

CANTON CORE, JANUARY, 1965
CANTON, MISSISSIPPI
GEORGE RAYMOND, DIRECTOR

POLITICAL PROGRAMS: THE FREEDOM VOTE

The MFDP attempted to get the names of Mrs. Annie Devine, Mrs. Victoria Gray, and Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and Aaron Henry placed on the official ballot of the state of Mississippi to run for congresswomen and senator on an independent ticket. The attempt failed, so the Negro had no way to express himself about whom he wanted to represent him. So the MFDP decided that they would have a mock freedom election that would take place October 30,31, Nov. 1, 2. In Madison County the representatives of MFDP accepted the freedom vote. They got together and set up polling places all over the county; in the churches, homes, grocery stores, and other places of business. However, the number of votes cast was considerably less than in the previous freedom vote. The majority opinion of the Canton staff on the reasons for this was that not enough political education was involved and the people could not be impressed by the significance of what they were doing because they were given no chance to understand it. In other words, the emphasis was too much on getting as many signatures as possible in almost any way possible. Not only did this prove ineffective on the people, but also demoralizing for the staff.

POLITICAL PROGRAMS: THE CONGRESSIONAL CHALLENGE

After discussing the congressional challenge with some people from around the state and with officials of the FDP, it was decided that we would attempt to get 1000 Negroes to go to Washington the day the 89th Congress opened, when, Mrs. Devine of the 4th Congressional District, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, Mrs. Victoria Gray of the 5th Congressinnal District would challenge the five congressmen elected in Mississippi. In deciding this it was said that we would go back into our local communities and explain the challenge to the people, and attempt to get them to raise their own money and means of transportation.

The program was explained to the people and within the three month period the people of Madison County raised enough money to rent a bus for \$450 (but the bus broke down before it got out of the state). There was enough money left over for gas expenses. About fifty people went from Madison County, Mississippi.

Depositions are also a part of the congressional challenge, and while this is being written lawyers are busy talking to witnesses who will give open testimony in relationship to being denied the right to vote, police brutality, etc. These people will testify in support of the three FDP candidates. This testimony will be given Jan. 25, 1962.

POLITICAL PROGRAMS: community organization

The staff in Madison County are in the process of a continuous organizational program. The method they are using is setting up house meetings, church meetings, precinct meetings, etc, with the sole purpose of getting people to talk about local problems, their problems, and anything they would like to talk about in hopes that somehow they can see that their various problems are somewhat related and that usually the solutions can be obtained with similar methods. We are really trying to get a program developed with the community saying exactly what it will be. This will provide them with the feeling of "I planned this and I'm going to work to see whether this program succeeds or fail. You see, we feel from talking to the

local people and to the staff that people are tired of people telling them what to do, because this has happened all their life. We feel that in Madison County at this point we must be advisory without a premade program.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS: THE ASCS ELECTIONS

In November Federal Programs in Canton became chiefly concerned with preparations for the ASCS elections. These preparations were initially thwarted by transportation limitations. The whole job of getting Negro candidates' names on the ballots was muffed because staff workers were unable to attend the meetings at which candidates' petitions were to have been drawn up. Finally, though, cars were rented, and as the December 3 election date drew nearer the entire Canton staff began to function with unprecedented coordination and sense of direction.

Staff workers moved into each of the 8 communities in Madison County (community boundaries were drawn by the ASCS) and began organizing for the campaign. The method of organization followed these lines: the staff worker contacted a few community leaders and spent a good deal of time making sure that they understood the voting procedure (which involved write-ins), the nature of the ASCS and the gains that a victory in the election could mean. The community leaders in turn began to organize canvassing teams among their neighbors to spread the word about the election and to get people committed to going to the polls Dec. 3. Staff workers met frequently with these canvassing teams and also attended other meetings about the election which community leaders called. The staff tried in most cases to act purely as resource persons.

The results of this approach are hard to measure. In the first hours of election day the Negro voter turnout looked more promising than the staff had expected in most communities. However by the time the polls closed - after 4 arrests, several physical threats, one injury and innumerable instances of voters being deprived of their full voting rights -- the odds had turned against the Negroes except in one community where a Negro committee chairman was elected by a slender margin.

