

Chapter 26 Let the Summer Begin

“I was arrested in Yazoo City for going through a red light and they didn’t have red lights in the town at the time.... [Mississippi?] You got beat up and thrown out. It was all an eye opener.” Jerry Rubin, co-founder of the Yippies (Youth International Party).ⁱ

Despite the murders in Philadelphia at the start of Freedom Summer, hundreds of young volunteers came into Mississippi from across the country – and forty-one Freedom Schools opened in the churches, on the back porches, and under the leafy trees of Mississippi.

Their students were native Mississippians, averaging fifteen years of age, but the average came from a wide range of persons, including small children who had not yet begun school through elderly persons who had spent their lives laboring in the fields. Volunteer teachers were, for the most part, still college students.

Most civil rights volunteers were greeted by angry reactions from most white Mississippians, who had already decided that Communists influenced the project. One unsigned Sovereignty Commission file contained what appeared to be a press release stating that Greenwood officials “have evidence of the Communist influence in the summer project.”ⁱⁱ

Greenwood Mayor C. E. Sampson and Commissioners W. G. Mize, Jr., and B. A. Hammon, attended to a speech on the floor of the U. S. Senate by Sen. Eastland, who claimed that “in which he referred to the involvement of known Communists in the racial movement being carried out in Mississippi this summer.”

SNCC’s office, said Eastland, was “... used by all of the local race agitators, including the Northern students sent here under the auspices of the National Council of Churches.” The cost of setting up telephone systems in the SNCC office, pamphlets distributed, and the names of lawyers associated with the project who were reported as “agents of the communist government of Fidel Castro” were cited as evidence.

Further, SNCC’s “involvement” with lawyers from the Southern Conference Educational Fund also “cited by Congressional Committees as a Communist front” and the National Lawyers Guild, which helped post bond for SNCC and COFO demonstrators arrested in Greenwood on July 16, 1964,” were also listed by Eastland. ⁱⁱⁱ

Discounting harassment from Citizens Councils, local governments, local, county and state police, as well as Eastland, the task set before this small group of students and teachers was daunting, volunteer Kristy Powell stated.

“[We] set out to replace the fear of nearly two hundred years of violent control with hope and organized action. Both students and teachers faced the possibility, and in some cases, the reality, of brutal retaliation from local whites. They had little money and few supplies. Yet the Freedom Schools set out to alter forever the state of Mississippi, the stronghold of the Southern way of life.”^{iv}

Success stories abounded throughout the state along with tales of “how we could have done this better.” In Ruleville as in many other small Delta communities, activities varied from classroom reading about famous African Americans to performing a play for the community titled, “White America.” The play took place on

the Freedom School's back porch with an audience of "200 or so people" sitting on benches in the sun or standing.

There had been initial concern over performing the play during daylight, but nothing bad happened, Powell recounted: "The audience almost became a part of the play. Small boys climbed on the porch ... in the middle of a scene, dogs and hens paraded in front of the stage and there was an intimacy and informality about the performance that underlined for me the impression that the play was woven out of the very stuff of these people's lives."^v

A special treat at the Ruleville school was music class – taught by Bob Dylan. "It was so cute, how he would gather the children around him and then play the guitar and sing with them," Margaret Block remembered.

Freedom School in Ruleville brought radical new ideas to most students; a state-wide student boycott even got its impetus from a protest in this Sunflower County-based school after a small group of students active in the "Ruleville Student Action Group" presented a "list of demands" to the school principal.

Students asked for teachers to register to vote, asked for an accounting of money earned cotton picking, requested formation of a student government and clubs, and asked that teachers take the lead in demanding better and integrated education.

One student, M. D. Perry, was "marched from the school at gunpoint" after refusing to sign a statement that he would never again take part in civil rights activities. "School was pretty tense. The result was that the minute he got on campus the cops were again called." Perry was tried and sentenced to 30 days and \$100 for disturbance of the peace, "and it was 10 days before we bailed him out on appeal on \$500 bond."

By the end of June, the Ruleville Freedom School was firmly established, but staff and volunteers had not yet "set up a beachhead" outside of Fannie Lou Hamer's town. SNCC worker Charles McLaurin tried to take the summer project into Drew, North of Ruleville. In his dissertation written on Freedom Summer, J. Todd Moya explained why he believed that Drew was particularly difficult to develop:

Ruleville teenagers who had joined the movement began canvassing in Drew, but McLaurin warned them, 'We don't want to be in Drew after dark.' If Mayor Charles Dorrrough treated Ruleville as his personal fiefdom, Mayor W. O. 'Snake' Williford ran Drew as his own police state. Drew whites were considered the most recalcitrant of Sunflower County, and perhaps of the state.

