

CONFIDENTIAL REPORT ON
SNOC ACTIVITIES
IN PANOLA COUNTY, MISS.
JUNE 25 - AUG 20
1964

by Claude Weaver,
Project Director

Panola County is a special case, and the Panola County Project deserves special treatment. Here for the first time, thanks to the fortunate combination of a strong Federal Court order and a relatively moderate white population, SNOC has the opportunity to register large numbers of Mississippi Negroes with minimal bloodshed. Panola is a testing-ground for the Delta. What will happen when the literacy test falls? How capable is SNOC of carrying a rural county through the agonies of an actual redistribution of political power? Are SNOC's braves capable of building and supporting a tightly organized and politically sophisticated black machine in the cotton fields? Panola is a county to be carefully worked, carefully observed.

Before the summer of 1964 the county had scarcely been touched by COFO Workers. Its Negro population was only fifty-six percent, low by Delta standards; it was not considered one of the tougher Mississippi counties. Panola was distinguished only by the existence of an embryonic Negro leadership. In May of 1964 Claude F. Clayton, Federal judge for the Northern District of Mississippi (responding to a remand order from the fifth circuit) ordered that the use of questions nineteen and twenty of the registration form be suspended for one year. The order sharply curtailed the discretionary powers of the circuit clerk and placed him and his records under close Federal scrutiny. It became extremely difficult for the registrar to deny registration to literate Negroes. Under the conditions established by the Panola County decision, almost any Negro who could read and write could become a "qualified elector" on his first try. There was no waiting period; applicants were informed immediately whether or not they had passed. For a year, at least, the doors were wide open. Panola County had become an Opportunity.

SNCC responded to the challenge in typically efficient fashion; ten Summer Project volunteers were deposited in front of Highway Patrol headquarters in Batesville on June twenty-first. The group lacked any concrete information on the county, it lacked a competent leader, it lacked direction to the Negro community in Batesville.

I was brought to Batesville on June 25th and placed in temporary charge of the project. We began to work in a halting and confused manner the very next day. Security was extremely tight, we were without transportation or headquarters. Our activity in the first two weeks was largely confined to canvassing in the Negro quarter of Batesville and speaking at various evening meetings. We were housed by Negro families in the Batesville area, and the cost of our food was defrayed by the Panola County Voters League. During the entire summer we found it unnecessary to spend anything on room or board. Finding office space was a different matter, however. What few available buildings there were had already been claimed by the teachers who were soon to arrive for the summer session. Most of my effort was spent in tracking down false leads on available buildings.

We discovered a perfect headquarters building; a modern one-story school building containing six large classrooms an auditorium, a kitchen and two interior offices. The building was the property of the A.M.E. Zion Church, and had been used as a theological junior college (Johnson Memorial Institute) up until 1961 or so. The elders of the church decided that the northern Mississippi Delta failed to provide an atmosphere conducive to higher learning, and moved the institute elsewhere. The building was for all practical purposes, abandoned for two years, being pressed into service only for an occasional community meeting. Early this spring one of the buildings of South Panola Training School (for Negroes) was destroyed by fire, and the upcoming summer session was faced with a severe shortage of classroom space. The county rented every available building in the area for the summer school.

The upshot of the whole affair was that the Johnson Memorial building was available to us only in the afternoons during this summer. Most of our community center activities were held there, and the evening meetings of the Batesville branch of the County Voters League. The building is held in trust by a six man board composed of A.M.E. Zion deacons around Panola and Quitman counties, but the real local power rests in the hands of a Reverend W.J. Neal. Rev. Neal lives in Memphis and pastors churches all over the northern half of Mississippi. He is a "seminary" minister, quite literate and articulate. Reverend Neal has assured us that the building will be available to COFO at a nominal rent anytime after September 15th. Neal is pro-movement and becoming more so. He is quite impressed with our work in Panola County this summer and has been preaching voter registration sermons in Quitman County lately. He told us over until the fall; Neal helped us to secure one side of an old cement-block church building outside the Batesville city limits. The deacons of the church have been pretty nervous all summer and have informed us that we must be out of the building ~~by Sept. 1~~. There is liable to be a great deal of confusion between Sept 1 and Sept 15.

