

[1844]

MISSISSIPPI TO MISSISSIPPI

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Mississippi is a bifurcated state. There is the state of gracious living, large plantations, lovely homes, economic affluence, numerous and well-appointed churches, beautiful gardens and leisure activities. In Jackson, the state capital, the official Visitor's Guide reports that the average annual income per working adult is \$5,200 (double what it was 10 years ago), unemployment is 40% under the national average, retail buying per household is 14th highest in the nation and there are 230 churches to attend. This is the world of privileged whites. There is also the state of appalling poverty, racial bigotry, political intimidation, and terrifying fear. This is the world of the disadvantaged, mostly Negroes who constitute 42% of the population. Both of these states are set in a region rich in history and natural resources, where both the magnolia and the mocking bird flourish. It would be difficult to find an area in the whole of the United States where the contrast between plenty and want, gentility and violence, beauty and ugliness is more pronounced and less justified. It was in the interest of reducing and eventually eradicating this unnecessary contrast that the 1961 Mississippi Summer Project was instituted.

On the basis of the success achieved by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee under the direction of Robert Moses, brilliant young Negro leader and graduate of Harvard, in a limited effort to qualify Negroes to vote in the fall of 1961, four groups came together to form the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to undertake a massive Peace Corps type of operation in Mississippi in civil rights during the summer of 1964. The four participating groups include the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). These organizations

are led respectively by Robert Koss, Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King and James Farmer. Professional leadership was provided by COFO for the Project. Volunteers were invited to take part. Approximately 600 college students from all parts of the country offered their services. In addition, a number of ministers, doctors, lawyers, and interested citizens joined in the program. All came at their own expense and each participant was required to have someone prepared to put up bail bond in the amount of \$300. The National Council of Churches gave support to the Project by enlisting ministers and others to serve with the students and by providing training and counselling for the volunteers. Three to four staff persons were appointed and stationed in Mississippi to give continuity to the program and maintain a close liaison between COFO and National Council representatives. Funds for the work were drawn from special contributions given by the member denominations.

Most of the students in the Project signed up for the entire summer. The others stayed usually for shorter periods of time. Assignments were made to particular communities and those taking part stayed either at a center or in the home of Negro families, usually the latter. The activities they engaged in were intense and varied.

Major attention focused on voter registration. Of the 435,000 Negroes over the age of 21 in Mississippi, less than 7% are registered to vote. In many instances, this is due to the lack of education and even apathy. But in many other instances, it is due to the formidable obstacles and threat of violence and economic reprisals that are placed in the way of a Negro citizen trying to register. In most cities and towns, the names of persons attempting to register are printed each week in the local newspaper. If the person is a Negro, he runs the risk of losing his job, having his credit withheld, and suffering physical injury. In

such cases, white merchants have been told by White Citizens Councils and other extremists not to trade with Negroes who have attempted to register, if they want to remain in business. It is largely because of such harassment and intimidation that only 21,500 Negroes were able to pass the requirements to become registered voters in Mississippi from the spring of 1962 to April 1, 1964, whereas 375,000 qualified in Texas for the same period. Volunteers called in towns and conducted classes to help Negroes prepare themselves to answer the questions and fill out the forms required to register. In one training session a Negro girl answered the question as to whether she was a citizen of Mississippi by saying "as much as I can be." She was told to answer "Yes" but her own reply was more honest and accurate.

Volunteers also participated in Freedom Schools established throughout the state to teach Negroes something about their own history and contribution to American culture, completely neglected in the public and state schools, and to train them for political leadership in political and social affairs. These were held for all ages and usually met in Negro churches. In addition, Community Centers staffed by social workers, librarians, nurses and teachers were set up to offer services normally denied Negro citizens and children. In many instances, the Centers afforded the first opportunity for Negro mothers to receive instruction in prenatal and infant care, for children to take a book out of a library, or for young people to engage in pleasurable recreation under skilled leadership. Other activities include special research projects, contacts with the white community to discuss ways of eliminating bigotry, conflict and poverty, training in non-violent methods to achieve equal treatment under the law, and assisting registrants in the Freedom Democratic Party. The latter is a new political party in Mississippi for both Negroes and whites designed to ⁵¹ replace the present state Democratic Party and committed to champion a strong civil rights program.

