

SOUTHERN PORTRAIT: CITY WITH A FUTURE, GREENWOOD, MISSISSIPPI; by Mike Miller

Greenwood, Mississippi. The Chamber of Commerce calls it "City With A Future". The Chamber tells visitors, in its pamphlet on the city, that in 1834 a site was chosen and named, after John Williams, "Williams' Landing". "Among those who brought cotton to this point to be shipped was the last of the great Choctaw Chieftans, Greenwood Leflore. In 1844, Williams' Landing was of sufficient size to be incorporated; the town was incorporated under the name of the Choctaw Chief, 'Greenwood'. From that time, it became clear that Greenwood was destined to be one of the Delta's leading cities."

One hundred and nineteen years later, Greenwood Leflore's great grandson, Wiley Branton, head of the Atlanta based Voter Education Project, came to Greenwood to testify at the trial of local voter registration workers. Greenwood, Mississippi is the center of a voter registration drive covering the great Mississippi Delta region. Dozens of young Negroes working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee fervently hope that Greenwood is a city with a future. They are daily risking their lives to make this hope come true. They were on trial because they believe that there must be full equality for Negroes in Mississippi and in Greenwood if this is to be a city with a future. There are 20,436 people in Greenwood, and 47,142 people in Leflore County. 52% of the city's residents and 64.6% of the county's residents are non-white—the overwhelming majority of them being Negroes. Between one and two per cent of these Negroes are registered voters. That is why the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee ("Snick") decided to work in the city of Greenwood, the County of Leflore, the Delta region, the State of Mississippi.

On June 18, 1962, "Snick" field secretary Sam Block came to Greenwood. His purpose was "to teach the Negroes of Greenwood their rights, duties and obligations as citizens under a constitutional form of government." His program was to instruct Greenwood Negroes about the Constitution of the United States of America and of the State of Mississippi and to encourage them to register to vote. The job was not an easy one. Mississippi Negroes have been beaten, killed, evicted from their homes and fired from their jobs for seeking to do what is their Constitutional right: registering to vote and voting for public officials. A shell of fear and apathy, built around the Mississippi Negro after 100 years of de facto slavery, met Block on his arrival to Greenwood.

Block is 24 years old, born and raised in Mississippi. For some time after his arrival in Greenwood, he couldn't find a place to stay. Negroes were afraid to be associated with him. When he walked down the street, they crossed to the other side. He was whispered about, called a "Freedom Rider". When he went visiting door to door, a police car followed him to each house, parked in front and the officers inside wrote things down on a pad whose purpose was well understood by the Negro residents of the street. Block was jailed several times. He was beaten up by three whites, and just escaped being hit by a speeding pickup truck. Demands for protection by the Justice Department received lots of attention in Washington D.C., but little action.

On April 2, 1963, the Mayor and Commissioners of Greenwood issued a Statement which reads, in part; "Negroes for many years have been applying for voter registration in Greenwood, Mississippi. No instance has been cited where any applicant, colored or white, has ever been intimidated, molested, or in any way interfered with." The Statement was reprinted in the journal of the White Citizens' Council. (the Citizen: Official Journal of the Citizens Councils of America; April, 1963; Vol. 7; No. 7; p. 5.) This is Greenwood, Mississippi, USA.

A chronology of events in the town best tells the story: August 26, 1962, Sam Block and three other SNCC field secretaries had to leap from the second

floor window of their office to escape a white lynch mob. October, 1962, Leflore County Board of Supervisors voted to drop the surplus food program which had helped maintain some 22,000 Negroes; the majority of whom are seasonal workers and sharecroppers. February 20, 1963, Sam Block reported that four Negro businesses, one block from the SNCC office on 115 E. McLaurin Street were burned to the ground. Block said, "I believe this was an attempt to burn down our office." February 22, 1963, Block was arrested for his statement, and charged with "making statements calculated to incite the breach of the peace." February 25, 1963, 150 Negroes packed the County Courthouse at Block's trial to hear him refuse to accept a suspended sentence if he agreed to drop all voter registration activities. 200 more Negroes tried to witness the trial, but could not get in. February 26 & 27, 1963, a total of 150 Negroes went to the County Courthouse to register to vote. February 28, 1963, James Travis, 20, a SNCC field secretary and native Mississippi Negro, was shot by three white assailants seven miles from Greenwood. The operating physician at the University Hospital in Jackson reported that Travis would have died instantly had the bullet penetrated his body with more force. March 1, 1963, Sam Block and Willie Peacock, SNCC field secretaries, were shot at by white assailants in an untagged car. March 21, 1963, the Leflore County Board of Supervisors voted to reinstitute the County program of surplus food distribution after representatives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture said the government would handle the program if Leflore officials wouldn't. March 24, 1963, SNCC office set on fire; office equipment completely destroyed, but records salvaged. March 26, 1963, shotgun blasts shattered the front door and bedroom window of Dewey Greene, Sr., father of George Greene, SNCC staff member, and Dewey Greene, Jr., recent Negro applicant for admission to the University of Mississippi. March 27, 1963, ten SNCC field staff arrested for "inciting to riot". They were protesting the lack of police protection.