There was a constant and bewildering flow of workers into and out of the county all summer; a rough list is enclosed. Several cars were purchased in Memphis - all of them have more or less survived the summer. The project was almost entirely self-supporting - volunteers appealed to Northern friends for funds. A rough record of expenditures and income has been kept.

Work did not really get underway until specific teams of workers were assigned to specific areas within the county. We managed to find free room and board for teams of workers in Sardis, Grenshaw and Come. Volunteers living in Batesville were assigned to work East Batesville, Courtland and Crowder - they were provided with transportation. Sub-project reports for several of the areas are enclosed. Once in the areas the volunteers found the people quite responsive and eager on the whole. Our Freedom Registration

Drive (which, incidentally, did not begin until mid-July with Dona's penultimate memorandum) drew us over three thousand forms. As I write this report, about fifty forms a day continue to trickle in.

All of our voter registration and F.D.P. work was done in close cooperation with the Panola County Voters League. The League was formed in 1959 by a small group of Negro farmers and ministers, the most prominent of whom are Robert J. Miles, Rev. W.S. Middleton, Rev. G.J. Williams and Rev. Rudd. When we arrived the League had no definite membership, no program more concrete than "encouraging and teaching the people to register and vote" and was composed almost exclusively of people from the Batesville area. Meetings were (and are) held bi-weekly at various churches around the county. We have devoted a great deal of effort to building up and strengthening the Voters League. One of our first moves was to have Atlanta SNCC print up a thousand Voters League membership cards. The NAACP should have a rather hard time making headway in a county where there is already something to "belong to". There are no strict dues in the Voters League; the only requirement for membership is that one be a registered voter in Panola County. The officials of the Voters League were rather jealous of their authority at first, but a delicate balance of power was worked out through the use of town "chapters" of the central (Batesville-oriented) League. The chapters, in Sardis, Greasboro, Somo and Courtland-Pope, meet weekly and send a certain minimum number of representatives to the bi-weekly county meetings. The membership cards are dispensed from the Batesville "central committee" (Miles, Middleton, Williams, Rudd), through the chapter presidents, to chapter members. The county leadership also holds a great deal of power in the newly formed Batesville Civic Club - perhaps the most vigorous and aggressive of the chapters. The county can, I believe, function for short periods without workers so long as it is adequately supplied by Atlanta with materials. The county is meeting happy we have held more than thirty mass meetings this summer in every corner of

of the county. The keynote of the meetings was always the same; "ORGANIZE!"
In four Panola County towns, they did organize.

With another month's concentrated work, the Voters League should be able to stand on its feet indefinitely - to withstand any shock. Every member who becomes active - there are about 200 now - is a voter registration worker. One of the really unusual facets of Panola County this summer has been the constant flow of Negroes to the County Courthouse in Batesville. On any given weekday there will be from twenty to thirty Negroes lined up on the courthouse steps. This steady "reasonable and natural" pressure has made the Panola County project the darling of the Justice Department.

"Nick" Flannery was largely responsible for the original suit, and maintains an active and genuine interest in the situation. As the chapter Leagues become more influential, the steady flow should increase in intensity, and it should become more and more apparent that the circuit clerks present facilities for registration are inadequate. It is extremely important that this steady flow of applicants be maintained. AND THAT the incoming project director not rely on Freedom Day type gimmicks. With skillful management the project should be able to pull 150 to 200 Negro applicants to the courthouse each week. If Negroes continue to attempt registration at the present rate, and if accurate records are kept of just who tried to register where, a month or so should be sufficient to build up a solid case for contempt proceedings against Mr. Shankle, the circuit clerk.

Shankle will make a worthy adversary for any project director; his strategy is to slow down and discourage black registration as much as possible without clearly violating the letter of Clayton's order. Shankle is afraid of Clayton, and he has every right to be. Clayton is a segregationist and a loyal Mississippian, but when the law is clear and unmistakable he does his duty as a Federal Judge. He is commander of the Mississippi National Guard - a major general - and he is used to having his orders obeyed in the spirit in which he gives them. If a solid case can be presented to him he will answer