



Drake Undergraduate Social Science Journal

Spring 2022 Edition

“Work, Live, Sing & Shout FREEDOM”: White Iowans’ Involvement in the Mississippi Summer Project, 1964

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Abstract

In 1964, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) launched a concerted campaign to fight for civil rights in Mississippi which came to be known as Freedom Summer. A significant part of their strategy involved recruiting white students from northern states, including Patti Miller, a music education major at Drake University, to join in their efforts. These young white northerners joined COFO despite monetary costs and the very real threat of violence and even death. This paper explores the details of COFO’s efforts in 1964, which included voter registration, establishing community centers, and organizing Freedom Schools, among other things; as well as what role white Iowans played in these efforts and why they chose to get involved.

The U.S.'s 20th century Civil Rights Movement reached peak activism in the early 1960s, during the lead up to the U.S. Congress passing the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts. While the history of the movement stretches long before and long after this period, it was during this time that racial justice focused organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equity (CORE), the National Organization for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and many other groups like them found their organizing reaching a fervor pitch. Oftentimes, these groups' work overlapped—in ideals, in the workers themselves, and in location. One of these locations was Mississippi, which was described by the SNCC in 1964 as “a state where individual political life is nonexistent, where the economic condition of a vast majority of the population is appalling, [and where sits] the home of white supremacy.”¹ Much of SNCC's energy was focused on this state, as a place where the most work had yet to be done; they staged multiple state-wide campaigns to enfranchise Black people and push, pull, or otherwise force the state closer to racial equality. In 1963, they joined forces with CORE, SCLC, the NAACP and other voting and civic groups to form a statewide organization in Mississippi called the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to better coordinate their efforts.

COFO was run by Bob Moses, a math teacher from New York with a master's degree in Philosophy from Harvard University, an experienced activist, and a “legendary survivor of the worst Mississippi had to offer.”² It was during 1961 that he and the other members of SNCC and COFO in Mississippi decided that their cause needed a more comprehensive, concerted campaign to “combat the terrible cultural and economic deprivation of Negro communities in

¹ Box 2, Binder, SNCC Pamphlet, *Mississippi Summer Project*, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

² Liz Fusco, “Freedom Schools In Mississippi (1964),” *The Radical Teacher* 40 (1991): 321.

Mississippi;” this was what came to be known as the Mississippi Summer Project, or Freedom Summer. COFO advertised it as a “Peace-Corps type operation” where hundreds of workers, including students, teachers, technicians, nurses, artists, and legal advisors from outside Mississippi, particularly from the North, would be brought in for the summer of 1964 to fight against the rabid inequality there.³ They spread the word across the country—including on Drake University’s campus in Des Moines, Iowa. It was there, in the spring of 1964, that Patti Miller, then a junior studying music education, a white woman from Audubon, Iowa, saw a brochure calling for volunteers for COFO’s Mississippi Summer Project. Decades later, Miller said that when she saw it, “I took it down, I leafed through it, and every bone in my body knew this was something I had to do.”⁴

This paper will look at what compelled Iowans to join a civil rights project in Mississippi, what their work looked like, under what conditions they were working, and the tactics that COFO used to fight for civil rights during this project. White Mississippians during this time flaunted a constant and immediate threat of violence against civil rights workers, which obliged COFO to use different, less confrontational tactics, designed to keep its workers safer—but not safe, as that was never an option. In general, the white, college-aged Iowans who volunteered were compelled to join COFO’s Mississippi Summer Project by their feeling that apartheid society in Mississippi was wrong and that it was their responsibility to work toward fixing it, for religious or moral reasons. Their work included every aspect of the Mississippi Summer project, from canvassing voting-aged Black people for voting registration, to running community centers, to researching life in Mississippi, to instructing Black children. Freedom Summer’s impact on Mississippi’s racial landscape was not immediately visible, but with the benefit of hindsight we

³ SNCC Pamphlet, *Mississippi Summer Project*.

⁴ Iowa PBS, “Iowans Return To Freedom Summer,” YouTube video, 48:44, (June 15, 2015).

can see that it did have a positive effect on voter registration in Mississippi, racially equitable educational praxis, and the lives of its participants. In the end, according to COFO member David J. Dennis Sr., “what made Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964 a success was the ability of people from different organizations and different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds and beliefs to come together under the COFO roof with the singular target of making the Constitution of the United States real for all of the nation’s people.”⁵

Why did the white Iowans involved stay? Why had they decided to go in the first place? As documentary filmmaker Stanley Nelson pointed out, these Iowans “didn’t have the problems of Mississippi” and “might go two years without seeing a Black person” if they just stayed home.⁶

