor staff. The three of us were all very much aware of the stalling. When we left, Brenda and Babette giggled. What grace there is in laughter.



That afternoon, I drove into the country with Rosalie, Bertie, and Celestine. We were going to pick up a lady so she could come into town to vote. Several young white boys about the same age as my companions were standing by the polling place as we arrived, and stared at us very coldly. As we left, they came out on the steps and jeered, flipping us the bird and mouthing “Fuck you, you bitch.” The young girls replied in kind!

We drove on to Sommerton and stopped at a polling place. One elderly man who could barely walk was led in carefully by one of the poll-watchers. He came out, suppressing

his pride and his grin. He didn't know where to go, so headed off in the wrong direction. The poll-watchers gently guided him back. He was solitary and radiant. Tears came to my eyes. I stayed watching the voting until a policeman told me to leave. I was evidently smiling too broadly myself.

June 29, Sumter

Today was our first day of canvassing for registration in Sumter. The proportions of the task finally struck me. This is going to be hard, daily, grinding work. Our initial contacts with people are so sketchy and superficial, but registration is just the beginning. There is so much more to do.

Roy G., one of our Southern members, organized the group for the day. I was paired with Bill W. At 4:00 PM we set off on our routes. The first lady we met was agreeable and ready to register. We were surprised and excited. The lady at the next house wouldn't talk to us or give us her name. One lady said apologetically "I lost my Bible and I can't remember how old I am." At one stop, two ladies tried to avoid us by going around to the back of their house. But we went around back too. They jumped when they saw us, and then we all laughed together.

In the end, we made appointments to pick up about six people after having canvassed two blocks of thirty people. Atty. Finney says to get 30% response we are doing well.

June 30, Sumter

The work is slow, the mornings free, and I never know quite how to use them. The neighborhood children are always around, and I get such joy from being with them. They are so open and hungry for things to do. Putting a program together for them would be a full-time job though and right now we simply don't have the time. But I'm working on it.

Canvassing this afternoon was very tiring and dusty and long. Three and a half hours a day is all we do, and yet the time can seem unending.

Today we met a beautiful lady named Mary Davis. She is 80 years old. At first, she protested about registering, saying she had arthritis, she was deaf, she couldn't read. I was sitting close to her and listening intently to what she was saying. At a certain point, she looked at me and somehow we connected. She turned slowly then, and said querulously, "Next Tuesday?" We were so happy we felt like flying. We promised her a wheel chair, strong men to roll her in it, and the world.

July 1, Sumter

We had a good group meeting at the house today in which we finally hashed out some questions that have been creating tension for us. Why are we here? Is it just to register people and leave it at that? Or do we use our canvassing to find out the larger needs of the community and then follow up? This has been bothering me considerably. We

decided to discover what is going on with welfare, housing, public health and other issues, and to try to get the local people informed and acting on it together if possible.



Another new thing is in the air: I asked the kids what activities they would like to do, and they started spouting ideas on every hand—plays, painting, dancing, drawing, and more. So after lunch, Jim C. and I, led by a band of about twenty children, headed for the nearby community center to see if we could use it for some activities. As we walked across the highway to check things out, the children were scattering and leaping around us in excitement.

The park is not big or even nice. There is broken glass all over, with broken swings and a broken spinning platform. The children didn't seem to mind and just swarmed all over the equipment, laughing, shouting, and screaming.

I was surprised to see white children playing there too. They were part of a group of about ten white people, led by a heavy-set lady along with a few teen-agers. "They never talk to us," said our kids. After a while their group retreated to huddle in the shade of a tree from which they watched us.

Jim went over to them. I played on with our kids, but suddenly it was tense. Jim started talking with them. We didn't know what would come next.

Finally I too went over to the group, and the children followed. Once under the tree together, all our children pressed close to Jim and me, absolutely still and silent. I felt very much on the spot and yet very protective of our little group.

Jim was talking with the lady:

The lady: "We believe it ain't Christian to mix them.

Jim: Christ never said that.

The lady: Well, he made them the color they are. Just tell us when you're going to bring them and we'll know what to do. We can't have our children wading in the same pool with them, you understand.

Jim: Ma'am, they have as much a right to wade as your children. And they are simply full of energy and must get it out.

The lady: Stony Hill, down the road, that's for colored.

Jim: That's too far, Ma'am.

The lady: Has all the same facilities.

Jim: Have you ever been there?

The lady: No. That's the colored section. Now this is for white. White people made this and painted it. Just tell us when you're going to come and we'll know what to do.

Jim: We can't stop them, Ma'am.

The lady: (astonished) Well, you brought them here. You brought them here—holding two of them by the hand!

Jim (quietly): It's a new day.

One of the teenagers muttered: Not until I die.

The lady: We wouldn't hurt them for the world, see—we just don't want them around our kids."

The strange thing is that, when confronted with each other face to face, we were all abashed. All of us. Our two groups sat and talked quietly together. Entrenched, but for a moment at least, speaking. And no one was exploding—no one—from the extended contact.

