

1964

## A SOUTHERN "VACATION"

by Rev. Jack Alford

McComb on the surface seems to be a typical American small town. There are attractive schools, shops, and homes. Lovely church buildings are seen everywhere. The people look well dressed and educated. The children are happy and friendly. McComb with its tree-lined streets, blossoming flowers, tall church spires is a city of terror.

Night after night through the summer comes the dread sound of an explosion, the shot of a rifle, the screams of fear - then pain. The cross of Christ is continually visible after dark in the form of burning crosses on front lawns of homes and churches.

Law, justice, Christianity become a mockery and cruel bitter joke to the three thousand negroes in the town of ten thousand. For their homes, businesses, their churches are being bombed, burned, and shot at. Their wives, daughters, husbands, and sons are being attacked, beaten, and killed. The fiery cross is being burned on their church and home front yards.

The pleasant, well dressed, church going white men of this town are merely doing what the white man looks on as his right throughout the deep South. Fred A. Ross, chairman of the State Welfare Board, continually shows his kind of human compassion and understanding of these gentle, intelligent negroes that we came to know so well in our stay there by publicly calling them "jungle savages, and jungle filth."

So Louis Allen, negro, is shot to death in front of his home. The negro Sunset Cafe is burned to the ground. C.C. Bryant's barber shop is bombed. Mrs. Jackson is abducted from her home, dragged with a rope around her neck into the woods, is stripped, beaten, and left for dead by two car loads of white men.

So Wilber Lewis, negro mechanic, is abducted at gun point and badly whipped with a leather strap. Freddie Bates' home is bombed. Curtis Bryant's home is bombed. Corrine Andrew's home is bombed. Colo headquarters is bombed. Zion Hill Free Baptist Church burned to the ground. Nat McGehee home hit with a kerosene fire bomb. Hugh Washington home bombed. Booker T. Gutter home bombed. Chisholm Mission Church bombed. Rev. James Baker home bombed. Mrs. Alyene Quinn home bombed. Society Hill Church bombed. The list of beatings, shootings, burnings, and bombings could be extended far beyond these few examples.

The stark reality of this terror had an unreal quality about it during our first few days in Southern Mississippi. But it soon became real after speaking to several southern white men, after seeing the shattered remains of a bombed negro home and church, after hearing the freedom songs and listening to the numerous experiences of warm, intelligent, quietly courageous negro persons.

The right to vote, you see, is basic to the whole situation. Just the right to exercise the most basic freedom guaranteed by the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

The day we arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, to see the COFO Center there before going on to Hattiesburg and McComb, the bulletin board announced that in the past two days 32 people had been arrested in merely attempting to vote. When we spoke with those who were arrested later in McComb we learned that for merely walking across the courthouse parking lot to attempt to register to vote, they were arrested for "trespassing." When asked how can one be arrested for such a thing on public property they were then charged with resisting arrest. Among those arrested were COFO workers, ministers, and McComb negroes.

COFO is Council of Federated Organizations, formed by the cooperative groups of SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee), CORE (Congress on Racial Equality), SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), and NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The ministers were there as part of the Ministers Project of the Division of Home Missions, National Council of Churches Delta Ministry. It was as part of the latter that three of us had taken our vacation time to volunteer our services in this project. I am Jack Alford, Southwest Field Representative of the Division of Home Missions of the National Council, Gene McCormack, associate Conference Minister of the United Church of Christ, and Con Pyle, Pastor of the United Church in Green Mountain Falls, made up the group of "three musketeers" that soon learned the seriousness, danger, and shocking injustice of Southern Mississippi the week before and after the national elections.

COFO staff members are young college age youth, for the most part and some from all over the U.S. as well as members from Canada, England, and Germany. They put their lives on the line to do this work and receive only five to ten dollars a week for their constant work. They and the volunteers like us live in "freedom house" centers, often sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags, with the very minimal in creature comforts. We all stand guard duty in the McComb center, especially since it was bombed one morning past at 3:45 a.m. I must admit to feeling somewhat similar to the time I stood guard in Korea years ago. Then at 3:30 I saw a white man go by in a car and I began to imagine all sorts of things about to occur with every rustle of the bushes or the barking of the dogs until my watch was up at 3:00 a.m. One soon understands why staff cars are equipped with two-way radios.

