

THE NATION

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Summer in Mississippi

Freedom Moves In To Stay

Jerry DeMuth

"Miss. Summer Project to End Aug. 24, 700 Students to Abandon This State," the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* headlined on August 8. But there were no signs of it at the more than twenty project locations. About 200 volunteers have elected to stay for at least six months and three aspects of the summer project—the Freedom Schools, the community centers and the voter-registration activities—will be continued.

By late August there were forty-seven Freedom Schools, with 2,500 pupils, in more than two dozen communities. Plans before the summer began were for fourteen such schools. "We're going to continue into the winter," explains Dr. Staughton Lynd of Yale University, Freedom School director. The schools will meet primarily at night because youths are attending public schools during the day. And new schools are being planned. Two panel trucks, for example, are being staffed and equipped to serve as schools in Neshoba County, where the three civil rights workers were killed last June.

The thirteen community centers will continue with the help of local adults and volunteers who are staying on; new buildings for such centers are being constructed in two rural settlements, Mileston and New Harmony, and one is planned for the large town of Greenville.

Voter-registration activities will be renewed. In the weeks just before the Democratic National Convention, emphasis was shifted from regular registration to gaining support for the Freedom Democratic Party. Voter-registration workers spent most of their time explaining the party to Negroes and getting those who supported it, and were without fear, to "freedom register."

By early August one or more of the three programs existed in about twenty towns. As workers from these projects made closer contact with other communities in their counties they began to move permanently into these areas, and new projects were born. In Marshall County, for example, the project has headquarters in Holly Springs. Its workers began reaching into adjoining counties as they went canvassing outside that town. Volunteers from Holly Springs were soon working in six counties, with plans to move into two more. In Panola County, seventeen volunteers lived and worked in the county seat of Batesville. Four teams had moved from Batesville to Crowder, Crenshaw, Como and Sardis.

A particularly interesting example of such expansion occurred in Sunflower County where the project has its headquarters in Ruleville, home of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer (see *The Nation*, June 1). A Freedom School, community center and voter-registration activities are all operated in a small frame house on the edge of this town of 2,000. Cardboard from cartons forms the ceiling. The unpainted walls are covered with maps and pictures. Shelves holding about a thousand books line the walls.

In the morning, young children play inside while their mothers meet on the lawn in back, sitting on benches in the shade of a few pecan trees. These women are taught health, first aid, reading, writing,



and Negro history. In the afternoon, after the Negro public school lets out, teen-agers meet for classes. The Negro schools in the delta are open in July and August so they can close in September and October, freeing the youngsters to work in the cotton fields.

In mid-July, Ruleville organized a mass rally at Indianola, a town some 22 miles away. James Forman, executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, gave the main address, but perhaps the most important speaker was Oscar Giles, an Indianola Negro. Giles rose from the audience and announced he was with the movement 100 per cent and would give it all the support he could. This was his first involvement with the civil rights movement. Giles had been waiting for the rights workers to come to Indianola, had been waiting ever since spring when he returned from a trip to Chicago and decided he had to do something about his people in Mississippi. Now he began moving with the civil rights workers and would keep on moving.

Three workers came from Ruleville to set up a project in Indianola. An old house was found and the workers began to fix it up. A group of Baptist ministers donated their old school to the project, a brick building, surrounded on three sides by fields of cotton. Materials began to arrive from the Seattle Friends of the SNCC group—art supplies, books, prints. A library was started and the walls became covered—with maps and photos of the non-white world, ancient and modern—and with prints by Miro, Daumier, Feininger, Gauguin, Kandinsky and others. Even the walls in the washroom were covered. A Citizens Band radio was installed and the tall antenna erected. It would be used to keep in touch with Ruleville and with the project's radio-equipped cars. On August 6, the finishing touch was added; a huge black-and-white sign over the doorway with the words "Indianola Freedom School," illustrated by clasped Negro and white hands.

Seventy-five Negro youngsters began attending classes in the afternoon and about thirty adults in the evening. A number of the children returned in the evening to help the adults with literacy training. One of those who come to the Freedom School at night is a woman whose legs are paralyzed; she also cannot move her arms freely. Sitting on her bed at home, she tells volunteer Fred Winn of how she has heard about the Freedom Democratic Party, and proudly explains why she fully understands it. "I went as far as tenth grade," she smiles. This, in Mississippi, where the average number of years completed by Negroes is six.