Our group played a while longer and then left. We must go back.



This afternoon I went canvassing with Hammie Lee J. as my guide. He is thirteen and has a sharp and comical wit. I was glad to be paired with him—my contact, my guide, my friend.

We came to a small one-room shack with advertisements hung on the patchwork boarding. We pulled a string on the door, and a voice called us to enter. In the center of the single room sat an elderly lady. The room was darkened and smelled of neglect. The lady was blind or near blind, and almost totally deaf. She was just sitting there, hands on the chair, alone in the dark. As Hammie Lee spoke, she leaned forward, straining to hear him, and then, giving up, lapsed into muttering about her children. She finally said, "Come tomorrow." Hammie Lee's face was sober. He said, "Yes ma'am, yes ma'am," and we both left very subdued.

The earth smelled sweet, the corn was tall. But at one point I thought I would not be able to go on, and had to force myself to get out of the car.



That night, a group of us stamped letters for a Medicare notice. Afterwards, we drove to the Dairy Maid for a sundae. All of us sat laughing and joking and talking in the car.

When we left though, some young white men in a car followed us. They turned up their headlights, yelling obscenities at us through the window at the stoplight. As they tailed us back to our side of town, Louie sat very still in the car and smoked. I jabbered and then was silent. No use pretending.

July 2, Sumter

It thundered and squalled last night. We woke up to rain spitting in our face. The kids refer to this as “dripping rain.”

Today I was paired up with Harold B. for canvassing, one of our Southern university members. We went out into the country early the afternoon. Because it was Saturday, I was able to spend a longer time talking with people at each stop, and felt much better about my role that way.

We met a blind lady and her ailing sister. They promised to come register. The blind lady carefully repeated all the necessary information and names. “Her memory is good as gold,” said her sister.

We stopped at Whites and Lilli’s Store, a one-room store full of intriguing jars. The proprietor came out, standing bent-over as he greeted us. He had fine lines around his bright, tired eyes. “My wife just died,” he told us. “I’m ready to close this out. Just come over part of the time.” We’re picking him up Tuesday.

Walking past rows of cornstalks, we saw clouds boiling around the horizon and a deep blue sky going on and on. It was almost peaceful.



A beguiling peace, however. Toni P., one of the white volunteers, reported that the same afternoon, she had been driving in the same area when her car got trapped in the sand. A frail elderly black couple came out to help push. They almost had the car out of the hole when a group of young white men pulled up and parked crossways across the road. At the taunt of “N... Lover,” the small couple froze, and then faded back into their house. Toni started to get out of the car, but the young men did too. So she settled back in the car, locked all the doors, and waited them out. After twenty minutes of taunting, they were gone.

Among the white volunteers, I think we have a false sense of security—being as we are a grafted part of the black community. We feel safe in the black part of town, but don’t really understand how deep the divisions run, or even the danger any of us may be facing—or creating.

So what good am I, a small outsider here for this short time? Soon I too will melt back into my own community, leaving this essential ugliness and confrontation, no matter what my good intentions and small actions.



It began to rain later in the afternoon just as I had gotten downtown with four of the young girls from our community. We took refuge at a Kress lunch counter. I got horribly paranoid sitting there. People hanging around outside. Everyone staring. Men in the store, riveting us with their eyes. I thought how much hate must have gone on over this stinking counter. It turns my stomach to go into the white community with friends from the black community. And yet we must do it--to show them it can be done.

We came home, sopped. It was beating down rain, and I was grateful for nature's interference.

July 3, Sumter

Today was communion Sunday at Mount Pisgah. Reverend James is really fine. His sermons make me cry.

Back at the parsonage, we had a big Sunday dinner of hash and corn, and then prepared for our community meeting. We had invited people from our canvassing visits to come discuss community problems. Eventually, six people showed. At first, the talk was very constricted, and people felt uneasy. But as we defined a few more of the local problems and got some contacts, it ended with all of us feeling fairly enthusiastic about the possibility of getting something started.

July 4, Poinsett State Park

Rise and shine everyone! We woke at 7:30 am, eager to head out for our July 4 picnic, and waited impatiently till 11:00 for everyone to be ready. We headed out into the countryside for Poinsett State Park in high spirits, past rich red dirt and piney woods.

Once at the park, we put blankets on the grass and had a picnic of spareribs, baked beans, and potato salad. We canoed in the lake, and then started a high-energy baseball game. In the middle of the game, about 10 young black guys from another group came over and asked to join us. All of us played hard and happy.

Harold and I got into a water fight at the end of the day, and ran squirting each other all around the field. "The looks you got!" said Margaret. It was a wonderful day.

July 5, Sumter

We were posted as poll-watchers at the Registration Board all day today. Everything went pretty smoothly. But in expectation of us they had posted signs advising registrants to "Please! Enter by side door."