Some would say that these courageous youth look like Beatniks. Perhaps a few of them do - but thank God they are here and are taking a stand that few other American youth care to take. We need a million more of them. COFO is run by very capable negro leaders, and the ministers' project by both white and negro leaders of exceptional caliber and similar courage. It is actually much safer for these workers to live in the negro community but in Hattiesburg R.v. Bob Beech, his expectant wife and two children live in the white community. Bob has been jailed a couple of times, struck by local whites, and has had the burning cross routine on his front

lawn. But he still hopes to be a "bridge" to the two communities. As Ministers' Project Director there for the National Council, he lives in continual danger, but his eyes sparkle with joy in the discussions about the work there. When we saw the day care centers, the group meetings, the freedom schools, the close relationship with staff and the negro community, we well understood his look of joy and the reason for such sacrificial effort of staff in Hattiesburg and McComb.

The first interview was a prophetic indication of things to come in our learning experiences in the deep South. We pulled up to an attractive, fine church building. Our job made some "bridging" contacts with white leaders of the community in Hattiesburg. The Pastor we met right away. The cordial smile on his face on greeting us soon faded as we introduced ourselves as being part of the Ministers' Project working with COFO. Gene was immediately turned to as the object of this southern white Pastor's attack. "What kind of minister are you to waste your time away from your own area meddling in others' affairs?" he asked. "How many people have you saved today? How many did you save yesterday? The day before?" he demanded.

"That is the job of the church, to save souls, not stir up trouble. Do you know if you are saved?" he pressed. Gene replied with wondering what was meant by such a term, and that he wasn't sure. "Well - I KNOW I AM SAVED," he snapped. "What kind of minister are you if you aren't sure of that?" he demanded, then immediately continued with a flow of Bible texts used like pludgions to beat us into silence. We listened quietly, almost stunned by the stream of quotations.

A layman came in and the Pastor immediately grabbed him and asked him to tell us what he thought our outside meddling was doing to the community. Without waiting for much answer or agreement with what he was saying, the Pastor stated that everything was just fine in the South before all the outsiders came in. "Why, if you all had stayed away everything would have been integrated in five years or less - schools, housing, churches - everything. Now it'll take us at least 50 years to undo the damage you have done."

"Read your Bible; Jesus never went around causing trouble. It must be nice to have time to meddle in others' affairs," he ranted on. When we explained that we were here on our vacation time - he flew at us with, "When I'M on MY vacation I preach the Gospel!"

"Did Jesus ever start riots and demonstrations?"

"We aren't here to do anything but help people have their rights as citizens," we explained.

"If I read my Bible correctly," I was impelled to add, "the scene before Christ's crucifixion of the mob didn't exactly indicate that Jesus never caused problems. Isn't it too bad that Jesus was driven by a mob from his home town, and that Peter and Paul seemed always to create mob problems in speaking in love? Too bad about that stoning of Stephen, too - isn't it? These men should have been more careful and stayed in their own

towns, shouldn't they?"

"Well, we are busy - we have more important things to do than stand here talking," barked the Pastor, showing us out the door. The layman then added, "I'm sure you will realize that it would have been better if you hadn't come down here - good day." We left and among ourselves admitted that the Pastors around here seem to be great on Bible text but lousy on context.

We then interviewed some handsome young men at Southern Mississippi University. I won't go into detail - suffice it to say that my conversation with an ex-G.I. middler student ended with his saying, "Well, I'll tell you, sir, if I was ever near a group that was doing non-violent, silent demonstration and you or anyone else was there I'd demand that the police shoot to kill, and if I had a gun at the time I'd kill you myself."

Let me now insert a recent article of the "Living Church."

