

# "They Know They're Niggers"\*

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With military suppression of the Oxford insurrection and restoration of peace to Mississippi, long silent voices of "moderation" rose in regretful tones there to deplore the fatal defiance and call for loyalty to the United States Government and decrees of its highest court.

Mississippi, no longer fevered with the delusion of its state sovereignty, was once again secured as a state of the Union. And on the riot-wrecked campus of the University a few students and teachers moved with gestures of welcome and commendation to James Meredith himself, the 29-year-old Negro whose admission to the school inspired a night-long fight between a mob and federal force. The principles of federal sovereignty and of Negro rights to equal public education seemed established.

But in the long Mississippi Delta and eastward, where the blue sky is low and the rich earth and half the people are black, white Mississippians still fight in old Deep South style the push of Negro neighbors to register to vote. They still oppose this 15-month effort with guns from country ambush, evictions from jobs and homes, false arrests, misapplication of local law, huge fines and long jail sentences, police and private beatings on city streets and country roads, and with threats, insults and the deep dread which white anger calls up in subjected Negroes.

Two Negroes are dead, one a voter registration leader killed by a state

representative and another whose body was found stone-weighted in a river bed, unidentified and unexplained. Two young girls, innocent of voting activity, were shot from a passing car and gravely injured, one of whom may be crippled for life.

The broken jaws, black eyes, cracked ribs and split heads of Negroes and friendly whites incident to this resistance are not susceptible to accurate count from newspaper clippings, court testimony, first-hand accounts and news releases from Negro organizations working in small-town and plantation Mississippi. Nor are the lost jobs and homes, property damage, loan and mortgage foreclosures, warnings and other means of tireless terrorization so long and expertly perfected in deepest Dixie. This account has no statistics, either, on the number of literate Negroes rejected at registrars' offices, while registrars assist whites to answer Mississippi's perennially peculiar literacy tests.

Whatever lessons in loyalty, law and prudence Alabama and South Carolina may be absorbing from the federal victory at Oxford, white patriots of the Mississippi Delta seem undaunted by their cohorts' recent defeat in battle with the United States.

The latest word of their dedicated resistance to Negro franchisement, as NEW SOUTH goes to press, is the arrest of the Rev. Jeff Surney in Cleveland, a few days after the quelled insurrection at Ole Miss, on four charges of passing bad checks six and eight months ago. Mr. Surney recently moved his family from Ruleville, being

\*Police Chief George Guy of McComb.

evicted from his home and farm tenancy and otherwise economically squeezed out of the community by white neighbors displeased with his wife's and son's assistance in the voter campaign, and not satisfied with young Mr. Surney's arrest, fine and jail sentence for vote activity.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee first moved into Mississippi to work with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People members in the state to instruct, encourage and accompany Negroes to vote, a year ago last August.

This descent evoked traditional Deep South response which involved four beatings for Robert Moses, SNCC registration leader, many arrests of SNCC workers and their local Negro friends, long jail sentences and expulsion from high school for demonstrating students, white attacks on Negroes unprotected by police and the killing of a Negro farmer by a state legislator. Violence and harassment included an attack on John Hardy with a pistol butt by the registrar at Tylertown, an incident which recently reached the Supreme Court in a Justice Department suit to enjoin Registrar Woods from such intimidations of citizens trying to vote. The high court upheld the Justice Department injunction. This white resistance in 1961 is recorded in part in *NEW SOUTH* of October 1961 and in more vivid detail in *REVOLUTION IN MISSISSIPPI* by Tom Hayden, a report of Students for Democratic Society.

The staunch spirit which inspires Mississippi's war on Negro franchise-ment is eloquently expressed in Mr. Hayden's interview with Police Chief George Guy of McComb, who explained the tax free benevolence which whites accord Negroes and that "They know they're niggers; they know their

place."

This brief resume of Delta vigilance in 1961 against threats to its ancient social and political arrangements, cannot describe in full the most regionally colorful aspects of Mississippi resistance to change: the flexible use of local and state law to punish Negroes asserting their rights; the richly colloquial expressions of race hatred, insult and warnings from individual white supremacists, from courthouse and police officials and from the bench of local and state courts, and the loyal rapport of indigenous FBI agents with fellow Mississippi authorities, a sympathy of feeling which has frequently frustrated both Negroes aspiring to citizenship and the Justice Department attempting to protect them.