The town's proximity to Parchman Penitentiary had through its history made Drew a dangerous place to be black. In the 1930s and 1940s overzealous (or sadistic) lawmen in Drew had used the cover of escaped prisoners to shoot unarmed blacks with regularity. If anyone questioned the murders, they deadpanned, 'We though he looked like he'd escaped from Parchman.' Black life at Parchman was worth next to nothing. There was also talk among Sunflower County blacks about a sharecropper named Joe Pullum [sic] who had been lynched near Drew sometime in the 1920s, but only after he had killed thirteen and injured twenty-six members of the lynch mob. Mae Bertha Carter, whose family sharecropped on plantations near Drew for decades before they moved into town, remembered at least two other lynchings. Her uncle was one of the victims.^{vi}

Local people from Drew finally agreed to attend a meeting in Ruleville where they were introduced to “tremendous applause,” according to David Halberstam for the *New York Times*. “You don’t know what a victory it is even to get the Drew people over here,” a Freedom Summer volunteer told the reporter. “We’ve got to make them realize what’s going on in this country because they’ve been living in such fear over there.”^{vii}

The first organized canvassing effort into Drew was led by McLaurin and took place on June 24, 1964, three days after the disappearance of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. A stream of cars and pickups “full of angry and armed whites forced the civil rights workers back to Ruleville.

McLaurin and the others were lucky to get out alive, but as they left, McLaurin promised the blacks in Drew who peeked out from their porches, “We’ll be back!”^{viii}

Drew’s first mass civil rights meeting took place just three weeks later on July 15; McLaurin and the volunteers returned the day before to hand out leaflets announcing the meeting.

Williford had eight of them arrested for handing out leaflets without a permit, setting bail at a minimum of \$100. “Williford told one of the white volunteers he arrested that ‘livin’ with niggers [was] un-American and un-Christian” and that volunteers were “Communist and a disgrace to the white race.”

But the Drew meeting went as planned. No church would host the meeting so it was held in a church’s front yard. Student volunteers and movement people from Ruleville and interested teenagers from Drew filled the yard and began to sing freedom songs.

Soon many of the student volunteers were arrested for various reasons including blocking sidewalks and passing out freedom song sheets. No one could afford to be the first to sign up, since the police and deputized white citizens watched closely.

The atmosphere of terror and suppression hung over the town like the sword of Damocles, waiting to drop. McLaurin and the remaining volunteers retreated to Ruleville. In the end, McLaurin was forced to decide that ‘Drew was a pocket of resistance that cost too much to take.’^{ix}

Opening day ...

“We are going to talk about a lot of things: about Negro people and white people, about rich people and poor people, about the South and about the North, about you and what you think and feel and want.... And we’re going to try to be honest with each other and say what we believe.... We’ll also ask some questions and try to find some answers. The first thing is to look around, right here, and see how we live in Mississippi.”

Professor Staughton Lynd, (From Introduction to Unit I of the Citizenship Curriculum:
Comparison of Students’ Realities with Others, online)

Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville met with the faculty and “the lawyer, David Godstick and I think Len Edwards met with the Principal.” After Ruleville students shared their story during a Meridian Freedom School Convention, plans were made for a statewide boycott.^x

Mario Savio, later to be the 21-year-old leader of the “Free Speech Movement” student uprising at the University of California at Berkeley in 1965, worked during Freedom Summer in Holmes County and in McComb.

In July, Savio complained to Jackson police that he and a fellow COFO worker, Robert David Osman, were attacked by two white men who jumped them from a car and beat them as they walked along the street with an African American. The attack occurred when Savio stopped in Jackson while being transferred by COFO from Holmes County to McComb.

On August 18, SNCC worker Marion S. Barry, Jr., the future mayor of Washington, D. C. who was born in Itta Bena, Mississippi, the son of sharecroppers, arrived in McComb to teach young blacks nonviolent protest methods and soon his group began holding sit-ins.^{xi}

“Some were arrested and expelled from school. More were expelled when they held a protest march after the murder of Herbert Lee, who had helped SNCC workers. In response, ... Moses and Chuck McDew started Nonviolent High School to teach the expelled students. They were arrested and sentenced to four months in jail for ‘contributing to the delinquency of minors,’” Barry told researcher J. Todd Moya.^{xii}

Life ‘turns around’ for Unita Blackwell

“Nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin. We didn't have nothin', so I was gonna try to see, could I get something? And one of those things was my right to register to vote and become a citizen of these United States.”

Unita Blackwell, Mississippi's first African American female mayor

Die-hard segregationists still controlled Mississippi in 1964, and there was a definite resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in reaction to Freedom Summer activities. A few whites welcomed the civil rights workers coming into Mississippi for the summer, but SNCC, CORE, and COFO were despicable words to most whites, referring to the worst of the worst “outside agitators” “invading” their state.