The Prosecutor, examining prospective jurors, asked one prospect: "Do you think it is a crime for a white man to kill a nigger in Mississippi?" The man was silent for a moment. The judge asked the prosecutor: "What was his answer?" "Nothing," was the reply. "He's thinking it over."

We don't know whether the man is still thinking it over. We do know that it took four days to find 12 citizens of Mississippi who agree that it is a crime for a white man to kill a Negro.

Nothing impressed us as much as the warmth and hospitality shown us by the negro community. Both in Hattiesburg and in McComb we lived in the heart of the negro community. We visited hundreds of negro families in their homes. Almost without exception these fine people exhibited a welcome and on parting often said to us, "Thank God you have come here. We hope you won't leave. We need your help and support. It means so much to us to know that you left your safety and comfort to be with us in this place. God bless you all."

What really chewed me up was that everything we did in such a perverted climate of white feelings in the south was literally putting our negro friends' lives, jobs, and homes on the line. All we had to face in most probability was jail or beating - then we went home. But these negro people by even welcoming us into their homes could and had in past months lost lives, jobs, homes, and churches. To say nothing of the threatening phone calls in the night, the burning crosses, the thinly veiled and outright threats. Even present job practices are appallingly bad. One pleasant little negro lady at a church meeting told me that she worked for a local white family, did all their cooking, cleaning, and took care of the children six days a week and for this received a total weekly pay of eight dollars!

But they welcomed us. They agreed to hold community meetings in their homes to discuss voting requirements, to hear a COFO lawyer tell them of their legal rights and support that COFO would try to give them. Fear showed in the home that had a gun in every corner, in a church meeting where

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Outside a negro in a miner's lamp hat patrolled the grounds with a rifle.

Just trying to register gets your name posted for two weeks in the paper and a resultant job loss and threats then ensue. No help is given the person of negro background, and most fail to qualify for the most minor and improbable reasons. Long questions are asked, large paragraphs of state Constitution have to be copied and explained by the person wishing the right to vote. Every obstacle possible is put in the path of the negro wishing to vote. COFO tries to offset this by classes and training sessions but for the most part this is fruitless.

So freedom voting is held by COFO. While these votes do not count legally in an election - it provides proof of how many negroes would vote if given the chance as well as how they would vote. But even in this open, free, non-counting election negroes are harrassed and threatened by the whites if they are caught going to a freedom vote place.

Much of our work in Hattiesburg and McComb was to help get out the freedom vote, to get them to attend meetings at homes and churches, to distribute leaflets informing them of these meetings and voting places. For this kind of activity a new Mississippi law was made calling such work "Criminal Syndicalism" and any of us could be arrested, and many had been in the past. While COFO workers and ministers were given time in jail the bombers of several homes were caught, given a brief talking to by the judge, given suspended sentences, and released. While the average age of these white men was 35 - the Judge gave lenient sentences because, as he put it, "They were just young men starting out in life."

While all this seems incredible to us even now, having experienced it and talked with the people involved, we know it to be the reality of the deep South. We also know that a more subtle form of such white harrassment and prejudice exists right here where we live. I strongly urge local ministers and laymen to plan through your denominational channels to be part of the Delta Ministry projects of the National Council of Churches, Division of Home Missions. These southern negroes need help in realizing their human rights now. Take your vacation in the South and help these freedom centers. Get support of your local Church to back you in case of arrest, fine and bail.

When you return you will see with new eyes the conditions of prejudice and injustice in your own back and front yard.

The workers for COFO and the NCC who live year round in this climate of hate, fear, and threat deserve our praise and our active support. "Without them," the negro there will soon tell you, "the white man's boot will be on our neck for another 100 years."

SOME ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

"Much publicity has been given recently to restaurant desegregation in McComb. This strikes some of us as amusing, since as white workers we never had any problems in getting our meals regularly in negro restaurants. Once again this tends to be just a token action to blur the real problem, which is denial of the right to vote."