The Iowans themselves insisted that they got involved because it was the right thing to do. Marcia Moore, a Fort Dodge, Iowa, native, said that when she learned about some Black people’s experiences in the U.S. through literature, she was shocked, and it compelled her to act.⁷ In an interview with a local paper, Patti Miller, who had never met a Black person before she attended Drake University in 1961, said she had to go because “I have to live what I’ve been saying...I hoped to become involved as a Christian, become part of a movement, a Christian movement...I’m very much afraid. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been quite so afraid of anything before. But I have to go. I would fear for the validity of my convictions if I couldn’t go.”⁸ One volunteer interviewed by *Ebony* magazine, Joyce Brown, said that “my fear is not as great as my duty. I’ve got to do it.” *Ebony* went on to describe the volunteers’ work as “the

⁵ David J. Dennis Sr., “Unsung Heroes of 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer,” *Southern Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 46

⁶ Iowa PBS, “Iowans Return.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Box 2, Binder, Newspaper Clippings, “Audubon Girl to Join Mississippi Rights Movement,” Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

compulsion, the compassion, the willingness to suffer so that the suffering of others might be abetted.”⁹ In most of the volunteers’ minds, this was a calling—a crusade—that was worth the threat of violence.

Cagin and Dray agreed that fear alone was not a sufficient reason to quit for these volunteers, but further argued that because of the intense media attention, and because of their exposure to the ideas of the Black radicals of SNCC over the course of their training session, “the students had in effect become captive to a larger drama they could not direct. They were pledged to a role that looked increasingly dangerous, yet could only profess their willingness, despite their misgivings, to see it through...quitting was...a complete betrayal of everything they stood for.”¹⁰ Social pressure may have played a role in keeping the white volunteers involved. It may also have been true that going back on their words and stopping something they already started was somehow more daunting than the intense violence and threat of death they were facing.

But another form of motivation to consider is that there were religious undertones and overtones to many of the volunteers’ commitment, which often went hand in hand with a kind of white savior complex. COFO itself was well aware of this kind of attitude; during their orientation at Oxford, Bob Moses made it clear: “Don’t come to Mississippi this summer to save the Mississippi Negroes...Only come if you understand, really understand, that his freedom and yours are one.”¹¹ Many of the volunteers, like Miller, called the Civil Rights Movement a Christian movement and said that was the basis of its appeal to them. It was, to an extent,

⁹ Box 1, *Ebony Magazine* September 1964, “Crusade in Mississippi,” Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

¹⁰ Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We are not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1988): 352.

¹¹ Cagin and Dray, *We are not Afraid*, 30.

Christian, or at least not entirely secular. Much of the physical and ideological organizing work was done through religious institutions because of their localized power in the communities racial justice activists worked in. But when white activists, outsiders, go into communities for religious reasons, that can have a negative connotation in light of the long history of imperialist activity done in the name of the Christian religion and the white man's burden, especially in majority-Black countries. The kind of proselytizing some Christian sects perform in the name of doing good is inherently paternalistic and infantilizing, unable to separate giving aid from believing they know better and are better than the people actually living in those communities. Even though this kind of work can be dangerous, religious fervor and a misplaced, racist sense of obligation to people perceived as incapable or lesser often motivated the people doing it to keep going.

Elements of that attitude are clear in some of the work these white volunteers did. Before her departure for Mississippi, Patti Miller gave an interview with a local paper where she stated her intent to apply for the Methodist Board of Missions and become a short-term missionary in Africa.¹² Although Miller herself does not directly parallel her desire to do Civil Rights work in Mississippi with her desire to be a missionary in Africa, the journalist writing the article does, and rightly so. It is entirely possible that the same impulse that motivated Miller, and thousands of white Christians for hundreds of years before her, to work as a missionary in Africa, also motivated her to volunteer for the Mississippi Summer Project. But regardless of, or perhaps even despite, their motivations for doing so, Miller and other Iowans like her did go, and the work they engaged in benefitted Black Mississippians and advanced COFO's campaign for racial equality.

¹² Box 2, Binder, Newspaper Clippings, "Audubon Girl to Join Mississippi Rights Movement," Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

The “Invasion”

Norman Harris argued that this period of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement is typically ideologically characterized by “non-violent direct action based on an integrationist ideal which assumed that white Americans could be enlightened and thereby made to treat African Americans with respect.”¹³ But that kind of ideology was difficult to put into practice given the air of terror that racist white people cultivated in Jim Crow Mississippi; lynchings, cross burnings, bombings, and beatings were all frequent occurrences as racist white southerners tried to keep Black people from registering to vote or engaging in civil rights activism.¹⁴ These actions were very rarely punished, even when the perpetrators were known; oftentimes, local law enforcement were participants in these activities. The whole South was awash with white terrorism, but Mississippi was a special kind of hell. COFO’s offices there were bombed, its workers attacked; the violence was so heated that the group’s backers decided to pull funding, but COFO was largely undeterred, and went forward with the project regardless.¹⁵ But as soon as word got out that COFO was planning to bring nearly a thousand mostly white northern college-aged activists to Mississippi, the white racist community, predictably, erupted.

