

# Mississippi 1964

*Editor's Note: This "on the spot" account, sent during the summer of 1964 from Canton, Miss. was written by Jo Ann Ooiman of Knox College, who planned to enter Johns Hopkins for graduate study that fall. After this was written she decided to stay on, instead of returning to school. This article is reprinted from the September 1964 Fellowship.*

**W**hen I entered orientation for the summer project at Oxford, Ohio, I thought that I already knew about Mississippi. I had read up on the shameful school system and the widespread poverty. I'd seen pictures of Thompson's Tank and Allan's Army. I knew about Medgar Evers, Herbert Lee and Lewis Allen. What I didn't know—what would come crashing in on me—was how such things feel when they penetrate beyond the mind and conscience to become part of one's every emotion and every move. I didn't know real fear until that week, nor how much cowardice there is in me. Sitting in the same rooms where Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner had sat but a few days before, going through the same briefings as they, I became very much afraid.

But Fanny Lou Hamer was there, singing "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine." I thought about her long days on the plantation and her terror-filled days in jail and wondered at the love and eloquence in her. Bob Moses was there, too, in bib overalls and spectacles, looking like a shuffling backwoods farmer, showing us what power there is in gentleness—and what suffering. In those last hours before we boarded the Mississippi-bound buses, he talked about how hard it is to be part of a project in which people "disappear." And he seemed on the verge of calling the whole thing off, sending us all home. But then we sang "Freedom is a constant struggle, a constant crying, a constant dying, O Lord, we've struggled, cried, died so long. We must be free, we must be free" And we knew that nothing could be called off and nobody could go home.

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## Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson

As we travelled toward the closed society, I thought about what Bayard Rustin had said to us: "You must expect that something beautiful will happen this summer." We'd been prepared to be jailed, beaten, killed. How could we hold such an expectation?

There was nothing beautiful in the White Citizens Council sticker on the door of the police station, nor in the faces of the officials and their thug deputies who questioned and "registered" us on our first day in Canton, Mississippi. It takes some imagination to expect anything but trouble, when every time we turn a corner we find a carload of WCC men staring at us, and when our Freedom House is served a Molotov cocktail, and two of our workers can be beaten on Sunday, in broad daylight, after being turned away from

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the white Methodist Church. ("You're down here living with the niggers, so you can just worship with the niggers.")

But we give thanks for the Presbyterian minister who turned his entire congregation away after some of them refused to let summer volunteers into the church. At least one man in that alien land on the other side of the tracks is moved by more than fear and hate. At least one body of people in that land has become troubled and forced to think about conflicts they have tried so long to ignore.

A one-room church with dirty white walls, park-bench seat, paneless windows, and a patch splintered by a bomb thrown last June was assigned to three of us as our freedom school. A few prints and maps on the walls, a scrub-brush to the benches and a broom to the floor dispelled our initial disappointment. But it resettled with added weight when the benches re-

mained empty on registration day. We searched the neighborhood for students, finding fear and mistrust everywhere. What if the church were bombed again, or the homes of the students? What if the parents lost their jobs? Sometimes these questions weren't so explicit. But they were always there—behind a heavy smile and "Yes maam—no maam (I wish you'd just disappear, maam)." By some miracle, though, twenty students appeared one day. Honest communication with most of them was impossible at first. They scarcely know how to read or write but are perfectly schooled in the etiquette of servility. Their own thoughts and feelings have never been acceptable conversation among "white folks." Gradually, however, they are forgetting to call us Sir or Maam. Occasionally they speak or write something which has the power of genuineness. And I get the feeling that maybe something beautiful is happening.

But then I remember how much they are likely to suffer because of what we're teaching them. And I wonder if this is really what I meant to do, just as I wonder if my family housing and feeding me is really worth the possibility of their being bombed out after I leave. We came to "free" these people. But it seems that we'll leave them in greater danger. I feel very angry about the northern parents' appeals for the safety of their own children. Where is the common conscience that would protect every human being on the globe?

I feel very guilty about returning to a secure academic world myself in September. Not all volunteers will return. Some of them are giving up graduate assistantships to stay on. Others of us wish our commitments were a little less tangled so we could do that too. We say that we'll be back, and I believe us—unless we join the new task forces of which we've begun to dream, into Harlem and Rochester, Chicago's South Side and all the "poverty pockets" in the nation. Mr. Kennedy's Peace Corps was a good idea, we agree. But it should have started here. We'd feel a little hypocritical teaching English as a second tongue to Africans when Negroes in Mississippi have been denied the right to learn it as their native tongue.

We may still be a rootless generation, and a restless one. But when at last we find work which is neither phony nor absurd, we'll show how much power there is in our discontent, and how much good it can do. □