The Voter Education Project, a southwide drive to register southern Negroes to vote and to supply the Southern Regional Council with research information on registration patterns and problems, opened shop in Atlanta last April and granted funds to Mississippi voting workers in the NAACP, Congress of Racial Equality, SNCC and other indigenous groups. After three months, at the suggestion of VEP Director Wiley A. Branton, these organizations pooled their efforts and risks in a statewide vote promotion union, The Council of Federated Organizations, operating mainly in the Delta, and chose Aaron E. Henry as president and Mr. Moses as director.

This reinforcement and coordination of Negro campaigners evoked greater resolve from the embattled whites and inspired louder cries of "communist conspiracy" in the press, on street corners, in courthouses, banks and stores, and all around under the magnolias.

Forrest County Registrar Theron Lynd in Hattiesburg, under Justice De-

partment orders to cease discrimination against Negroes trying to register, late in April rejected 19 more, including four college graduates, and the Justice Department sued him for contempt. A few days later Mr. Lynd's office failed two Negroes who applied and took tests, giving no reason for their failure, and put off two more who came twice to register.

Three white students and one Negro from Oberlin and Coe Colleges, visiting Mississippi to look at race relations, were arrested with white Mississippi attorney William Higgs of Jackson and held without charge for 10 hours at Clarksdale, after they left a political rally for the Rev. Merrill Lindsey, Negro candidate for congress. Mr. Higgs, the only white lawyer in Mississippi who has defended Negro civil rights cases, and legal advisor for Lindsey in his campaign, had accompanied the student visitors on a "mixed" swim on nearby United States government property.

Three young Negroes, Bobby Talbert, W. T. Allen, and Charles Ray McLaurin, and one white man, Peter Stoner, in the voting movement were arrested June 2 in Jackson, the state capitol, while demonstrating for civil rights on the steps of the Jackson Federal Building. They picketed in protest against contempt of court convictions of two young Negroes who sat on the white side of a Hinds County courtroom, against pressures on Campbell College in Jackson and for Negro employment on city buses. The four refused to make \$500 bond set by the police court judge, who postponed their trial, and remained in jail. Several civil rights organizations protested to Washington this city arrest of peaceful picketers on federal property.

July 3, 20-year-old Jesse Lee Harris and 17-year-old LeVaghn Brown of

the Jackson Movement, finished their 40-day jail sentences for contempt of court, occasioned by sitting on the white side of the courtroom during the trial of Mrs. Diane Nash Bevel (for "contributing to delinquency of minors" in her work with young Jackson Negroes). Mr. Harris and Mr. Brown emerged from prison with reports of another form of Mississippi war on Negroes, cruel and unusual punishment in prison. Harris said a deputy sheriff taking him from the courtroom to the county jail, called him "a damn nigger" and beat him on the head, and that at the county farm the two were dressed in striped uniforms, where other prisoners were not, and denied association with other prisoners. Both young men said they were beaten several times at the county farm prison. On one occasion a guard named Keith, when he learned Harris had been a sit-in demonstrator, beat Harris with a length of hose while other prisoners held him. Keith, said Harris, later beat him repeatedly with a stick when he was unable to move a log, and sent him to a county "sweat box" for solitary on bread and water for 30 hours. Mr. Brown also was beaten twice with heavy sticks, he said, by a guard named Douglas Wright, who ordered other prisoners to hold him.

A police beating of a 14-year-old boy in Greenwood, Mississippi, where the voter Council has an office, is not ostensibly linked with registration efforts, except by Negro presumption that this was a part of official acts to intimidate, and by rural Deep South tradition of random Negro punishment in times of tension to express the mood of the white community.

Welton McSwine, Jr., who told police "I go to the cotton field all the time and back home," was arrested

and questioned for information on the breaking and entering of a white woman's home in July. This interrogation, conducted in a back cell, included beating the boy with fists and a black jack and a whip-lashing as he lay naked on the floor, he testified. Police interrupted the flogging at a buzzing signal, as SNCC field secretary Samuel Block interprets it from young McSwine's account, to stop the child's screams and turn on a TV set to drown out further cries.

The buzzer sounded as Mr. McSwine, Sr., arrived at the Greenwood jail, after his white employer had called police and asked them to release Welton in his father's custody, Block's report says. Welton said police told him to stop crying, wash his face, dress and go to the courtroom, and that when he entered the wrong room, a policeman struck him on the head, shoved him into the courtroom and directed, "That room, nigger." Mr. McSwine took his son home and to a doctor for treatment of swelling welts on his body, documented by photographs.