There was a concerted effort by local media to paint the impending arrival of northern activists in a bad light. Debbie Harwell pointed out that some papers and public figures went so far as to conflate these college students with communist infiltrators and argue that therefore the communist party was playing an active role in the Mississippi Summer Project. This kind of red baiting—harassing or persecuting someone on the basis that they are communist or sympathize

¹³ Norman Harris, “The Sixties: An Analytical Chronology,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 14, no. 3: 145.

¹⁴ Debbie Z. Harwell, “Wednesdays in Mississippi: Uniting Women across Regional and Racial Lines, Summer 1964,” *The Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 3: 620-1.

¹⁵ Harris, “The Sixties: An Analytical Chronology,” 146.

with communists—was a common smear tactic used against leftist, liberal, and progressive activists during this period. It was also, in this instance, false. Historian John Rachal pointed out that white racist state officials often used red-baiting to avoid being accused of open race-baiting while they riled up their constituents against the civil rights workers.¹⁶ Harwell quoted one newspaper editorial that wrote that this project was an “invasion” and amounted to “the occupation of our state by federal authority.”¹⁷ Rachal argued that racist white southerners saw the whole endeavor as an insult to their “way of life,” and saw the students like Patti Miller who wanted to get involved as “holier-than-thou outsiders” who were planning to “impose their naïve, liberal, and probably communistic values on the Magnolia state...to roil the state’s racial harmony by sowing the seeds of discontent among its contented Negro citizens.” They engaged in extensive name calling in the press; Rachal collected a list of these terms that might have been comical in their exaggerated vitriol, had they not carried with them the very real threat of violence:

"invaders," "intruders," "left-wing agitators," "professional agitators," "carpetbaggers" (this from a former NAACP member who "turned Tom" and became editor of a black Jackson weekly), "communists," "trouble makers," "do-gooders," "mised pawns," "racial zealots" (both from Senator John Stennis), "meddlers," "integrationists," "ideological manipulators," "propagandists," "CORE creeps," "weirdos," "beatnik sophomores," "immature collegians," "motley missionaries," and "pseudo-religious reformers" (ministers representing the National Council of Churches had been picketing the Forrest County courthouse in Hattiesburg since January).¹⁸

And all this talk wasn’t just talk. At the state-wide level, in the leadup to summer 1964, the Mississippi state legislature passed over 20 laws limiting public assembly and free speech.

¹⁶ John. R. Rachal, “‘The Long, hot Summer’: The Mississippi Response To Freedom Summer, 1964,” *The Journal of African American History* 84, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 318.

¹⁷ Debbie Z. Harwell, *Wednesdays in Mississippi: Proper Ladies Working for Radical Change, Freedom Summer 1964*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014): 28-9.

¹⁸ Rachal, “‘The Long, hot Summer,’” 316.

In addition to the statewide response, local municipalities also prepared in their own way. One example Harwell found is the mayor of Jackson, the state's capital, who "hired additional policemen, purchased 250 shotguns, and procured an armored vehicle—a retrofitted ice cream truck known as 'Thompson's Tank'—that carried ten police officers and had shotguns protruding from gun ports."¹⁹ Local law enforcement and white supremacist terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the White Knights were preparing to commit violence against Black and white civil rights workers and any Mississippians who listened to what those activists had to say.

All the threats and violence against the Mississippi Summer Project workers were immediately realized when three COFO civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner, disappeared overnight on June 21st, 1964—the day the first group of northern college students began arriving in Mississippi for the campaign. In fact, Goodman was one of those white northern college students. COFO had prepared its workers for this as best it could; but as Seth Cagin and Philip Dray pointed out in 1988, COFO could only do so much. Its emergency procedures were mostly designed for managing arrests, which they could control, to an extent. But what happened to these three, Cagin and Dray argued, "a complete disappearance without a trace, was much more difficult—and frightening...on the first day of the summer project, even before the majority of the volunteers had arrived in the state, the very worst had happened: three of their own were missing, at night, in Mississippi."²⁰ It was a terribly perfect example of the danger these volunteers faced; a danger COFO was well cognizant of, and did its best to prepare its volunteers for.

¹⁹ Harwell, "Wednesdays in Mississippi," 621.

²⁰ Cagin and Dray, *We are not Afraid*, 42.

