

## TO OVERCOME FEAR

by Charles McLaurin

The first people that I accomanied to the Sunflower County Courthouse in Indianola, Miss. gave me the spirit and courage to continue.

I will always remember Ausust 22, 1962 as the day that I became a man. It was on this day that I was to test myself for courage and the ability to move in the face of fear and danger, danger such as I had never faced before.

\_\_About 7:30 a.m. that morning, I had been around to the homes of peop,e who had given me their names as persons willing to go to the courthouse and attempt to register to vote. I was very disappointed, I had only been able to find three of the ten. The other because of fear had left home rather than say so to me.

Since, I was going down to the Courthouse for my first time I too was afraid; not of dying and not of the man (Mr. Charlie) per say, but of the powers the sheriff's department, the police department, the courts; these are the powers and the forces which keep Negroes in their so-called places. The night riders would not be so fearful if it wasn't for the sheriff who would be on their sides, or the policemen who would arrest the Negroes who had been shot by the mob, for breach of the peace. The Negro just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. So for this reason and many others, this poor Negro must face a hostile police court, he must stand before a prejudiced judge and be sent to the County Farm or the State prison, for a crime committed by others whose skin happened to be lighter and brighter, this is the system and the effects of that system and of the people subjected to the system.

So much for the in-between. About 8 a.m., I had only three people to go to the courthouse, this was the day I learned that the numbers were not important. I learned that a faithful few was better than an uncertain ten.

These three old ladies whose ages ranged from 65 to 85, knew the white man and his ways, they knew him because they had lived worked and raised families on his plantations, and on this day, they would come face to face with his sons and daughters to say, "We Must be Free;" Now!

Tommie Johnson, son of one of the ladies active in the movement in Ruleville was to carry us down in his car. About 8:30 Tommie came to where I was staying and we went to pick up the three old ladies. After we had them in the car; off we went, down the highway south on 49 highway.

We drove past an American service station operated by three white brothers known as the Woolenhams. These were bad brothers. They were known to beat up Negroes getting off the Greyhound bus when it put them off there. They also pulled guns on Negroes who asked for air in their car tires. As we passed this station I could not help but watch to see if they noticed the car, for this

car had taken six brave ladies down weeks earlier, and all the white people knew it. On and on passing the people in the cotton fields; trucks and busses along the sides of the highway; men, women and children moving to rhythm of the beat of the hoe; working hoping and forever saying "lord, my time ain't long, this work will soon be over, I'll be free."

Now Doddsville, five miles south of Ruleville. Doddsville is the home of U.S. Senator Eastland, James O. Eastland that is.

The light turned red just as our car reached the intersection and we stopped. A strange little place this was, five or six buildings old and run down from the years when cotton was King and the Negroes were even more plentiful than they are today. Doddsville where many years ago the burning of Negroes was a Sunday spectacle where whites young and old delighted at this evil which killed the spirit of the old Negroes and set the stage for the place-fixing of young ones not yet born.

On and on my eyes taking in as much at a glance as possible. The old ladies talking telling the stories of the years gone by; me with knees shaking mouth closed tightly so as to not let them hear the fear in my voice. I am feeling the movement of the car and the rumbling of the motor as we move on and on towards our destination, Indianola, county seat of Sunflower County. As we move past the little town of Sunflower one of the old ladies said, "Won't be long now". At that moment my heart seemed to stop; fear, so much fear, realizing what danger could lie ahead for us especially me. A smart Nigger trying to change a way of life liked by everyone; at least it seemed that way.

Indianola, the city limits of Indianola, state of Mississippi; county of Sunflower I am the police. These are the words of Indianola's trusted police officer, Officer Shark. As we move into the city passing the number of gas stations along highway 82 I could almost speak now. I was going to face the man (Mr. Charlie) in the courthouse. I was filled with fear but this I must do; do this or continue to die. Not that I was dead and walking as such, but one who is alive in real life but dead in mind, dead in ability to say do or act in a way that would give attention to one's presence in society.

We turned off the highway and again we drove south, this time through a neighborhood, a white neighborhood. Then around a corner and there was the courthouse the police station and the sheriff's department. All of the big powers together. We pulled up in front of the Courthouse. The building was an old faded brick type with a fourth door that opened on a different street.

As I opened the door to get out I got a feeling in my stomach that made me feel weak. Sweat started to form on my forehead and my mouth became moist. At this point I was no longer in command, the three old ladies were leading me, I was following them. They got out of the car and went up the walk to the courthouse as if this was the long walk that lead to the Golden Gate of Heaven, their heads held high. I watched from a short distance behind them; the pride with which they walked. The strong convictions that they held. I watched

as they walked up the steps into the building. I stepped outside outside the door and waited, thinking how it was that these ladies who have been victimized by white faces all of their lives would suddenly walk up to the man and say, I want to vote. This did something to me. It told me something. It was like a voice speaking to me, as I stood there alone, in a strange place and an unknown land. This voice told me that although these old ladies knew the risk involved in their being there they were still willing to try. It said you are the light, let it shine and the people will know you, and they will follow you, if you show the way they will go, with or without you.

So they did, I ask one night; I told them what to do and when that day came I followed them. The people are the true leaders. We need only to move them; to show them. Then watch and learn.

The ladies came out of the courthouse and found me day-dreaming. They told me that the man in the office had told them that the office was closed. At that I went to see. I tried to open the door but it was locked. I knocked but no one opened the door. I went back to where the ladies were and we went back to the car.

As we drove away I looked back at this place, called Indianola for one day real soon I would make a speech on these grounds. Surrounded by hundreds. That dream came true 3 1/2 years later. When we held one of the greatest Freedom days in the state around the courthouse.

Charles McLaurin