What is mildly called "harassment" persisted in the Delta to injure, dismay and deprive, if not daunt, uprising Negroes. The voter campaigners in late summer and fall, in their turn, persisted for ballot rights and representation with a petition to be presented to the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives. The petition asks that the election of Jamie Whitten to congress from the Second District be nullified and that the Negro candidate, Lindsey, be seated in the House, on the grounds that Negroes, if allowed to vote, would have elected him. Promoters of the petition seek 65,000 signatures from voting age Negroes, a number exceeding Whitten's majority over two white opponents.

Mr. Henry, Clarkdale druggist and state president of NAACP, is a spectacular but as yet unintimidated object of "harassment." Last March Mr. Henry was arrested on a "morals" charge and sentenced to six months in jail, a sentence he is presently appealing. Mr. Henry picked up a young white hitchhiker in Clarksville who charged that the NAACP leader talked to him about civil rights and made sexual advances to him. Mr. Henry is also defendant in two libel suits for \$40,000 damages. He protested that the Clarksdale prosecuting attorney and police chief had conspired against him with trumped up morals charges. These two officials sued him for damages, and won a verdict in a jury trial, which Mr. Henry is also appealing. Mrs. Henry, a Coahoma County school teacher for 10 years, was recently fired for her voter activity.

Louis Allen, an Amite County farmer, who witnessed the death of Herbert Lee, a farmer vote leader, at Liberty and said that State Representative E. H. Hurst shot Mr. Lee without provocation, in August suffered a broken jaw, when a deputy sheriff hit him with a flashlight, and a \$25 fine for "aggravated assault" on this officer who broke his jaw in two places. The unfortunate Mr. Allen is also an ardent worker in the drive to register Negroes in McComb and Amite County. He was injured as he walked by the city jail and a woman prisoner called out and asked him to make a phone call for her, whereupon the deputy sheriff attacked him.

Pressures on Negroes stepped up in August and September. After a mass meeting of white people at Ruleville, city officials closed two dry cleaning businesses owned by Negroes, on charges they violated city ordinances.

Mayor Charles M. Dorrrough of

Ruleville personally dismissed Lenard Davis, 49-year-old sanitation department employe, because, as Mr. Davis quoted His Honor, "your wife's been attending that school," a Council class in registration instruction and non-violence. It would be, the mayor added, "a little difficult for you to find a job here in Ruleville."

The white owner of a bus which Fred Hicks, a Negro, hired to drive field hands to their plantation work, told Mr. Hicks he could no longer use the bus without a commercial license, until his mother withdrew her name from voting rolls.

Mayor Dorrough also notified the Williams Chapel Missionary Baptist Church that free city water and tax exemption were removed because the property, scene of voting meetings, was used for "purposes other than worship services." A few days later a fire insurance company cancelled the church's policy.

August in Greenwood was enlivened by the attempts of 25 Negroes to register, laboring under the glare of a new Mississippi state law which requires that all aspirants to the ballot must wait two weeks for their names to be published in a newspaper, before they can register. Thus fingered, the 25 tried anyway, and awaited the process of registrar's publication of their names and subsequent testing.

The late summer letdown in Greenwood also was relieved by the adventure of Mr. Samuel Block. Three white men accosted Mr. Block in a parking lot and beat him with their fists, inflicting pain and anxiety, but no serious injuries. Mr. Block did not report this attack to police, since spokesmen for the local constabulary already had established their relations with him when they "threatened to knock my

teeth out." He did complain to the FBI, with what results NEW SOUTH is not yet aware. Police Chief Curtis Lary told United Press International he knew nothing of the attack and had never heard of Block.

Mr. Block and two Negro colleagues, Luvaghn Brown and Lawrence Guyot, working late in their Greenwood office, a second-story room on the Negro side of town, received further white attention August 16, the night after Block's beating. An anonymous phone caller, who said he was a White Citizen council member, ordered them to leave town. At midnight, the three saw a police car outside and heard the driver call other cars on his radio. The car drove off, they reported, and a few minutes later they saw three private cars filled with white men cruising around the block. One car stopped and white riders left it and ascended the stairs to the Council office. The three Negroes locked the door, escaped out of a window and fled to a friendly Negro home.