Orientation in Oxford, Ohio

By the end of 1963, COFO leaders like Bob Moses and Wiley Branton knew that federal intervention had become necessary if they were to achieve any kind of lasting change in Mississippi.²¹ As Harwell quoted in her book, in COFO's prospectus for this project, the organizers stated that "political and social justice cannot be won without the massive aid of the country as a whole, backed by the power and authority of the federal government."²² The Mississippi Summer Project was designed, Rachal argued, to give the movement a "jump start" on this front; between the scale of the work and the "very visible white students" from "elite colleges," it would almost guarantee attention from the national media and put more pressure on the federal government to get involved.²³

The work that white Iowan volunteers like Miller, Moore, and the others did was laid out for them in detail before they even arrived in Oxford for training. Freedom Summer involved several different silos to which COFO could assign its volunteers, and it explained them all in detail in an initial letter about the project for toward potential applicants. They included registering Black Mississippians to vote, organizing community centers, teaching at what COFO called Freedom Schools, and several smaller special projects. The freedom registration campaign was an ongoing project with Freedom Summer's volunteers jumping in for a final push. It involved "establishing local registrars in every precinct in Mississippi with registration books resembling as much as possible the official books at the state" so that COFO could challenge the official registration books, which fell under the purview of racist white southerners

²¹ Harris, "The Sixties: An Analytical Chronology," 146

²² Harwell, *Wednesdays*, 69-70.

²³ Rachal, "'The Long, hot Summer,'" 315.

who actively worked to exclude Black Mississippians from the register.²⁴ Volunteers assigned to this area also helped campaign for candidates for state-wide office from the Freedom Democratic Party.²⁵ For the community centers, to which COFO assigned Patti Miller, COFO made an effort to recruit some professional workers like teachers, social workers, and nurses. Their job was to “provide instruction in prenatal care, infant care, and general hygiene...and a cultural program for the community [including] movies, dramatics, dancing, and music...programs in literacy, adult education and vocational training and [to] serve as Centers for political education and organization.”²⁶ These workers also served as a kind of jack-of-all-trades, filling in for other areas when there were gaps, including working with children and speaking to white community members. Twenty-five Freedom Schools were established across Mississippi, each set up to take in as many students as possible, and sometimes more than that. COFO developed a curriculum for its students that covered a wide range of topics, nearly exactly like what they should have been learning in Mississippi’s public schools: reading, math, grammar, political science, the humanities, journalism, and creative writing. More broadly, COFO also wanted the Freedom Schools to cultivate leadership skill among young Black Mississippians. Other, smaller projects included general research about racial oppression in Mississippi, creating a committee of white Mississippians to eliminate “hate and bigotry” in the Deep South, and launching a legal offensive against the state with volunteer law students.²⁷

Once COFO accepted the volunteers’ applications, it sent them detailed information on what their work would entail.²⁸ Some areas received more instruction than others; Freedom

²⁴ Box 2, Binder, “Memorandum: on the SNCC Mississippi Summer Project,” Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Schools, for instance, got a lot of information about the curriculum they would be teaching and in part developing on the ground. One memo laid out an average day's schedule for the teachers and the high-school-aged students they would be teaching:

Early morning (7-9): Concentrated individual work on areas of students' particular interest or need. Morning (9-12 or 1): Academic curriculum Afternoon: (2-4 or 5): Non-academic curriculum (recreation, cultural activities and some tutoring). You will have to bear in mind that it is too hot in the afternoon for much concentrated work. Evening (7-9 or so): Work with voter registration activities, or special events like a visiting folk singer on evenings when no political work is needed.²⁹

COFO also frequently sent for donations of money, books, and other supplies from its volunteers and other sympathetic parties in its communications.^{30 31}

The bulk of the ideological training for volunteers took place while they were still at home, though there was still discussion in the training camp of their latent racism and how to work around it. Most of the training that actually took place in Oxford was "survival techniques" on how to avoid or live through the violence volunteers would inevitably face; things like watching out for cars without license plates and cops without badges, avoiding standing in lit windows so snipers can't shoot them, knowing the roads in and out of their area like the back of their hands, memorizing the safe houses and sanctuaries available, not wearing contact lenses or sandals, carrying a jacket to wrap around their heads in case of an attack, and how to stun a charging dog.³²

COFO made it abundantly clear to these volunteers that they would be facing violence and jail time. In the program overview sent to potential volunteers with the applications to

²⁹ Box 2, Binder, "Memorandum: Re Subject: Overview of the Freedom Schools," Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

³⁰ Box 2, Binder, "Memorandum: on the SNCC Mississippi Summer Project," Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

³¹ Box 2, Binder, "Memorandum: Re Subject: Overview of the Freedom Schools," Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

³² Ibid., 32.

