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The Accents are Southern

Experiment in Virginia

(By Staff Correspondent)

BLACKSTONE, Va. — It's very much like the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project in miniature—except that the accents of most of the workers are Southern.

This is the 1965 Summer Project of the Virginia Students Civil Rights Committee (VSCRC), headquartered in Blackstone and fanning out through six Black Belt counties.

Through the summer, 20 young people worked in the project, 15 of them white, virtually all students in seven Virginia colleges, most of them native Southerners.

Ben Montgomery, chairman of VSCRC and a student last year at Hampton Institute, tells how it came about:

"We began talking at a state-wide student conference called by SNCC last fall. We decided we didn't need to go to Mississippi to find work that needed doing. We had problems right here."



—Southern Patriot Photo

DISCUSSING VIRGINIA'S 'CONTROLLED SOCIETY' and what to do about it, some members of the Virginia summer student project gather in front of their Blackstone headquarters, (from left) Howard Romaine, University of Virginia, Lucius "Duke" Edwards, Virginia State College, David Lubs, University of Virginia, and Ben Montgomery, Hampton Institute.

The area in question, Virginia's Black Belt, lies south of Richmond, the state's Fourth Congressional District. Negroes make up 47.9 per cent of the District population and are a majority in 10 of its 18 counties. Last June only 18.6 per cent of those eligible were registered to vote.

Median income for the entire district is \$3,532 a year—putting it 405th among the 435 congressional districts in the nation; from one fourth to one third of the Negro families earn less than \$1,000 a year. The area is rural, the main crop tobacco.

To the casual observer, however, there is nothing at all like Mississippi's vast flat stretches of cotton fields sprinkled with tiny cabins and then one big mansion where the owner lives. The country here is prettier—hills and greenery and variety.

"The problems are covered up better," explains Lucius "Duke" Edwards, a project worker. "Many people think Virginia Negroes are free just because nobody is shooting at them every few nights."

Edwards says that if Mississippi is the "closed society," Virginia is the "controlled society."

Traditionally, this state has been run from the top by the few. Registration and voting figures are among the lowest in the nation, for white as well as Negro. The government is highly centralized. Real power lies with circuit court judges elected by the legislature; the judges appoint

key local officials including those who control schools and welfare.

Even local elected officials are beholden to centralized power, because a state compensation board annually fixes their salaries. The whole system was made to order for machine control, which Virginia has long had.

How do a handful of idealistic college students go about tackling such a formidable force to let some fresh air of democracy in?

You start somewhere, these students say—in one county, now six counties, later more. And you work, you have faith—and when you get discouraged you start all over.

The first thing these students did, last winter, was research. No civil rights project in the South has been more carefully prepared for than this one. They collected facts and figures on the area. Then they visited some local people.

Then they talked among themselves. Stanley Wise of the SNCC staff met with them. By summer they were deeply imbued with the SNCC philosophy that an organizer is not a missionary who goes out to help "the people" but a catalyst who helps people help themselves.

"Our job," explains Howard Romaine of the University of Virginia, "is to find out what people want and need and help them organize themselves."

So this summer they spent a lot of time just listening.

Vote registration was an obvious objective, but far from the only one. Crop allotments were a big issue, for there is often evidence of discrimination.

Lack of jobs is a major problem for Negro young people; most of them leave, a Lunenburg County youth told the *Patriot* reporter, because they think they will find a job in the North. They rarely do, so usually come back—and join the Army as a last resort.

And sometimes the problem was just food.

"Let's don't talk about civil rights, honey, let's talk about food," one woman told Anne Romaine (Howard's wife; there were two young married couples on the project). This woman had four children and was really hungry. So that set the students to trying to get surplus food into the county.

SCOPE, the summer organizing project of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, also had workers in this area (they were from out of state), and a Presbyterian group had a tutoring project. They all worked together.

What is the reaction of local Negroes to these white students who come to their homes—not Northern students but white Southerners?

"They just don't believe it," laughed Duke Edwards, himself a Negro. "They ask where they are from, and the kids say

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Staunton or Lynchburg, or somewhere else in Virginia—and they can't believe it."

Trust, of course, does not come overnight, but it is not impossible, and real relationships grew.

As for the white students themselves, they are an inspiring group; full of the contagious joy of those who have found their way out of the sham of the Southern segregated world. Unlike the mavericks of earlier generations, they are beginning to have the numbers that make them know they are part of a real movement.

There is Howard Romaine, native of Louisiana who was studying bio-chemistry when he discovered the sit-ins and Mississippi and the movement and couldn't get his mind on the chemistry anymore ("It bugged me, man, it bugged me.") There is Nan Grogan, cheerleader at a Virginia high school, social leader at Mary Washington College—until she worked in an Atlanta slum on a YWCA project, saw poverty firsthand, found SNCC, went to Mississippi.

And so on down the list—each with his own story, breaking away, finding freedom.

Nan Grogan thinks they feel it all more deeply than many Northern students who come South. She worked in Missis-

Southern Students Organize

issippi last summer and was amazed during the winter when she visited another summer worker in New England and found that his interest in the movement had cooled.

"They went home to be heroes, had dinners given in their honor, all that," she explains. "If you are from the South and work in the movement, you may go home to ostracism and pain. So you think a long time and when you make up your mind you really believe."

One future objective of the Virginia project will be to organize among the poor white people as well as the Negroes of this impoverished region and to bring them together.

There is also talk of literacy schools, political action to support independent candidates for both local and state offices, and community organizations to make use of anti-poverty programs in a way that makes them really belong to the local people.

The project will continue; some summer workers will stay. Those returning to campuses will be telling their experiences, attempting to bring

other searching young people to the wide world of emancipation and social commitment. There will be weekend organizing projects during the year, and hopefully many more on the job next summer.

Here perhaps is the greatest significance of this project: not only Southern black and white students working together, but working in communities close to home and thus bridging the gap that so often separates the intellectual from his fellowman.

(The Virginia student project is not the child of any national organization, so has limited financial resources. You can make a tax exempt donation through the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) P.O. Box 6403, Nashville, Tenn., which is supporting them. Make checks to SSOC, and mark them for VSCRC.)



--Patriot Photo

THE VIRGINIA STUDENTS and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's SCOPE workers jointly set up an office, library and community center in Victoria, Va. Here SCOPE worker Bill Monnie of West Virginia Wesleyan College (left) talks with a local civil rights worker, John Boyd.



HELPING LOCAL PEOPLE learn the mechanics of organizing is part of the Virginia students' work. Here two project workers, Howard Romaine (left) and Bill Towe, show Richard Wallace and Lawrence Fowlks how to run the mimeograph machine.

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