

# THE LONG HOT SUMMER IN MISSISSIPPI

Four WILPF members went from the Annual Meeting to join the young people working in Mississippi this summer on freedom schools and voter registration. Three of these had not planned on going, but decided to give a week's time: Ruth Deas and her husband, of Chicago, and Marjory Collins of New York, a writer who has worked with civil rights organizations in the South and is currently engaged in a research project for the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. They worked in one of the community centers and saw the desperate need for office supplies of all kinds, for clothing and books. One of our Springfield, Ill., Branch members, a trained nurse, had already left to spend her vacation working in Mississippi and the fourth volunteer to go from the Annual Meeting was a staff member who was giving her monthly vacation to the Summer Project. Since these two may still be in the South, we are omitting their names. Katy Baker, WILPF National Publicity Secretary, accompanied our staff member to the 2-day orientation session in Memphis, Tennessee, "to learn about the Project and how I might contribute even though my efforts would have to be from the safety of Philadelphia, Pa."

## Between Bitterness and Fear

By Kitty Baker

The day the civil rights bill became law, July 2, I joined 45 volunteers in Memphis for indoctrination for the Mississippi Summer Project. The sessions dealt with problems as simple as holding quiet conversations with Negroes who have never shaken hands with a white person; as complicated as learning Mississippi law (six laws recently passed were blatantly aimed at thwarting civil rights); and as dangerous as knowing that there are police informers among the freedom workers.

At one session, a bizarre, realistic scene was enacted showing what males could expect at the hands of the police, followed by admonitions to curl up in a ball and cover as much of the head as possible with the hands. Women are not usually so brutally treated by officials, we were told, but could expect a beating from white prisoners. Whites have sometimes been (temporarily) jailed with freedom workers for the sole purpose of showing them "who's boss down here." Never stand in an open doorway with the light behind you, said our student instructor; be sure the roof light in a car does not go on when you open the door at night; sleep toward the back of a house and toward the back of a room, in the event something is thrown in the window. And soon.

"Mississippi Negroes are bitter," said a young Negro minister. "Like it or not, you are the white man and you will meet with fear, hope, and distrust. Some of them will hate your guts. But there are others who are free—those who have transcended their history. The whites you will meet have a mental illness caused by fear, approaching paranoia, of what will happen when the Negro has political power."

By the end of the summer, COFO (Council of Federated Organizations) staff workers, who earn less than \$10 a week, hope to have 82 areas in Mississippi participating in one or more of the programs, which include voter registration, Freedom Schools, and community centers. There is no way of estimating how many local Negroes will be free or brave enough to participate, but in Hattiesburg, 570 are attending the Freedom School when it was optimistically hoped that 50 might come. At this midpoint in the Summer Project one fact is definite: by September, Mississippi will have moved closer to the realities of the 20th century and approximately 1,000 freedom workers will have had an inside view of the struggle for civil rights.

## Letter from the South

Our WILPF staff member writes from Mississippi asking for WILPF literature. She has met a number of young women who "think WILPF sounds splendid and want to know more about it. Some of the COFO staff really want to work with women in Jackson this fall after the Summer Project is over. They are all in their mid-twenties and are fascinated by the Black Sash idea as the most creative approach to involving women, and Southern women, in the civil rights problem. I think I can do a little field work along the way this month." Below are excerpts from her letter.

"I've never experienced a 'community of fear' before where everyone fears and distrusts everyone else, black and white each fearing the other. This deadening existence is known, within the Movement as 'the Plague.' I wonder how soon after my month here I will emerge from the habit of watching always—watching strange cars, strange noises, for diners, which you must always carry with you (in case of arrest—you're supposed to be able to make one phone call), always checking where the telephone and exits are as you enter a house.

"(In Memphis) I felt a certain numbness come over me as the list of security instructions grow longer and longer. We all came alive a little, though, during the question period, when a group of police arrests, a young female inquired, 'Is running away an accepted form of nonviolence?'"

"The next morning, I had breakfast with some of the SNCC workers who are going into the S.W. Mississippi area to McComb. This is the worst section, with some 80,000 vigilantes about. Only 12 of the most experienced staff are going there—a place from which they had withdrawn in 1961 because of the extreme danger. They all knew that some of them might not return, but felt that if they didn't go the worst section of Mississippi would not have been 'moved' and the whole summer project, in effect, would have failed. It was a heart-rending experience to see them depart.