participate, the organization said just that, and added that volunteers should “check out in advance their sources of bail money, in the event it might be needed.”³³ They repeated this warning and recommendation in most subsequent communications sent before volunteers left for training, which was hosted on a college campus in Oxford, Ohio. Once they arrived for training, the warnings continued. Cagin and Dray summarized it well when they said that “the central theme of the conclave, relentlessly hammered at the students, was that they were headed into a maelstrom. “I may be killed, you may be killed,’ cautioned SNCC executive secretary James Foreman. ‘The whole staff may go.’”³⁴ The more experienced civil rights workers running the training session, including lawyer R. Jess Brown, described where they were headed to the white volunteers as an environment where everyone around them meant them harm:

“They—the white folks, the police, the county sheriff, the state police—they are all watching for you. They are looking for you. They are ready and they are armed. They know some of your names and your descriptions even now, even before you get to Mississippi. They know you are coming and they are ready. All I can do is give you some pointers on how to stay alive”...Brown stressed to the white volunteers that their race would not insulate them from assault. “You’re going to be classified into two groups in Mississippi,” he said. “Niggers and nigger-lovers. And they’re tougher on nigger-lovers.”³⁵

Their words were almost an attempt to get the volunteers to turn back. It was certainly meant to make them afraid—and white volunteers did learn to fear the violence they were facing, but most of them continued on. Only 10 of the 300 students finishing the initial training session at Oxford, Ohio dropped out after the news of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney’s disappearance reached them; the rest stayed.

³³ Box 2, Binder, *Memorandum: on the SNCC Mississippi Summer Project*, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

³⁴ Cagin and Dray, *We are not Afraid*, 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

Historians like Cagin and Dray have argued that there was an underlying strategic calculus to the decision to bring young white volunteers to Mississippi in the midst of all this violence: that calculus being that COFO's leaders knew that "white Mississippi would not take kindly to the invasion of Yankee do-gooders, and there would inevitably be violence directed against center volunteers. This violence against young northern whites, it was hoped, would finally draw the eyes of the nation to Mississippi and break civil rights deadlock there."³⁶ There is plenty of evidence to support that. White college students like Patti Miller, Marcia Moore, Gwen Cooper, Stephen L. Smith, Bambi Brown, and Raymond L. Rohrbaugh, among many others, did generate a great deal of media attention. And that attention wasn't just racist southern papers decrying their actions; their hometown papers, like the Des Moines Register, the Des Moines Tribune, and Audubon's News-Advocate, repeatedly interviewed them about the work they were doing and why they were doing it. Popular mainstream national publications like the Saturday Evening Post and Newsweek also wrote articles about the violence and why COFO continued to work through it.³⁷

On the ground in Mississippi

Once volunteers arrived in Mississippi, COFO put them straight to work; there was no time to waste in a campaign that could be measured in weeks. From the beginning, the atmosphere was understandably grim, given that it started with the disappearance and subsequent murder of three of COFO's own. Patti Miller, who arrived on the day after Goodman, Schwenny, and Cheney's bodies were found, noticed this immediately. In a letter from her first day, she wrote that:

Things are very quiet around here this morning – everyone walked in silence – [exchanging] knowing glances, but few speak. –The ones who have been here all summer

³⁶ Cagin and Dray, *We are not Afraid*, 29.

³⁷ Box 2 and Box 3, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

feel the tenseness of the moment more than most – for they knew the three...very well. They struggled – worked – laughed with Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, Andy Goodman. And now they know their fate – and everyone is more determined than ever.³⁸

As the Freedom Summer volunteers went about their work, teaching, canvassing, organizing, they were beset on all sides by racist white southerners who, as had been made perfectly clear, were willing to do almost anything, including commit murder, to stop them from reaching their goal. *Ebony* magazine described them as “little Davids in a land of Goliaths.”³⁹ The SNCC ran a weekly newsletter to document every incident of racist and deterring action on the part of racist Mississippians; things like “five cartloads of whites, local police, and the highway patrol” firing shots at Black people attempting to register to vote at the courthouse, or Molotov cocktails being thrown through the windows of COFO community centers.⁴⁰ One incident in Itta Benna, Mississippi, involved the total destruction of a voter registration center: “Supporting posts on the porch were broken, the front door was torn off, windows were smashed, and posters torn down.”⁴¹ The center had been facing threats of violence over the phone for weeks.

COFO volunteers had the law turned against them as the police and state troopers allied with the racist white terrorists. Rachal found that there were over 80 assaults and beatings over the course of the summer, and a thousand arrests. Police brought them in for littering, distributing leaflets without a permit, violating curfew, interfering with a police officer, shoplifting, obstructing the flow of traffic, disturbing the peace, trespassing, withholding information, profanity, vagrancy, loitering; and oftentimes for no reason at all.⁴² The Iowan volunteers were no exception to this phenomenon.