Unita Blackwell of Mayersville, a tiny town about 50 miles North of Vicksburg in Issaquena County, would always be affected by the changes in her hometown. Her life was turned around when she left the cotton fields and became a field representative and grass roots organizer for SNCC.

Ten years later, in 1974, Blackwell was elected the first black woman mayor in the state and served as the Mayersville mayor for the next 26 years.

Writing for the *Jackson Free Press*, Blackwell recalled sitting on her porch with a friend, Corinne, in late June of 1964 and seeing the first young Freedom Summer volunteers coming into the Delta – walking quickly into town, past her house:

In the spring of 1964, we began hearing whispers around Mayersville that some “Freedom Riders” had gone to Henry Sias’s house for a secret meeting. Mr. Sias was a black man in his 80s, a retired schoolteacher, who owned a little land of his own that he farmed just south of Mayersville.... He belonged to the NAACP—the only NAACP member in the entire county at the time, so the white people considered him a radical.... Black people looked up to Mr. Sias because he was an educator.... But they didn’t dare go down to the Sias house to find out what was going on for fear they might lose their jobs, their houses, or even their lives ... [The rumors] had aroused my curiosity, and I hoped they were true. Not long after that, Mr. Sias [said] there would be some students coming in June to help people get registered to vote. We didn’t talk about it, though. We knew how to keep a secret. Blacks are a secretive people; for years black people’s lives had depended upon keeping secrets.^{xiii}

That first Delta summer was long and hot for Blackwell and the Freedom volunteers, with temperatures in the 90s and above and showers that leave a gluey humidity. At statewide headquarters in Jackson, COFO volunteers directing the project received telephone calls at the rate of 500 a day from all over the state and recorded the messages in typed WATS line reports. Wide Area Telephone Service was similar to day’s 800 numbers

One “typical” day included a carload of whites circling the Freedom House at Batesville; rocks tossed at Holly Springs; seven or eight trucks patrolling the road from Ruleville; heightened tension in Cleveland over the presence of two white girls as civil rights workers; a negro porter at Greenville beaten by police; and two men beaten at Holly Springs where a threat is made to bomb the freedom House.

When the summer was over, Aaron Henry and other leaders praised volunteers and the summer program. They were “the greatest assets to ever come our way and without them our road ahead would have been far more treacherous and uncertain.... [Their] accomplishments ... were great, and the levels of political and academic education of Mississippi Negroes were significantly raised.

“Most important, Negroes all over the state came to realize their personal obligation to improve themselves and become useful citizens,” Henry would later write in his memoirs.^{xiv}

ⁱ Margaret Block remembered meeting Jerry Rubin when he worked as a volunteer in the Delta. “Oh he was funny. He was always suggesting things to do. Once he wanted us to go to Indianola and challenge the all-white grand jury.” (Conversation with Margaret Block, April 15, 2005)

ⁱⁱ [Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission file\(s\) SCR ID # 2-45-2-12-1-1-1.](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Sovereignty Commission, [document SCR ID # 2-150-1-1-1-1-1.](#)

^{iv} Kathy Emery, Sylvia Braselmann and Linda Gold, “Freedom Summers and the Freedom Schools,” (Dr. Kathy Emery, Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum, online).

^v Kirsty Powell, “A Report, Mainly on Ruleville Freedom School, Summer Project, 1964,” Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum. The document is from: SNCC, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972 (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1982) Reel 68, File 367, Page 0582. The original papers are at the King Library and Archives, The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, GA.

^{vi} J. Todd Moyer, “Let the People Decide,” (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 128.

^{vii} David Halberstam, “Negroes Meet Nightly Despite Tension in the Delta,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1964.

^{viii} Moye, 129.

^{ix} Ibid., 130.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} David Halberstam, “The Children,” (New York: Random House, 1998), 219-221. [Barry’s mother, Mattie Carr, was born in 1917 near Minter City, in rural Tallahatchie County. She was not married and lived with her mother, grandmother, and some of her uncles. They moved from one plantation to another in the Delta, looking for working in small towns like Alligator. She had started going into the cotton fields at the age of four and when she was about eight began picking herself. “You didn’t look back and complain, and you didn’t think of doing anything else because no one knew anything else.” When her son, Marion Junior, was a baby, she took him into the fields, first in a wash bucket and then a cotton sack. Barry ended up living in Memphis where he graduated from high school and was accepted into Fisk University as a chemistry major. He participated in the freedom rides.](#)

^{xii} [Moye, 129.](#)

^{xiii} Blackwell. In 2004, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour used the term “outside agitators” referring to those who hoped the federal government would “drag out” approval of his planned cut of 65,000 people from state Medicaid roles.

^{xiv} Henry, 170.