Amite County officers in Liberty on August 22 investigated four white men in two cars on a CBS assignment, the visitors explained, in the company of the ubiquitous Mr. Moses, at the same time that 20 Amite Negroes came to town to register to vote. Five finished their tests, when a power failure closed the courthouse for the day. Deputy Sheriff Daniel Jones, said the newsmen's station wagon windows were covered with black plastic in violation of the law which bans anything but stickers on motor vehicle windows. Driver Harry Etklin pled guilty and paid a \$36 fine, and the party left Liberty.

White night riders on September 5 shot up a Negro section of Carthage, inflicting tremendous terror, formidable property damage and slight and

painful knee injury on one elderly Negro as he lay abed beside his 9-year-old grandson. Gunmen fired volleys into eight homes and a store in the Harmony community. This visitation occurred after Negroes petitioned for school desegregation in Leake County.

Leake County Sheriff D. M. Lloyd said he knew nothing of the gunmen and that as Negroes couldn't identify the marauding cars, "it's hard to work on these things without any leads." Deputy Sheriff Emmett Faulkner surmised that the shooting might have been perpetrated by Negroes to draw attention and sympathy.

Ruleville again erupted into the news with a night-time shooting into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Herman Sisson on September 11. Twenty-year-old Marian Burkes was wounded in her arm and leg by buckshot and 18-year-old Vivian Hilliett was shot in the head. (Both girls were uninvolved in voter registration, and guests of the Sissons. Mrs. Sisson had tried to register to vote.)

Mayor Dorrrough surmised, again, that Negro registration workers perpetrated this violent crime. "We think," he said to investigating FBI men, "they did it themselves."

Mr. Moses protested this attack to the Justice Department in Washington, which ordered FBI agents to investigate it. These federal officers apparently conferred with city officials and started their investigation with the questioning of Mr. Moses and other SNCC officials, until Moses informed

them that it was he who had complained and demanded FBI help in apprehending the assailants on the Sisson's home.

Miss Burkes, in precarious condition for several weeks, has recovered with partial use of her leg, in which a bone was shattered by shot. After removal of what officers guessed was a 22 caliber bullet from her head, Miss Hilliett is also out of the hospital and recovered.

Four Negroes fishing in Black River at Goodman discovered the body of a Negro man, weighted with 100 pounds of rocks, September 12. The unknown body, apparently thrown from a bridge, was buried in Potter's field. Police said the Negro had been dead about five days.

Violent disorder disturbed a Negro section of Greenville the night of October 5, during which four white boys injured a 14-year-old Negro boy with a brick thrown from their car. Someone smashed a window with a missile and Negro boys threw pop bottles and beer cans at white boys. Fifteen whites and Negroes were arrested and Police Chief W. C. Burnley threatened a curfew for all teenagers. One hundred Washington countians signed an ad in the *Delta Democrat-Times* calling for an "end of lawlessness and disorder."

After a several-year period of sharecropping and tenant indebtedness to his employer, the loss of two cars, and eviction from his farm work and home, Rev. Jeff Surney, 51, World War II

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veteran and father of eight young girls, moved his family to Cleveland. Among his economic vicissitudes at the hands of white Ruleville farm and business owners was payment of \$1,370 on a 1957 Pontiac he bought in Greenwood for \$1,100 plus \$500 carrying charges, to have the car repossessed in default of one payment and to lose the \$1,370. A few months' later Mr. Surney's employer bought him a 1954 Ford for \$565, which, in settlement of debts to his employer, Mr. Surney never saw, thus losing \$1,370 and \$565 on two cars, in addition to finishing up the year \$214 in debt by the planter's statement.

Mr. Surney's son, Lawrence, was arrested the last of August for distributing handbills to announce a voter rally without a permit, and was jailed and fined.

The elder Mr. Surney sought twice in August to register to vote at Indianola, and the third time, with a busload of Negro applicants, he was allowed to fill out the form.

On October 18 the Rev. Mr. Surney was arrested in Cleveland by a Justice of the peace, brought to Ruleville and convicted of passing bad checks. He appealed to circuit court and will be tried next March. Mr. Surney is again house-hunting, due to the displeasure of his landlord at this arrest.

"I am gravely concerned," observed VEP Director Branton, who has defended many Negro cases in the Delta and suffered considerable costs and harassment himself, "over the state of justice in Mississippi." —M. L.