

[1964, Dec]

Bi-annual Report
Rankin County Project

Three COFO field workers moved into the rural Sandhill section of Rankin County in December, 1964. Workers had been in the county briefly during the summer and mass meetings had been attended by workers from the Madison County Project for approximately four months prior to December.

Rankin County is 34% Negro, largely rural, and very frightened. The school system is one of the worst in the 4th district and the history of police brutality is long. Just one incident-the beating of four Negro men last year as they were taking the voter registration test, committed by the sheriff and deputy sheriff in the registrar's office- created a county wide fear which staff continuously has to fight to overcome.

The project has no permanent office; mobility has been preferred, plus the logical county seat location is inaccessible to the fear of renting to COFO. There is no project budget. Staff workers and local people do their own financing with the aid of some funds being received from staff contact outside the state. Staff had to rely on local transportation from January through March, but has now acquired a car donated by a Northern contact.

A determined effort has been made in Rankin County to have staff operate as organizers and advisors only and, with the exception of MFDP requests for action, all the plans, programs and actions mentioned in the following report are the ideas and desires of the people of the Rankin County movement.

Work during December was directed toward meeting the requests of MFDP for people to be in Washington D.C. on January 4th for the presen-

tation of the congressional challenge and for Freedom Days in the state to back up the challenge.

Lots of enthusiasm about the trip to Washington resulted in a really exciting fund raising campaign. Twenty Mississippi Student Union students borrowed cars and literally covered the county canvassing for money; the adults had fish fries and the Kids held record hops (Rankin County staff nearly wore themselves out attending money raising functions); and two churches sponsored gospel singing evenings. In two weeks this rural community raised approximately \$500.00 and proudly bought a used school bus just in time to make the trip. Twenty-four people left Rankin County for Washington in the bus which went about 100 miles before it broke down. Fortunately, the built up pride and enthusiasm (plus some financial aid from COFO and CORE) enabled them to raise enough money to continue to Washington and to return home and raise more money to repair the bus which is now running and providing transportation to state and county conventions and workshops.

A small (17 adults and 10 students) group marched to the county courthouse to attempt to register on January 4th. They were turned away by the sheriff who announced that the circuit clerk (registrar) was busy preparing for a grand jury session. The highway patrol caught all 27 people in a roadblock on their way home and checked all identification. That night 3 of the men who had participated were arrested (on false charges) and taken to jail. A deputy sheriff said as he arrested them, "You came to see us today; we've come to see you tonight."

During the rest of January and February the local people from Beat 3 spent a good deal of time attempting to open up the other more fearful communities in the county. Delegates from Beat 3 visited churches in other areas speaking for the movement, COFO, and FDP. Staff's 2

attempts to attend churches in the county seat, Brandon, resulted in our being escorted away from the churches and out of town by the sheriff's department. We had more luck in the rural areas surrounding Brandon and are slowly beginning to establish contacts and hold meetings in Beats 1, 2, and 4.

Depositions for the congressional challenge from Rankin County were held in February. Lack of communications between the challenge lawyers and the Rankin County project resulted in no adverse witnesses being subpoenaed, but the hearings of testimony of local favorable witnesses were a great morale booster for the County hearings in Jackson a few weeks later.

Somewhat surprising (to staff) was the response of 15 delegates from Rankin County who traveled to New Orleans for the Regional CORE staff meeting in January. In their words- they were impressed by staff spirit and dedication and felt that they learned a great deal from the workshops and sessions they attended. Feedback indicates that this was true.

In March Beat 3 organized a committee system as follows:

1. FDP committee- handles voter registration, precinct organization, conventions and workshops, communications with Washington and Jackson FDP offices, etc.
2. Welfare and Aid Committee- gathers, stores, and distributes food and clothing and studies and distributes information on Federal aid programs.
3. Education committee- studies and suggests action on complaints about a school system, plans for school integration in the fall, responsible for setting up and maintaining a library.
4. Publicity and Fundraising committee- handles movement newspaper, printing of leaflets, ideas on getting new members and increasing involvement of old members, fundraising ideas and plans.
5. Community center committee- building project for new community center, plans for summer program.
6. Transportation committee- responsible for bus, and car pools, etc.

Citizenship and voter registration classes were started in March and the voter registration drive was stepped up in April after the Justice

Department filed suit against the Rankin County Registrar. People began going to the courthouse in small groups and were allowed to take the test. The first week of this drive groups took the test on Friday, Saturday, and Monday. Six people were told immediately that they had passed the test and were allowed to sign the registrar's book. On that Monday night Mt. Pisgah church, the site of Beat 3's weekly mass settings, was burned to the ground. The next day, the home where Rankin County staff workers live was shot at.

The spirit, at least of movement regulars, seems to have been increased by these events. Thursday night meetings continue by car light at the burned church site; the students staged a 3 mile march; and the voter registration drive continues. FBI and local law enforcement investigations of the burning and shooting have shown no results as yet.

The Rankin County Movement is now working on a community action project aimed at solving the water shortage problem. Water is presently available only from cisterns in most of the Beat 3 area and it hasn't rained lately. Tentative plans are being made for a march to the county seat sometime in late May.

Staff is presently made up of two(white) workers. We are also covering the Scott County meetings while the Scott County staff is on vacation. Progress is slow, but continuing.