In an article in the New York Sunday Times of July 19, 1964, James Silver, Professor of History at the University of Mississippi daringly declared that "the closed society of Mississippi comes as near to approximating a police state as anything we have yet seen in America." In the light of the experience of the Mississippi Summer Project volunteers, that statement is no exaggeration. COFO recently released figures reporting that three students had been killed, four persons were shot and wounded, 32 were beaten or injured and approximately 250 were arrested since the start of the Mississippi Summer Project. Thirteen Negro churches were destroyed by fire, 17 other churches and buildings were damaged and 10 automobiles were either damaged or destroyed. Those who walked the dusty roads calling on Negro families lived under the constant threat of being apprehended and picked up by the police for minor infractions of the law or of being accosted by rabid racists, appropriately called "red-necks."

The facts and incidents that could be cited to illustrate the oppressive rule of the white oligarchy in Mississippi are legion. There is not a single white native lawyer in the state who will take a civil rights case. Only three Negro lawyers are qualified to handle such cases and all outside lawyers are barred. Few skilled jobs are available to Negroes. Since the number of unskilled jobs are limited, many Negroes are dependent upon relief which puts them at the mercy of the local authorities. It is not uncommon for domestic employees in white homes to receive \$1.00 or less for eight hours work. One Negro woman who was employed full-time in a white home reported that she was frequently told at the last minute that her services would not be required the following day, for which she was docked in pay, requiring her to try to find other work in order to support her family. Most of the income for the state is derived from a 4 1/2% sales tax which is levied on food, clothing and necessities as well as non-essentials and which places a disproportionate share of the tax burden on the lower-income groups.

No teacher or student at Jackson State College, an all-Negro state school, can participate in the civil rights movement in any way without facing immediate dismissal. Negro children are not permitted to use school facilities or grounds for recreational activities during the summer months. The 25 mile-long beach along the Gulf, stretching in front of Gulfport and Biloxi and known as "the French Riviera of America," built with public funds, is closed to Negroes. A Negro in Forrest County who had waited in vain for two hours to pay his poll tax was told by his white employer upon returning to work that, if he were ever again seen at the courthouse, he would not only be fired but "something worse" would happen to him. Later, at the insistence of his wife, he asked for his "time" and quit, because his wife didn't want him to work and live under such a threat, even though it meant having the family meager on her meagre salary. Oscar Chase, an honor student at Harvard and civil rights worker, was jailed on a traffic charge in Hattiesburg and placed in a cell with several "red-necks" who beat him until he bled. The Reverend Robert Booth, Co-Director of the Minister's Project in the same city, was arrested for allegedly attempting "to obtain goods under false pretenses." He had written a check in the amount of \$127.95 before several other checks he had deposited previously had been cleared by the bank. The latter provided more than enough funds to cover his check. He was released on \$3,000 bail. After several weeks of waiting, the charges were finally dropped, the money returned and the case closed. Others have not been as fortunate. A hundred years ago in a speech given on July 4, 1812, Frederick Douglass, the first great Negro anti-slavery leader, addressed himself to white Americans in his own generation in a way that has a tragic relevance in Mississippi today:

"You glory in your refinement and education, yet you maintain a system as barbarous and dreadful as ever stained the character of a nation—a system begun in avarice, supported in pride, and perpetuated in cruelty.

You shed tears over fallen Hungary, and make the sad story of her wrongs the theme of your poems, statements, and orations, till your gallant sons are ready to fly to arms to vindicate her cause against the oppressors; but in regard to the ten thousand wrongs of the American slave, you would enforce the strictest silence, and would hail him as an enemy of the nation who dares to make these wrongs the subject of public discourse!"