By the end of March, Greenwood became internationally infamous. The police dogs had been used on a group of Negroes seeking to register to vote. And, Richard Gregory, citizen (Dick Gregory, Negro comic) had come to Greenwood to join the freedom movement. Sneaking later of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's work, Gregory said, "This is the greatest organization in the world." And, on another occasion, "The most feared group in the South today is SNCC."

At this writing, the end of July, over 1300 Negroes have sought to register to vote. As far as SNCC workers know, less than 100 have passed an examination that requires the applicant to interpret any of 285 sections of the Mississippi State Constitution. The adequacy of the interpretation is judged by a white registrar of voters. Negro college graduates have failed.

Behind the story of voter registration efforts, violence and intimidation is another tale—of poverty and of economic pressures against the Mississippi Negro. The story is simply told with the following statistics from the U. S. Census. The average Mississippi Negro earns \$1,444 per year. The urban Mississippi Negro earns \$2,100. His rural, nonfarm counterpart receives \$1,271. And, the rural farm Negro—the sharecropper, tenant farmer, farm laborer—receives \$974. (1960 Census, "General Social and Economic Characteristics—Mississippi", pp. 118, 132.) Viewed in another way, the 1960 Housing Census reports the following on plumbing facilities in household units with non-white heads: there are 207,611 occupied units; 62,160 have exclusive use of a flush toilet; 7,570 share a flush toilet; 137,881 use "other toilet facilities or none". (1960 Census, "Housing, Mississippi", p. 13.) And conditions are getting worse, not better. "The (farm) worker who has traditionally looked toward cotton picking as a means of laying up some winter money has had an uncommonly thin season. Wage rates...have averaged lower than in recent years. Machines have picked a record portion of the crop..." (Mississippi Farm Labor Letter; Mississippi Employment Security Commission, November 13, 1962.)

According to the 1962 report of the National Sharecroppers Fund, "The need for new jobs in the rural South has been intensified by acceleration in cotton harvest mechanization. In 1950, only 8% of the cotton crop was machine harvested...The Department of Labor estimated that in 1962 the harvest was 57% mechanized. Between 1959 and 1961, peak employment declined by at least 250,000, while production dropped less than 3 per cent." (The Condition of Farm Workers in 1962; Report to the Board of Directors of National Sharecroppers Fund; Fay Bennett, Exec. Secretary.)

The attempt to register to vote is an attempt to find a voice for these problems. Yet the very attempt leads, in many cases, to increased economic deprivation. Two examples, which could be repeated many times, are reported by a SNCC voter registration worker: "Mrs. L.C. (it is best not to use her name) had gone down to register on April __, 1963. She worked for four days and was fired. She had been working at the _____ for six or seven years...She rents a house from Mrs. _____. The man who collects the rent, Mr. _____, a Negro, said that he was told not to pick up any more rent from people who have registered to vote." Mrs. L.C. has five children and is the sole breadwinner for her family. "Mr. F.V. worked at _____. He had been working there for eight years. When he was fired on Monday, _____, he was not told why. He called later in the day and was told by one of the Negro workers there that he had overheard the boss say that he fired Mr. V. because he had gone down to register to vote." There are seven people in the V. family.

The fight for freedom in Mississippi continues. YOU CAN HELP VOTER REGISTRATION EFFORTS IN GREENWOOD. WE NEED: typewriters, office supplies, electric mimeograph machines and supplies, ham radio equipment, automobiles to transport people from the fields to the County Courthouse where they register to vote, buses to transport them to mass meetings, food and clothing to provide these necessities for those who are fired from their jobs because they try to register, and money to pay the \$10 per week salary that SNCC field secretaries are supposed to receive.

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