"I got polio when I was 6 months old. I worked in the fields for eighteen years—from when I was 13 to when I was 31, I chopped and picked cotton." Fred expresses amazement since she has never walked a step in her life. "I chopped and picked cotton on my knees."

The local students have participated in voter-registration canvassing and have begun to take action to improve their local school. They may join the Ruleville Student Action Group which was formed during the summer, one of many such local organizations which the summer project has encouraged.

Gary DeMoss of Kansas City, a volunteer, speaks with amazement about the Ruleville Negro school:

Whole classes go out and pick cotton, though they're never given any accounting where the money goes. A freshman algebra class has seventy-two students, they sit two to a desk, and have only one teacher. Sometimes three and four classes meet at the same time in the gym and the entire library is a couple of incomplete sets of encyclopedias. No typing is taught there and almost every student here at the Freedom School wants to take it.

The Student Action Group has passed out leaflets and sent letters to teachers and school officials demanding a change in these conditions. They and other student groups may stage a state-wide school boycott this fall.

"The teen-agers can take over after we're gone," explained Don Madison of Columbus, Ohio. "The students here catch on very quick and really want to do something. They understand what's going on."

The older people are more easily frightened. In Holly Springs, Dave Kendall of Sheridan, Ind., tells of his experiences in trying to canvass in nearby Tate County:

The sheriff, a deputy, and the constable with a police dog kept following us wherever we went. We would talk to people about registering and when we left the sheriff would call them over and tell them to ignore us... and back up his order with all kinds of threats. We kept calling on people and talking to them. But they wouldn't even look at us. They would just look right past us at those cops. Other times they'd see those police sitting there in their cars, taking notes, and they'd slam the door right in our faces.

Four people agreed to go to the Tate County courthouse to take the registration test, but because of threats none went. The barn belonging to one of the four was burned. Two youths who helped Dave and

his co-worker, Woody Berry of Dayton, Ohio, fled to Memphis to avoid a threatened lynching. There are 4,326 voting-age Negroes in Tate County; none of them are registered.

But in Panola County, more than 600 Negroes have been registered since the summer project began. In October, 1961, when the Justice Department filed a suit against the registrar, only one Negro was registered; thirty-one more were registered while the suit was going through the courts. Then last May a one-year injunction was handed down. It ordered that the sections of the registration test calling for an interpretation of any of the 285 sections of the state constitution, and a definition of the duties of a citizen, be dropped for one year. Many still are failed for other questionable reasons, but the injunction is the biggest breakthrough in Mississippi, and rights workers are determined to take advantage of it for they are still a long way from getting the county's 7,000 voting-age Negroes registered.

And elsewhere, the young people keep on pushing. A former café has been fixed up—the floor repaired, grease washed off the walls, everything given two coats of paint—to serve as a community center. "A young Negro in his twenties heard about our literacy program and drove 14 miles to our center," explains Margie Hazelton, a short, slim redhead from Detroit. "He said he had gone as far as the third grade but then had to drop out because he had to work for his family. I've been teaching him reading and writing through the Laubach method."

In Greenwood, the Friendship Baptist Church is home for the Freedom School. One of the teachers, Carolyn Egan, a pretty, short-haired blonde from Portland, smiles with hope as she tells of one of her students:

In my math class, my trigonometry student continually is asking for more homework. He's never missed a day of class and is always there on time. He's really eager to learn. He gets up at 5:30 to help canvass for voter registration before people go out to work in the fields; then he comes to the Freedom School. They don't teach trigonometry at the Negro school here. He plans on going to college and we're trying to gather all the information we can on scholarships for Negroes in the South.

In Hattiesburg a Negro woman returning home from work got on the bus. A white woman removed her package from the seat next to her to make room. When a white woman later got on the bus, the driver asked the Negro woman to give up her seat. The woman didn't do or say anything and the driver called a policeman who arrested her. She was charged with breach of the peace and interfering with an officer. All the Negroes left the bus in protest.

At a city precinct meeting organized with the help of the summer workers, the occurrence was discussed. Several mentioned a limited boycott of buses. A mass meeting had been scheduled for the next night and it was decided to go fur-

ther into the situation then.

These people, these situations, cannot be left behind, most of the summer workers feel. Some give the workers new hope; others make them more determined. In either case, they point to the need for continuing the work of the summer. About one-fourth of the volunteers plan to stay. At least as many more plan to return, some next summer, others as soon as early next year. To some an even stronger reason for staying is that the community has become a part of their life, has become their home. And they expect new groups of volunteers to join them.