"On Sunday the 5th, we set off for Canton. The volunteers who arrived the week before found awaiting them 25 Negro hosts, two or three cars loaded with police, and a large number of 'White Citizens' taking pictures and notes. It's Hospitality Month in Mississippi. Our group found only one police car, and only several 'Citizens' lurking around staring and taking notes.

"We went to stay the night with an ancient church venerable (who) lived in what might be an archetype of an ancient slave cabin—small, weatherbeaten, unpainted, running water only in the kitchen. He slept in the living room and there were two double beds in the bedroom for the 4 girls. Just as we were going to bed he came into the room and gathered up his Bible and returned to the living room. He popped in again a minute later to announce, 'Now you young ladies have no need of being afraid.' (We waited for some word of divine protection from the Good Book) 'because . . . there's a strong 16-gauge shotgun right beside my bed.' The swift progression from God to guns was almost too much for us.

"Next morning we spent about 4 hours checking with various farmer families who might house volunteers . . . it seemed that the poorer the family, the happier they were to have us. One relatively well-off family wouldn't have us. (A woman) with many children and a small house peppered with newspaper said she would be 'honored.' One fine old man greeted us, 'God bless you, you really came.' Apparently all the Negroes and most of the white people in Mississippi thought the Northern volunteers would be Negro (as are most of those who have been working in Mississippi for the last two years) and it came as a resounding shock to all that most of the volunteers are white . . . We arrived back in Canton before

sun-down, as we are not to travel at night.

"I cannot describe the bitterness, fear, and distrust that exists here. White Missisippians feel they are fighting a 'Holy War,' in which the rest of the country and the world are against them. They feel that the white volunteers are 'White Negroes,' and the rottenest of them all," as a letter from the White Citizens Council expressed it so charmingly in a letter to COFO.

"The Negroes, too, are bitter. When many have seen members of their families beaten, shot, or assaulted by whites they, understandably, hate most whites and distrust even some of the white volunteers. They feel the whole white system is rotten, particularly with the frequent tie-ups of police authority and the white church with the powers of evil. The Methodist minister in Canton is the police chaplain, and when the police have their little drills, the minister gets out there with his gun. And the sheriff of McComb is the former head of the White Citizens Council. I talked several days ago to a man who has a friend teaching at a Mississippi College (who) is himself a moderate liberal, but says he is the only male member of his family who has not shot a Negro. This kind of thing appalls. And the Negroes know that the civil rights bill is not designed to effect changes in the deep South.

"I am very glad I came. COFO has held to nonviolence only by a slim thread and it needs support drastically . . . when one hears the tales of beatings, brutality, harassment, and bombings that SNCC and COFO workers have undergone, one realizes that their decision that no guns (or anything that could possibly be considered a weapon) be carried is a heavy step. I do hope the support of the young volunteers confirms them in their non-violence . . . this summer's work is crucial.

"Laurel's specialty, apparently, had been arrests. When I arrived, three out of the four project members had been arrested . . . apparently some sort of ploy to discourage volunteers from coming to Laurel. It failed and there are now about ten of us and three more arriving. The local authorities have returned to their usual target, the Negroes, whom they arrest and beat at random.

"The weather is horrendous, with temperatures often at, or near, 100. This wouldn't be so bad, but after every incident our hosts close and lock the doors and pull down the front windows . . . blankets are put up across the windows and the lights turned low, and we have our private informers . . . I am grateful that so far we've brought no specific harm to our kindly hosts, but we fear retaliation on them, once we've gone and the spotlight is off Mississippi. Perhaps this is the worst fear . . .

"One of my students took part in the sit-in on Saturday (at) a Variety store lunch counter . . . A policeman standing at the entrance when the Negro youths entered said 'Now' and two white men went after the young people with baseball bats . . . and one of the men pulled a knife. The policeman did nothing to protect the children (my student was 12), who finally escaped.

"The entire situation here in Mississippi is shocking, especially the police connivance and the courts."