

# The Forgotten Battle in Arkansas

## Little Rock

Arkansas was the home for a civil rights project last summer different only in size from the one last year in Mississippi. It was an outgrowth of two and a half years' work in the state by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the main force behind the Mississippi project, but because the Arkansas movement did not involve large numbers of volunteers or dramatic violence, it has been ignored.

Forty volunteers, roughly one-fourth of the applicants, helped the seven regular S.N.C.C. staff members working from six offices in 14 counties in the southeast section of the state. This is the area where almost all of the state's Negroes are concentrated, an agricultural, primarily a cotton-growing area similar to the Mississippi Delta on the other side of the river.

The closeness to Mississippi leads Arkansas Negroes to make comparisons. They don't find themselves as badly off as Negroes in the Magnolia state, and they are not much worse off than Arkansas whites, who make much less than Mississippi whites, so the Negroes in Arkansas are often apathetic; but they have little to be proud of. Despite its name, Arkansas is not "The Land of Opportunity." The median yearly income for Negro families in Arkansas in 1960 was \$1,636; in Mississippi it was \$1,444. At those levels the question is how much one starves. The income for Negro families in the cities of Arkansas was \$2,044, less than in Mississippi, where it was \$2,100.

The atmosphere changes in Arkansas as one gets farther from Little Rock and closer to Mississippi. Middle-class Negroes become rarer, and whites become more hostile. Reports of threats and beatings increase. Persons have lost jobs for enrolling their children in white schools or supporting the civil rights movement. Police harass rights workers, following them, stopping them, making false arrests, occasionally beating them. As in Mississippi, police sometimes arrest the beaten and not the beater.

The movement that has formed lacks the drive and militancy of the movement in Mississippi. Mass meetings don't reach the emotional intensities of meetings across the big river, and the background of some of the participants in Arkansas is middle-class. I attended a meeting in Stuttgart, Arkansas, the "Rice Capital of the World." A smartly-dressed young woman made a strong plea for support of the S.N.C.C. workers; after the meeting broke up she drove off with her husband in a new Baracuda.

**C**OMMUNITY CENTERS and freedom schools similar to those in Mississippi were part of most of the projects in

Arkansas, but the main push was for voter registration. Arkansas is unique in this area of voting. Questionable voting procedures and political infighting have created havoc. For three and a half months last spring the state did not have one registered voter.

The situation has its roots in an amendment to the state constitution that banned the poll tax and made registration permanent rather than yearly. (Adopted by the voters last November with the verbal support of Gov. Orval Faubus, this amendment was actually opposed by the governor behind the scenes, according to some sources here.) The new registration was supposed to take place during the first two months of the year, but those months ended with a hassle over what information should be on the registration forms still continuing. Without any registered voters, elections had to be postponed.

Age and residency are the only voting requirements, but there are still problems in registering Negroes. In the past county sheriffs did the registering; under the new law this work is done by the county clerks. Perspective voters must go to the county courthouse, which is difficult for Negroes who normally lack the means of transportation or the time to make such a trip. The county clerk can go out into the county, but this has been done only seldom, and then mainly in the predominantly white counties. In Lincoln County, which is 48% Negro, the clerk let it be known that he was going to two towns for a week each to register people. The first week he went to Gould, site of a S.N.C.C. project and 25 miles west of Mississippi, and set up his office in the local Moose lodge. During the first two days 300 Negroes and only 18 whites showed up to register, whereupon Moose officials ordered the clerk to leave the building. He left the town and returned to the county seat, never to venture forth again. S.N.C.C. workers picketed and demanded he return to Gould, to no avail—police raided the homes and businesses of five of the picketers.

Still, a large number of Negroes are registering. The next problem will be to see that their votes are counted and fairly.

A year ago a Negro was elected to the Dollarway school board in Pine Bluff. Other Negroes who ran with S.N.C.C.'s help lost, one of them under questionable circumstances. William Green ran for the State House of Representatives in Lincoln County, home of Gould. There were then 1,800 registered Negroes in the county and 3,100 registered whites. Green got only about 1,600 votes. Persons who helped take Negroes to the polls, including Bill Hansen, former S.N.C.C. project director for Arkansas, believe that he should have gotten more votes than he did in many precincts, but they were not able to check these sus-

picions. Poll watchers for Green were permitted at only two of the 18 polling places in the county. Though each person had written permission from Green to act as his poll watcher, all that is needed under Arkansas law, they were turned away at 16 places with either no explanation or the explanation that the permits were not notarized. Notarization is not required under state law.

The Independent Election Research Council investigated the 1964 election and found that over 30,000 of the votes cast, 8%, were absentee votes. Many of those who voted absentee hadn't applied for absentee ballots, which they must do according to state law.

In Poinsett County, according to the Election Research Council, 184 absentee ballots were sent to the same post office box number. Patients at nursing homes and other institutions were voted absentee through the operators. In the Old River Township in Pine Bluff, where S.N.C.C. has been working for over two years, there are only 39 registered voters; 53 persons voted.

County clerks blocked the G.O.P. from attempts to examine the voting records. In Faubus' home county, Madison, while the G.O.P. was trying to examine the voting records, the records were stolen from the courthouse. Someone had conveniently left the back door to the courthouse unlocked that night. Madison County had the highest percentage of absentee votes cast of all the counties, 11%.

In Phillips County, where S.N.C.C. has a project, only 301 applications for absentee ballots were mailed out, but 835 persons voted absentee. The Election Research Council studied 500 of the absentee voters; 326 of the 500 were Negro, and of those 326, 195 resided in Ward 4 in Helena. The absentee ballots of many of these Negroes were filled out by Jack and Amanda Bryant, a Negro couple, in their home, which was not an official polling place. Mrs. Bryant signed the ballots and the county sheriff was present at least part of the time. Half of the Negroes who voted at the Bryants were questioned by the Election Research Council and affidavits taken and 40 stated that they did not vote absentee of their own accord. Last winter Jack Bryant became local head of the N.A.A.C.P.

**W**HAT LIES AHEAD of the movement in Arkansas is hard but quiet work, political education, and the close watching of elections. This work in Arkansas lacks the drama to capture the interest and concern of the rest of the nation, but for Negroes here it is no less important than the battle in Mississippi. J.D.