

October 23, 1964

MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM PROJECT - CRISIS IN MCCOMB

Stanford student Dennis Sweeney and twelve other Freedom Project workers were arrested yesterday in McComb, Mississippi on charges of operating a food handling establishment without a county health certificate.

Three of the arrested were released on bond, the other ten, including Sweeney, are being held in the Pike County Jail pending receipt of bail. The McComb police have issued warrants for two additional arrests on the same charges. A later report that Sweeney had "broken out of jail and was being pursued by bloodhounds proved erroneous. It apparently resulted from the malicious joke perpetrated by a Pike County jailer.

The first arrests came at one-thirty p.m. when the McComb police entered the McComb office of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) and charged three workers with "operating a food-handling establishment in the city of McComb without first having obtained a health certificate from the Pike County Health Department in accord with an ordinance of the city of McComb." The three were released on a hundred dollar's bond each.

The police returned at seven-forty-five p.m. and arrested more workers, including Sweeney, on the same charge. They were booked and then held in the basement of the McComb city jail.

The arrests were first reported here at 7:15 (PDT) when Stanford student volunteer, Marli Schenk, phoned the Stanford Daily from the McComb COFO office. Miss Schenk expressed grave concern for the safety of Sweeney and the others while they remained in jail. As news of the arrests came in, members of the Mississippi Freedom Project -- Stanford group began a spontaneous drive to accumulate a bail fund for the twelve. Efforts were made to contact McComb authorities and to inquire as to the condition of the arrested workers.

At 11:10 (PDT), James Haas, a Stanford graduate presently working with Senator Pierre's Salinger, succeeded in reaching Sweeney in the Pike County jail. Sweeney reported that he and the other ~~five~~ nine volunteers were in good condition and had received fair treatment from the local police.

However, an apparent crisis developed ten minutes later when Stanford student Ned Borgstrom reported that he had been told by a Pike County Jailer that "Sweeney had just broken out of Jail."

Borgstrom had placed a separate call to the Pike County jail at approximately 11:20 (PST). He gave the following account of the conversation that ensued:

"A voice answered and said 'Los Angeles', I said, 'I understand you have a man booked named Dennis Sweeney.' He said, 'We did, but he just broke jail.' I didn't understand what he was saying at first and I told him that I was concerned that Dennis be treated properly. The man replied, 'He will be, when we get him back.'"

The COFO office in Jackson was immediately informed of the Borgstrom phone call and was asked to check the validity of the ~~alleged~~ alleged jailbreak. At 12:15, Jackson COFO reported that they were unable to confirm or deny the story, but they expressed fear that a ruse had been conjured up as a pretext for killing Sweeney. They said they had called the McComb jail and had been told that "Dennis Sweeney has escaped and there are Bloodhounds after him." Subsequent checks, however, proved that the jailbreak was nothing more than a malicious joke.

Haas, calling from San Francisco, contacted McComb Chief of Police George Guy who expressed "shock" at the report. "Nobody has told me anything about an escape," he said.

Guy's denial was confirmed shortly by a call to Jackson FBI man Keith George. George reported that he had checked out the story with County Sheriff R.R. Warren and had been satisfied with Warren's assurance that "Dennis Sweeney is resting comfortably in Pike County Jail."

The trial of the fifteen Project workers is slated for Monday in the county circuit court, Judge Harry Case presiding. The normal penalty for "food-handling" offenses is a fine ranging from \$5 to \$100.

The basis for the arrests, according to McComb Police Guy, is that the overcrowding of the two McComb Freedom Houses created a "boarding house" situation for which a health certificate is required. Another phone call to the Pike County Jail elicited the information that Sweeney had been arrested on a charge of violating the county food code, because he "had not taken a bath in 90 days which comes from living with niggers."

Those currently being held in custody are: John Wilkin, Arkansas; Marshall Ganz,

Bakersfield, California; J.D. Smith and his wife Laurie, Aurora, Illinois; Ursula Junk, Cologne, Germany; Nancy Jervis, Long Beach, New York; Candy Brown, Los Angeles, California; Harry Bowie, Longsides, New York; William Powell, Cambridge, England; Dennis Sweeney, Portland, Oregon; and Rev. Paul Long, of Rochester, New York, a Presbyterian minister based with the National Council of Churches, is also being held in ~~the~~ custody for illegally handing out leaflets. His bond has been set at ~~7~~ \$50. Pike County Circuit Judge William H. Watkins yesterday suspended the sentences of 9 McComb white men convicted of the August 20th racial bombings in McComb, Mississippi.

The nine men pleaded guilty or no contest to the charges and were ~~the~~ sentenced to terms up to five years.

Judge Watkins subsequently suspended the sentences giving the following reason for his action. They were mostly "young men, just starting out in life." All came from "good families" who were perhaps "more surprised than anyone else at the implication of the men in the act of violence." They "were unduly provoked and ill-advised."

The Judge concluded, "What you have done has been to some extent provoked by outside influence. Some of the outsiders who have come into the community are people of low ~~and~~ morality; some of them are unhygienic. Their presence here was unnerving, unwanted."

The sentencing and subsequent suspensions were conducted in a virtually empty court room.

According to Chronicle correspondent John Beecher on the scene, Judge Watkins announced the indefinite postponement of the trial slated for the ten as a device for removing spectators. After the courtroom cleared, the sentencing was immediately rescheduled for noon.

Since June 21, the Negro community of McComb has endured 16 terrorist bombing attacks. Stanford Junior Frank Morse, abducted and beaten by four whites in ~~the~~ Marks, Mississippi, Tuesday, prepared to leave the state for Stanford today.

Morse and his fellow Freedom Project volunteer Dave Harris left Marks hurriedly yesterday afternoon in fear that there was a warrant out for their arrests. They reported that the FBI based in the area had been less than co-operative in conducting a investigation of the Tuesday kidnapping and attack. ~~They were~~ "We were very disillusioned," Harris said.

Morse is still suffering from the effects of the slight concussion that he ~~sustained~~ sustained. "I feel just warmed over," he commented to the Daily.

The two joined fellow Stanford students Doug Sorenson and Mitch Miller, in Columbus yesterday. They will travel together to Jackson today for a press conference. They expect to arrive on the Stanford campus sometime Monday. "All we're trying to do now is just to get out of here," Morse commented. "This place is unreal."

When the cotton is picked and chopped the residents of Quipman County (if they are black) starve for the remainder of the time. The sanitary conditions in numerous living arrangements are beyond the imagination. Bathing is relatively unknown or is at least rated as a luxury. Death in childbirth is a constant fact of life. Dental care: What's that? Birth control is effectively unknown. Hospitals for blacks are two steps from "Witch - doctery." (Some child care at "clinics:" little or no adult care). The family study I listed is presently inflicted with a case of goiters due to malnutrition. The figures I listed on food speak for themselves. A "prosperous" family eats three meals a day (has bacon instead of fatback for breakfast). Some of the people here have houses that sit in the midst of large pools of excrement. These people pay sewer taxes and have ~~xxxxxx~~ privies; pay street taxes and have gravel roads.

...We don't need to send a Peace Corps all the way to Africa to find subhuman living conditions.

How these people have managed to stay non-violent (it is like the word of God to them) in the face of so much hate is beyond me. I want to do so much for them. They are such good people; warm, friendly, completely open to me, a white man. I went to a mass meeting tonight and fell in love with Marks' black community. I wish I could take every adolescent cuddling in the warm intellectual womb of Stanford University and show him what needs to be done.
Enough.

--Dave Harris