

Notes From Mississippi

By Jerry DeMuth

In Philadelphia, Miss., the white Citizens' Council had distributed a descriptive list of cars associated with civil rights activities. Mickey Schwerner's car was on that list. Also local, county and state police had broadcast descriptions of the car, and taken photos of it. And in the heart of the town a Klan recruiting poster proclaimed:

"Khristian Principles

"Konstitutional Government and

"Korrestional Action Against Usurpers

"Klandishness means fraternal brotherhood, protection against forced integration, outside control, and the return of sovereignty to our state."

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In Batesville, local leader Robert Miles tells of what has happened to his house where four summer workers have lived with his family. "In July my house was tear-gassed about one o'clock. A car in the road woke me and I got up and went to the door. I heard a noise on the roof but thought it was a brick or a rock. The car went off in a hurry and I went back in the house. I smelled tear gas and grabbed my children and ran out. We couldn't get back in the house till 4:30 and the smell hung around for a couple days."

The tear gas bomb had landed in the back yard and the wind blew the gas inside the house. The local police came and took the empty shell but not before the rights workers got a good look at it and made a note of the manufacturer's name painted on the metal. Later when the police showed the shell to FBI agents and others it was a different shell without the printing.

Two weeks later, Miles' house was again a target. "Around 11 a car stopped in about the same place and someone shot at our house three times. The first shot woke me up, then I heard two more shots." None of them hit the house.

In Clarksdale, where schools are under court order to integrate, officials this summer established new school zone boundaries. In one section of the city where a small Negro community merged with a white neighborhood, Negroes were leaving their homes. Several buildings were vacant, other Negroes told of how they were supposed to move by the end of August. "I dunno why. I jest heerd it. But we's don't know where we's gonna go." In Mississippi, whites never explain why to Negroes, they just tell them what to do.

I went with a lawyer and two SNCC workers to the courthouse to find out the reason. It took the lawyer an hour of determined questioning of hostile "public" officials to get any answers. Meanwhile, I examined a posted list of poll tax payers. The six columns were headed date, name, residence, age, sex, and receipt number. But under age there were no numbers, only one of two letters, C or W. The lawyer finally found out that the city was condemning that Negro community for a proposed park.

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In Ruleville, Freedom School teachers discovered that students at the Negro school are forced to go out and pick cotton in the fall. They are never given any accounting of the money and if they don't go they are fined \$2—\$2 in an area where Negroes are payed an average of \$3 a day for working 10 to 14 hours in the fields.

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In Indianola, a Negro told me, "I live over on a plantation and our gas was turned off. I told the owner about it and he said maybe them freedom riders will turn it on for you."

Another Negro declared: "The mayor sent out letters to everyone telling us not to have anything to do with any of the freedom workers. But no one's going to tell me who I can see. I'll come over here and talk to everyone if I want to. And I'll even bring everyone home with me for dinner if I want to."

In Holmes County, two deputy police in plain clothes stopped their car along the highway where a Negro minister was walking. With drawn guns they forced him into their car, threatening to kill him. They claimed he had been bothering a white woman. They drove to a house, stopped, and dragged the Negro to the porch.

"Has this nigger been bothering you?" they asked the woman. She was honest enough to say no, and the two let him go. But if she had said yes he undoubtedly would have been killed. Only a year previously one of the two police had, without apparent reason, drawn a pistol on a Negro boy, put it to his head, and shot him dead.

Also this past summer in Holmes County two rights workers had been beaten, a car had been firebombed, a new community center dynamited, and a home unsuccessfully firebombed. In defense, Negroes sit in the dark at night, with shotguns at their sides. Early in August, one prowling white had been chased away by two armed men.

In Tate County, police closely followed rights workers Woody Berry and Dave Kendall who worked there. They threatened a Negro cafe with losing its license if they served the pair meals. They threatened Negroes who talked to the two about registering—the county doesn't have any registered Negroes. In spite of it all, four Negroes did agree to go to the courthouse. But threats made them change their minds the last minute. The barn belonging to one of the four was burned. Two

local Negroes who had helped Berry and Kendall fled to Memphis after whites threatened them. "We have a river and a rope waiting for you," the two were told.

Three carloads of whites stopped Berry and Kendall. "Lynching's too good for you," they exclaimed. "The Tallahatchie (where Mack Parker's body had been found) ain't full yet and we got a lot more rivers." After two weeks, Berry and Kendall left the county.

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A small group of volunteers began work in Marks in early August. Soon word was out that one of them was being arrested and a lawyer went to investigate. He talked to the cop who had just finished making the arrest.

"What is this fellow being charged with?" "Don't bother me."

Question repeated. "What business is it of yours." "I'm his lawyer." "Well, you're not going to find out." Question repeated. "Will you shut the fuck up." Question repeated. "I told you to shut your fucking mouth."

The officer suddenly grabbed the lawyer and smashed him into the side of the car. His head snapped back and the edge of the door split his scalp. Then the cop shoved him into the car and took him to jail. The lawyer was charged with interfering with an officer and disorderly conduct.

"Here's a nigger lover," the cop told two whites as he tossed the lawyer in the cell with them. One didn't do anything; the other—when he found out that the "nigger lover" was a lawyer—wanted him to represent him. He had been denied counsel and not being able to make phone calls had resorted to dropping notes asking for an attorney out the cell window.

The lawyer was released the next day. His head gash had begun to heal, and it was too late to put in the stitch or two originally required.

"There ain't no phone here in the jail," he had been told when he wanted to make a call while in the cell. Now he asked where there was a phone he could use. "Right here," the jailer replied, pointing to his desk.

Mississippi officials not only make their own rules, they change the game to suit themselves.