³⁸ Box 2, Binder, Handwritten Letter for August 5, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

³⁹ Box 1, Alex Poinsett, “Crusade in Mississippi,” *Ebony*, magazine, September 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection: 26.

⁴⁰ Box 1, Staff Newsletter, SNCC August 1, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Rachal, ““The Long, Hot Summer,”” 321-2.

A local Iowa paper reported on Marcia Moore's multiple stints in jail on vagrancy charges, which Moore said were false because she carried her purse with her everywhere. She's quoted describing her second arrest in the article: "A constable of some kind – who drove a car not marked as a police car – stopped his car and told Marilyn and myself we would have to get in his car and be questioned because he wanted to know what I was doing in the Negro section of town."⁴³ The *Des Moines Register* reported on two more Iowans, Bambi Brown and Raymond Rohrbaugh, who were arrested for picketing a courthouse in Greenwood.⁴⁴ Another college-aged Iowan volunteer, Stephen Smith, was arrested in early July on charges of reckless driving and resisting arrest; he reported to the FBI, and later recounted to the *Des Moines Register*, that a local deputy beat him while arresting him: "He [the deputy] then pulled a gun on me and said he was sorry he couldn't kill me and proceeded to hit me with the gun butt on the head...he also struck me across the face with a flashlight and when we had through he cocked his gun and announced he was going to kill me."⁴⁵

The incidents continue: according to another local Iowa paper, Brian Peterson, a Des Moines native, was travelling with a minister and another young volunteer when they were all assaulted by a white man in McComb; when they reported it to the police, the police said they had no leads because they hadn't described their assailants well enough.⁴⁶ From the moment they arrived to the moment they left, the white Iowan volunteers were subject to violence from Mississippians and their police force, and almost every time it attracted the attention of papers in

⁴³ Box 1, Newspaper clippings, "Mississippi Police Again Stop Iowan," *Des Moines Register*, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁴⁴ Box 1, Newspaper clippings, "Pickets Freed After 5 Days," *Des Moines Register*, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁴⁵ Box 1, Newspaper clippings, "Iowan Tells of Beating By Dixie Deputy," *Des Moines Register*, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁴⁶ Box 1, Newspaper clippings, "Beat D.M. Rights Aide, 2 Others in Mississippi," Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

Iowa; it spread the word not only about the violence civil rights workers and Black people were facing, but also about COFO and the work it was doing. The volunteers themselves were excellent at taking concern for themselves and directing it toward the untenable situation in Mississippi; in a letter published by COFO, Miller wrote that “all our concerns must be for the dreadful injustice in this state – and in all America – and the world, as far as that’s concerned. Our concern must be for the miserable results of blind hatred – for human beings who have never known a taste of freedom – for the Negroes who must be freed from slavery – and for whites who must be freed from the chains which hatred places on us.”⁴⁷ Miller also gave another interview to a local religious magazine in Iowa where she denied the fact that COFO made anything explode; instead, she and the other volunteers “brought out into the open some of the beatings in dark jail cells, the bodies tossed into rivers. Finally some of the people there found out about these things.”⁴⁸

It wasn’t just local Iowa papers that suddenly sat up and took notice of what was going on in Mississippi once young white students got involved. As COFO’s leaders had predicted, the presence of the white northerners made national media pay attention to the violence. *Ebony* ran an article in September that included interviews with some of the COFO volunteers:

“The threat of bombing hangs like an atomic bomb over our heads,” admits COFO volunteer Emily Shrader, 22, at her Jackson headquarters post. “We don’t know when it’s going to happen, but we believe it will.” She gestures at plywood sheets boarding up the office’s plate glass windows smashed by white hoodlums. “At night we work in three or four shifts,” she continues. “It’s like a game of Russian roulette. You don’t know whether you’ll be ‘it’ when the shot comes.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Box 2, Binder, Handwritten letter for August 5, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁴⁸ Box 2, Binder, “Report from 1964; ‘I learned About Freedom,’” *Iowa Together Magazine*, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁴⁹ Box 1, Alex Poinsett, “Crusade in Mississippi,” *Ebony*, magazine, September 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection: 26.

Newsweek magazine also ran stories on the COFO workers all throughout the summer. *The New Republic*, another popular national magazine, ran a story in late August of 1964 about COFO's strategy for achieving its goals specifically, highlighting that their demonstrations "were useful only to build interest among local Negroes and to show the North that the right to vote was still not honored in Mississippi."⁵⁰ Freedom Summer garnered more and more attention as time went on, as did the rest of the civil rights movement in the South. COFO's bid to generate more publicity through using white Northern volunteers, and potentially gain federal intervention to protect voting rights, was marginally successful. As the news media's attention and the violence of racist white Mississippians grew, so too did COFO's work.