As Woody Berry explained in Holly Springs:

Negro people here are happy that we're here. They feed us, take care of us, protect us. When Hardy Frye, a volunteer from Sacramento, was arrested he wasn't permitted to make a phone call, but we knew what had happened in minutes. A Negro man saw him get arrested and jumped into his truck and came right to our office and told us.

Mississippi, with a total population of slightly more than 2 million, is extremely rural, and almost everywhere strong community feelings exist. It is easy to become a part of the Negro community within a few days of active work with its people.

Twenty-five workers found this to be especially true in Mileston, project headquarters for Holmes County. Mileston is not shown on most maps; driving down U.S. Highway 49E from Greenwood to Jackson, all you see is a sign, a short-order café and store, and a small train station along two tracks where the Illinois Central hasn't stopped in years. A few miles south of Tchula, Mileston is a community of 120 to 150 Negro families who have owned their own land since 1939. That was when the plantations went bankrupt and the federal government gave the workers a chance to homestead the land. Few of the Negro homes have running water and in some the conditions are shocking. A seasoned voter-registration worker, out canvassing one day, found a family living in a windowless shack. A little light and a lot of flies—and in the winter probably a lot of cold—came in through chinks in the walls. Both husband and wife, often ill, could seldom work, and there were no welfare payments. In the shadows huddled three children, their eyes puffy and running with pus. The boy's stomach was swollen from malnutrition. On the bed lay a young baby crying. He had been born blind.

Across the tracks is a narrow dirt and gravel road with small, identical homes, run-down barns built for mules and no longer needed, and fields of cotton and soy beans. Whites are seldom seen down this road in Mileston except for the civil rights workers who stay with some of the Negro families living along the road.

"You're so isolated here," explained volunteer Gene Nelson of Evanston, Ill., "that you can easily forget about the rest of the world. You can even forget about the rest of the county you're working in."

Down a couple of miles is a side road with two houses at its end. One serves as a community center, the other as the Freedom House where several volunteers live. Beyond the houses is a field of cotton. On the other three sides are thin woods.

This area of Mileston is home for the volunteers and headquarters for Holmes County activities. The voter-registration workers leave it to canvass during the day, but the others stay here to teach at the Freedom School which meets at a church along the road, to help build a new community center which is going up next to the church, or to help children in arts and crafts and recreation at the temporary community center. The phone they use is in one of the homes, as is their main Citizens Band radio transmitter. Occasionally they may go out to the highway store for a hamburger or a bottle of pop. But they live and eat with the families here, and sit and talk with them as members of the family. "They're like my own children," one of the hosts said to me.

The fears of the Negro families have become the fears of the volunteers. All share in the tension. They know well local leader Hartman Turnbow's story of how in the spring of last year he tried to register, of how his home was burned two weeks later, and of how he, himself, was arrested and charged with arson. They were there when a dynamite bomb was tossed into another Negro's home. They saw where it had landed on his young daughter's bed, failing to go off. Two of them had been beaten by local whites. Another, when canvassing, listened to a Negro minister who told how two deputy policemen in plain clothes forced him into their car at gun point and threatened to kill him. The volunteers know that one of the two had, without apparent reason, killed a Negro boy the previous summer. At the new community center they can still see the hole in the ground where there was a bombing in mid-July. And every time they drive down the road they can see the burned-out hulk of a SNCC project car that was fire-bombed a week later. They know too that out of more than 8,000 voting-age Negroes in the county only forty-one are registered.

At night, it is too dangerous to venture far from their little community. They work at the Freedom House and temporary center, or sit talking to people on darkened porches along the road. They sit and talk while their hosts keep a shotgun nearby, waiting for those who may toss the next bomb or fire the next shots into their homes. Occasionally a car comes down the road, and the crunching of tires on gravel fills the air. Voices quiet, hands reach for shotguns; in the tense stillness everyone is joined more closely together. Then the car signals, and all relax and begin to talk again. Volunteers cannot desert this community; if there is any change in Mileston it will be one of increased activity. And this seems to be the pattern throughout the state.

'I didn't know colored people could vote.'

"I came up on a porch and an ancient man says "Yes, sir" and offers me his chair. An enraged white face shouts curses out of a car window. We are greeted with fear at the door; "I didn't know colored people could vote." And people ask why we are down here"

- from a white SNCC worker's field report.

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