"It is a general consensus of opinion among those of us who have worked in Mississippi that the FBI has been strangely inadequate both in numbers and procedures in solving bombings, burnings, killings, and other crimes that are continually occurring in the deep South. I must admit personal feelings of grave misgivings about the role of the FBI in the South at this time."

- - - Jack Alford

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The following information is taken from the November, 1964 issue of "Social Action."

A Litany of Facts

IN MISSISSIPPI

915,722 Negroes constitute roughly 42% of the total 2,178,000 population. The birth rate per 1,000 population among Negroes was 34.8% in 1961; among whites, 21.8%.

The chance that a Negro baby may die within the first year of life is at best twice that of a white baby.

The total population remained almost the same between 1950 and 1960. There was a net increase in the white population; a net decrease in the non-white population. Most significant for Negroes is the large decrease in the group aged 20-34.

All Negroes aged 25 and over had completed an average of only six years of education in 1960. This is five years less than the average for whites.

Of the roughly one-half million Negroes employed in the State, more than a third are employed in agriculture, another third in the service

industries. Although Negroes comprise almost 40% of the total employed labor force, only about 4% are employed in manufacturing and even less than that in construction.

Negroes in 1960 had an average annual income of \$606, only 29% of the average income of \$2,023 among whites.

The average income of urban Negroes in 1960 was 33% of the average among whites, a decline from 36% in 1950.

There were 207,611 housing units for Negroes in 1960. Of these 30.1% were owner-occupied and 61.9% were renter-occupied. Of the 207,611 units only one third can be classified as in sound condition; the other two thirds have been described as deteriorating or dilapidated. Of the homes in the rural areas, over 75% are without any piped water at all, and over 90% had no flush toilets, no bathtub, and no shower.

In 9 counties not a single Negro was registered to vote in July 1963; in 26 other counties less than 1% of the Negro population over 21 years of age was registered to vote.

In the course of the summer in the "closed society" 3 workers were murdered, 4 others were shot and wounded, 55 were beaten and injured, 250 were arrested; while 15 churches were burned and destroyed, 17 others were partially destroyed, and 10 automobiles used by project personnel were damaged or destroyed. There was constant threat of violence and death in everything that was attempted.

These facts are from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the State Board of Health, the CONGRESSIONAL WEEKLY, (July 5, 1963), and the Racial Justice Now Report on the Mississippi Summer Project.

Some 475 volunteers went through the NCC Summer Project school at Oxford. In addition, 125 people were trained at LeMoyne College, in Memphis, and about 140 others received orientation at Tougaloo College, outside the state capital at Jackson. Forty-five teachers had a special session at Washington's First Congregational Church. In all, at least 300 recruits took "basic" for Mississippi.

Work went ahead, meanwhile, on developing a ministry to the volunteers. Denominational staffs cooperated in the recruiting which was intensified after the tragic news of June 21.

Some 250 churchmen - ministers, rabbis, adult laymen - serving one- to two-week stints, worked at NCC voter registration projects, in Hattiesburg, McComb and Canton. Another such project was started at Batesville in August thanks in great measure to the support of a strong Federal court order.

Sixty-one ministers and rabbis served as minister-counselors - chaplains who served both as adult strength and moral presence. All served from two to four weeks, and some stayed in Mississippi the entire summer.

Their work varied, and each made himself useful in whatever way was most meaningful. Different men found themselves at different times as chauffeurs

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teachers, counselors, mediators, comforting shoulders, negotiators with the white communities, pick and shovel wielders, rally participants - the gamut of the work in the trenches. They faced abuse of a personal nature - verbal and physical.

It was brave and dirty work in which they shared, but they stayed. In nearly every major crisis that erupted on any of the 27 projects during the summer, a representative of the church was there, either actively involved himself or in position to summon additional resources - legal and otherwise - from the NCC offices in Jackson.

Eight people were specifically assigned to carry on the ministries of listening, talking, and reconciling in the white communities. Greenville and McComb were two places where such lines of communication have been opened.