Miller, who was assigned to work at a community center, completed a few different tasks in Meridian. According to a letter Miller wrote, the center itself was "the upstairs of an old, dilapidated building – in the middle of a very low class Negro section of town."⁵¹ One of her responsibilities involved going in the company of a few other religious minded volunteers, including a unitarian minister, to interview ministers in Meridian and Philadelphia and ask them to speak out against the violence from the white community, which saw mixed results.⁵² Oftentimes the white clergy would respond with things like, "God knows the sin of integration – he meant for segregation to exist and any other way is wrong" or "I have enough to do preaching the gospel to my white people – let alone the Negroes," which further showed the white community's resistance to racial justice, even when the message was coming from a white girl that one paper described as looking like a "southern belle."⁵³

⁵⁰ Box 1, Christopher Jencks, "Mississippi: From Conversion to Coercion," Photocopy, *The New Republic*, August 22, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁵¹ Box 2, Binder, Handwritten letter for August 5, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁵² Box 2, Binder, Photocopy of newspaper clipping, *Ottumwa Courier*, Saturday, November 28, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁵³ Box 2, Binder, Handwritten letter for August 5, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

Because Miller majored in elementary music education, COFO also assigned her to organize a program for Freedom School children six to nine years old; something she found rewarding.⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ This was typical for the Freedom Schools. Some partnering groups, like Wednesdays in Mississippi, a group that brought “respectable” Northern women to the South to bridge the gap between the COFO workers and white Southern women, had concerns about young people without qualifications leading these sessions; but overall they felt that it was “tremendously exciting” to see the work they were doing.⁵⁶ One of these women, Baston, said “I thank God for the young people...from all over the country who are working with the children in these schools. For their strength—for their courage—for their competence in their ability to erase evil...they personify hope.”⁵⁷ Beyond the practical education volunteers offered, they also gave Black student some of their first experiences with white people who treated them as equals, or even human beings.

The Freedom Schools did some journalism of their own about the educational experiment they were running. In Meridian, the Freedom School ran a publication call the *Freedom Star*; it included poems and personal statements from the students, as well as these student journalists’ interviews with their volunteer teachers. One of its early August 1964 editions includes a few of these interviews. Pat, a student at the Meridian school, asked a volunteer, Steve, how he felt about teaching Black people; Steve replied that “he felt wonderful; he said that he had heard the children here wouldn’t accept white teachers from the North because they were used to the Southern whites. He also said he was glad to be teaching because he felt very strongly about the

⁵⁴ Box 2, Binder, Photocopy of newspaper clipping, *Ottumwa Courier*, Saturday, November 28, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁵⁵ Iowa PBS, “Iowans Return To Freedom Summer,” YouTube video, 48:44, (June 15, 2015).

⁵⁶ Harwell, *Wednesdays*, 73.

⁵⁷ Harwell, *Wednesdays*, 76.

fact that the people here are being denied many rights which are due to them.”⁵⁸ When another interviewer with a different teacher, Ronnie, asked the same question, they got a similar answer: “I feel that I am down here to hasten the day when no one will talk any more about ‘teaching negroes’ or ‘teaching whites,’ but just teaching people.”⁵⁹ A third interview asked another teacher, Betty, how she liked teaching in the Freedom School in Meridian; Betty answered that she found it

very exciting and rewarding. The students are alert and interested – the future leaders of the Mississippi Freedom Movement. Their understanding of the problems that they and all of us are facing is amazing. Together we have all grown in our understanding of each other and of the tasks that still need to be fulfilled. I hope that we can try to apply our understanding and actively work toward realizing our goals.⁶⁰

COFO’s Freedom Schools were encouraging in their students the same kind of curiosity and desire to widely publicize the truth as COFO as a whole was in the national media.

Volunteers COFO assigned to voter registration had perhaps the hardest and most dangerous job. Travelling through neighborhoods and places of work and towns and across an entire state full of people hostile or indifferent toward their message made them particularly vulnerable to all the violence detailed here. Convincing Black Mississippians that their vote was worth their life was no easy task, either; Newsweek described this as “The Wall” in a mid-July article: “The Wall: the wall was too high, and finally, the boy [volunteer] walked away...a barrier of suspicion and fear and unlettered apathy...divides them—and most white men—from the Mississippi Negro.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Box 2, Binder, *Freedom Star*, Freedom School Publication, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Box 1, “Mississippi—Summer of 1964: Troubled State, Troubled Time,” *Newsweek*, July 13, 1964, Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

After all of that; the hard work, the violence, the isolation; the big question is: did it work? Was it worth it?