In view of that statement made a century ago and from the experience of the "long, hot summer" just past, what are the prospects for the future? On the surface, the outlook is bleak and little progress has been made. Despite the gains in voter registration, the vast majority of Negroes are still disenfranchised. No immediate improvement in economic status appears in the offing. Educational opportunities remain limited. Churches continue on their way oblivious of the revolution going on around them. In some respects, white attitudes of hostility toward Negroes and resistance to change are more pronounced and unyielding. Of special concern to those who have worked in Mississippi during the summer and returned to their schools and jobs in the North is the awful after-thought of possible reprisals and retaliatory violence against Negroes who have taken part in the Project. Nevertheless, dire as the picture may be, Mississippi will never be the same again. Indications are not lacking that the wall of Mississippi apartheid has been irrevocably breached and that proud masters of Mississippians, however silent and inarticulate, recognize that their proud state, in James Silver's words, "must participate in the common destinies and routines of American social and political life." Many Negroes for the first time in their lives have had the sweet taste of being treated as equals by white persons. Many whites for the first time in their lives have seen Negroes and whites living and working harmoniously together without any untoward incident either harmful or degrading. The enactment of the

Civil Rights Act is already having a beneficial effect. Increasing numbers of hotels, restaurants, stores and other commercial enterprises are serving Negroes and integrating their facilities, usually with a minimum of fanfare or fuss. The presence of agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been salutary in impressing irresponsible groups in the community with the serious nature of crimes against persons and serving to keep law enforcement personnel alert to their responsibilities. The experience and witness of the Freedom Democratic Party at the National Democratic Convention has given impetus to the drive to grant Negroes a larger and more equitable share in state political affairs. More importantly, even in ordinary living and daily affairs there are signs and evidences pointing to the promise of a better tomorrow. Two small incidents will suffice by way of illustration. In Baltimore, a Negro woman made a purchase in a department store from a white sales clerk and signed her name to the charge slip, prefixing it with "Mrs". The clerk crossed out the "Mrs" saying that only a lady would sign her name in that way. The Negro woman, after being told that she could only use her first and last names, asked to see the manager, a Jewish merchant. After listening to the complaint, he ordered the clerk to write in "Mrs" before the customer's name or face immediate dismissal, adding that he had suffered too much from discrimination himself not to want to help others. The sales clerk burst into tears, talked about the sanctity of white womanhood, and claiming^{ed} that she couldn't bring herself to recognize a Negro as an equal. When the manager remained firm, however, she wrote in "Mrs" on the slip, promised to raise no further questions on the matter in the future, and survived the experience without any apparent impairment to her soul. In the state capital at a popular restaurant, a group of well-dressed white teenagers were enjoying dinner and

an evening on the town when four Negroes walked in. The hostess seated them at a nearby table. Immediately a dead silence fell upon the group and three or four of the young people left the room. However, after what was deemed a proper display of annoyance and displeasure, conversation was resumed, those who had left returned, the Negroes were served (none too graciously) and things got quickly back to normal. When this has happened a number of times, the silence and awkward stint will likely be dispensed with, to the relief and good of all. In a community outside of Jackson, several SFCO college students were denied admittance to a Presbyterian Church at the regular Sunday morning service. The minister was told of the incident by one of the women who felt rather pleased with himself for having spotted the students and turned them away. Upon entering the church the minister went directly to the pulpit and reported what had happened, reprimanding those responsible and announcing that in good conscience he couldn't conduct the service under such conditions. He then dismissed the congregation with the benediction. The following Sunday the students worshipped in the church without incident.

These lesser victories for social justice do not necessarily portend a general thawing of the glacial attitudes of prejudice in Mississippi, but at least they are a hopeful beginning in that direction. Fortunately the Mississippi Summer Project is going to be continued, albeit on a reduced scale, and when next summer rolls around there will undoubtedly be another influx of students, ministers, lawyers, doctors and others to conserve and advance the gains that have been made. Certainly there can be no respite in the present struggle until freedom is won and justice secured for all.