

Natchitoches Parish

Scouting Report

April 1965

Comments on Contacts:

Ben Johnson is the most influential and rich Negro in the parish and is opposed to CORE working there. His reasons are obscure to me; the man himself is remote. I've had four or five strained conversations with him; he is always polite, but says the Natchitoches Parish Voters' League (of which he is president) can handle registration in that parish. Perhaps in the future, he says, CORE will be needed, but not now. He talks like an activist in the fields of Civil Rights, but he won't help me find school desegregation plaintiffs and he opposed his son's testing of a movie in Natchitoches (which did desegregate).

Johnson owns two funeral homes that I know of, one in Winnfield, one in Natchitoches, and is president of the Winnfield Mortuary Insurance Company, which insures funeral homes in nine parishes in north Louisiana. Many people in Rapides and Natchitoches affirm that he is easily a millionaire.

Rev. Scott, a member of the Voters' League tells me he is in favor of CORE working there, but he doesn't appear to have much influence over the other members. Same for Rev. Barnum. Scott invited me to a meeting of the Voters' League, but after I spoke, Johnson attempted to neutralize my voter registration spiel by bringing up the "mess" in Jonesboro and Bogalusa.

Mrs. Ward is a civic-minded school teacher, who has involved herself with the more conservative phases of civil rights work. She, too, is a member of the Voters' League, is trying to interest her student in canvassing for registration (brought 70 of them to Voters' League meeting), and is the initiator of the Headstart Program for Natchitoches.

Mr. Walker is a young militant school teacher who took part in the demonstrations at Southern with Ronnie. However, he will be in south La. for the summer.

Summary:

Although there are potentially good people in Natchitoches, they are all somehow under the thumb of Ben Johnson. It appears that as long as he opposes our working there, finding housing or any overt adult support will be difficult.

J. Rollins