As poll-watchers we weren't allowed to go inside, but we would confer with the people we brought as they came out, sending them back in if needed. A few were refused

because they couldn't subtract their ages to get a birth date, a few others because they couldn't remember birthdays. Very few were totally turned away.

I was delighted to see 80-year old Mary Davis arrive in a car. Smiling broadly, she said "They came out to the car to register me. Ah yes, I was so happy!" Another lady, holding up her registration card, said to us with a big smile, "I'm not going to lose this for anything!"

At the end of the day, we saw 73 people registered.



While we were waiting there, an elderly white man came up. He was quaky and thin as a reed. I thought he would blow over. He wanted to know where Medicare was. I felt sorry for him. We sent him over to one of our cars where one of our drivers sat with a lady who had just registered. I saw the driver glaring suspiciously behind the wheel as the man approached, and hoped they would work it out. Yes, he got in the car all right, and off they went to drop him at the Medicare office.

That evening, there was an NAACP meeting about Medicare. Tuomey Hospital in Sumter won't comply with the Federal standards and so does not qualify for Medicare reimbursements. This cuts across black and white lines. Could this be an issue for community cooperation?

July 6, Sumter

This afternoon, a company of us dispatched ourselves to the tracks for canvassing. Today I was paired with Bill W. By the end of our shift, we were hot and sweaty and dirty. At every turn, people would say, "Come in and sit down. It's hot to be walking around like that."

One lady we met was washing clothes in a tub. She was very suspicious, but then we got to talking—or rather listening. Her husband had been shot. Salvation Army kept her kids in clothes. Two of the seven have gone to school, and these two little ones running around were her grandchildren. She kept spitting blood through her teeth, aiming at various corners of the yard. She didn't want to talk about registering. Life had already been too hard.

We got 87 names on the books today.

July 7, Sumter - Last day of registration for this registration period.

This morning I got an unexpected letter from my father. He had been out of the country with his second wife when I left to join the project. It said: "Get your ass on home in twenty-four hours or I'll take your mother to court."

I sat stunned and unbelieving. Toni came in and looking at my face, sat down. Is it a death?” she asked. Suddenly I was embarrassed for considering myself indispensable, but also angry for having wasted time that I now knew was so precious. “No,” I said, then added, “thank God.”

But it did feel like a death. I have become so deeply attached to this project, and to every single person I have met. I have never been so totally committed to anything in my life. The feelings were so strange. Nightmare... unreality.... dizziness.

I sat staring out the window--Toni simply there, waiting. I saw bicycles go by, a little boy walk underneath. I felt the place started reeling away from me—almost a physical sensation—as I tried to gather my guts and prepare for disengaging my heart.



I broke the news to our project leaders but not yet to any of the other members in our group. I wanted to see the last day through on my own. So I made a few calls, sent a telegram, and then went out to do my shift at the Registration Board. I sat there boiling in the sun, sweating grimly and gladly. Every person was a light to me. Every face a victory.

I sat until 5:00 pm and when all was told, we had 106 names registered for the day. We were all excited, but I was ecstatic. To have accomplished this! I was so grateful that if indeed I had to leave, I had seen at least this one small thing through.

So that is how I got through today. By not talking about it, by wanting to see everything going on as usual—and just taking in every moment.



Tonight was the talent show rehearsal. This was the one activity I had been planning with the kids, and it was happening at last. The children were milling around now. At the hint of activity, they appeared from nowhere--Linda, Betty, Patricia, Janie, Barbara Jean, Yvonne, Yvette, Anabelle, Rosalie, Bertie, Celestine, Julie, Hammie Lee, Malachi, James, Bernard, Thomas, Jimmie, Robert Lee. I couldn't stop hugging them.

The rehearsal degenerated painlessly into a dance and a great release of energy. Gay and I took two of them, Patricia and Barbara Jean, into the dark dining room to continue “planning,” but their young heads kept turning wistfully towards the sounds of the dance.

It is the children that I am most torn to leave. I will never forget them waving and calling at me, “Abby! Hi Abby! Is Abby there? Abby, here is my record to play. Abby will you be Treasurer of the Talent Show? Abby, do ushers wear black? Abby! I want to draw, I want to dance. Can I play the guitar? Abby Abby Abby!”

Toni and I didn't talk much that night before bed, just good-night. "We'll miss you," she said. "I'll miss you too."

I lay awake thinking for a long time, and recalled my earlier fears about the "raw-boned reality" I was coming to meet. I realized that in my short time here I have not experienced any real hate--I have mainly seen a lot of love.



July 8, Sumter

At this morning's meeting, we celebrated the final registration tally. In the three-day open registration period from July 5-7, we had registered a total of 266 voters. Now we will divide up into action groups to handle other community issues--citizenship education, slum lords, electricity and plumbing, education, and welfare. So everything is finally take shape.

Then I had the floor. Smoking fiendishly, and with much difficulty, I told them all my news. Everyone was very silent.

I left right after with Atty. Finney for Washington D.C. and the airport.

I'll be back.