Looking Back

In the immediate aftermath of Freedom Summer, the volunteers themselves seemed hopeful, and some, including Patti Miller and Bambi Brown, made plans to go back.⁶² Brown gave an interview after her return to Des Moines where she said, “It changed my whole way of thinking about our society and my place in it...for the rest of my life I will try to be actively involved in the civil rights movement.”⁶³ They certainly believed the experience had been valuable to them. It also radicalized many of them. Cagin and Dray argued that the experiences students had in Mississippi that summer with the COFO organizers and in the Freedom Schools taught them the organizing tactics that exploded on college campuses across the country in the mid to late sixties.⁶⁴ One volunteer said of the leaders of orientation, “there was a whole constellation of dynamic, brave, electrifying, truthful people, using their brains for a purpose, not simply to pursue material ambitions...for the first time I felt American.”⁶⁵ They quoted another volunteer, Eugene Walker, as finding his own education at UCLA lacking after his experiences with Freedom Schools:

There was no topic in Mississippi which could not be discussed ellipse the teachers and students felt free to discuss a variety of topics in any way they chose. Why, I thought, don't students at northern universities who have much more opportunity, discuss in the same serious way that Negroes and whites in Mississippi are doing? in the freedom movement we acted as well as tact. There was no separation between thinking and doing, and, above all, both the thorough criticism of the status quo, and the acting out of convictions contrasted sharply with my experience at UCLA.⁶⁶

⁶² Box 1, Nick Lamberto, Newspaper clipping, “D.M. Girl, 19, Ready to Work in Dixie Again,” Drake Archives, Patti Miller Collection.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Cagin and Dray, *We are not Afraid*, 387.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Cagin and Dray also argued that Freedom Summer had been a success overall; that COFO had succeeded in cracking Mississippi “wide open” to the national public through the media coverage they generated.⁶⁷

The activist leaders in COFO, however, had a different point of view than the white northerners—Iowans or otherwise—whom they invited to Mississippi. Their push into the mainstream left them disappointed with how little difference they found between racism in Mississippi and racism in national politics.⁶⁸ And it didn’t look great for Mississippi either, in the immediate aftermath: “The national leaders of the NAACP accused SNCC of being infiltrated by Chinese communists and divorced itself from COFO, creating a rift in the Mississippi movement primarily along class lines. By late July 1965, COFO had been abolished; and the following summer, fewer than 200 volunteers participated in programs run by the MFDP.”⁶⁹

But the more time has passed, the more positive outlooks on the results of Freedom Summer have become, especially the work done in the Freedom Schools. Harwell quoted an activist, Unita Blackwell, who had nothing but praise for the Mississippi Summer Project 35 years later: “Jerry still talked enthusiastically about his freedom school experience— how considerate and kind his teachers were, how they didn’t try to pour information into his head in a strict controlling way but got him involved in learning and how much he learned.”⁷⁰ When volunteers like Miller returned to Mississippi years later, they found their former students had become City Council members, mayors, and chiefs of police.⁷¹ Sherita Johnson and Cheryl

⁶⁷ Cagin and Dray, *We are not Afraid*, 422.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Harwell, *Wednesdays*, 141.

⁷⁰ Harwell, *Wednesdays*, 183.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Jenkins found that “because of the efforts of the ‘foot soldiers’/activists during the summer of 1964, during that year 6.7% of Mississippi’s voting-age black were registered to vote, 16.3% below the national average. But, by 1969, that number had increased drastically to 66.5%, 5.5% above the national average.”⁷² They also argued that the increased political literacy and awareness the schools and community centers generated empowered Black Mississippians to fight for enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, including eliminating the poll tax.⁷³ Rachal argued that “cracks” began to appear in Mississippi’s racist wall; offering up the 1,600 Black Mississippians who succeeded in registering to vote that summer, and “more importantly,” the 17,000 more who attempted to do it.⁷⁴

Overall, it seems that no matter why white northern Iowans went to Mississippi, be it for purely idealistic reasons, or religious ones, or even out of some misplaced sense of paternalism and burden, the effects of their and COFO’s work on Mississippi was positive. They faced incredible violence and the threat of death in order to help Black Mississippians fight for their rights to vote and to have an education. But it is also worth remembering that the victory here does not just, mostly, or mainly belong to the northern white people who helped; they played a small, if crucial, part in a battle that started hundreds of years before they arrived in Oxford, Ohio, and continued long after they were gone; a battle whose strategy was laid out by the radical Black activists of SNCC and COFO. Though, in the end, the victory doesn’t belong to them, either. Dave Dennis said it best: if the victory belongs to anybody, “it belongs to the people of Mississippi.”⁷⁵

⁷² Sherita L. Johnson and Cheryl D. Jenkins, “‘If It Ain’t Local, It Ain’t Real!’: The 50th Anniversary of Freedom Summer at Southern Miss,” *Southern Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 27.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Rachal, “‘The Long, Hot Summer,’” 332.

⁷⁵ Dennis, “‘Unsung Heroes,’” 46.

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