Since then various avenues of protest have been tried: we filed a report of the physical intimidation and violence with the Justice Department and another with the Civil Rights Commission. About 15 voters complained on their own to the state ASCS committee and about 1 had hearings before that committee; the results of the hearing were unfavorable. However those who did not have hearings received word that hearings were unnecessary because their votes had been investigated and determined valid after all. We also spent considerable time and some postage communicating the USDA, inquiring about formal channels of complaint. It seems, however, that there are no precedents for challenging an ASCS election, and we were left hanging in some confusion. We supported an abortive program, originating in the Jackson COFO office, to send a delegation of farmers to Secretary of Agriculture Freeman immediately. Our delegate was ready to go, suit case literally in hand, when Jackson called to say the trip had been cancelled; other counties had not come through. About 3 weeks ago USDA investigators finally appeared. They have been supplied with a thick folder of affidavits and reports (affidavits, incidentally, are still coming in) and through them George Raymond drafted an official complaint, copies of which, with a covering letter, are circulating all over the United States, hopefully increasing Mr. Freeman's mail-intake.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS: THE FARMERS LEAGUE AND MADISON COUNTY COOPERATIVE

At present there is no one in Canton carrying on federal program work. This is unfortunate not only because of all the untapped potential in this area, but also because the promising products of past work are being neglected. The most serious neglect is of the Farmers League and the Madison County Coop. The first, which has been the most dynamic local organization Madison County Negroes have ever seen, is slowly settling into stagnation; the second is on the verge of losing its charter for want of a business manager or someone with a lot of time to spend and a lot of experience and technical knowledge to back him up.

WELFARE

Madison County periodically receives large shipments of clothing and food from northern supporters. These are supplemented, too, by small boxes which frequently come in the mail from various individuals. Occasionally, too, the county receives part of the shipments which are sent into Jackson COFO. There is no question about the need which such supplies can partially fill. But there is an overwhelming question about how they should be distributed. The Canton staff unanimously agrees that distribution from here on out must be the responsibility of the local community, not only because there are insufficient staff workers and facilities to handle it, but also because the Freedom House should not become a symbol of do-gooder-give-aways. We have begun conversations with local people and are planning a meeting in the immediate future to formulate a county-wide welfare program. We anticipate that several large problems will develop: one will concern the places of storage and distribution, none of which the staff wants in the vicinity of Freedom House; another, very touchy one will concern the merits and disadvantages of using clothing and food to "encourage" people to take part in the movement. Whatever the solutions and final decisions, this is a pressing issue which the staff is determined to see resolved soon.

VOTER REGISTRATION

No organized approach to voter registration has been tried since the end of the summer project. This is mostly because energies have been channelled into the MFDP programs, the ASC elections, and, most recently, the staff's work on grass roots community organization. In one community where a staff worker has been living for about a month, holding small "tea parties", discussions with the local people a locally-initiated, locally-planned voter registration campaign is taking shape: nothing dramatic, no freedom days (the people have explicitly vetoed them, in fact), just a few people a week going to the Court House and perhaps (this is still in the discussion stage) the setting up of preparatory workshops. Here, the Canton staff believes, is an example (and there are others) of how the local people can sense and meet their own needs in their own ways, fully understanding what they're about and why: it's important -- a picture far preferable to that of staff workers telling them what is good for them and leading them through the paces without even giving them a chance to grasp the nature and significance of what is happening.

INCIDENT REPORT

Except around ASCS election time the frequency and degree of harassment have dropped off considerably. Martha Wright did spend a day in jail during the freedom vote. She was picked up for "distributing leaflets without a permit," but her case was dismissed on the grounds that it was her first offense (interesting, since the prosecuting attorney knew it to be her 2nd offense -- she has a trial in the federal courts on the same charge from this summer). Around the same time Bill Forsyth was given a traffic ticket for illegal parking when his jeep stalled on him; he pleaded to guilty, was his own defense, and won the case! The same day George Raymond was jailed for interfering with an officer when he pulled up to see what kind of trouble Bill was having. His case has been removed to federal court.

Just before the ASCS elections a local canvasser, Mr. Cleophus Lockett, was shot at from a passing car while walking down a country road. He was unharmed. Also, Tom Ramsay, who was coordinating the elections, received 2 illegal traffic tickets in the week before the election. In one instance police tailed him out of town to charge him with speeding, even though he was driving 5 miles under the limit. Then, on election day, 4 persons were arrested on charges of "disturbing the peace in a public place," "disobeying a police officer," and "trespassing." Three cases have now been removed to federal courts. The fourth, George Raymonds, was tried in absentia found guilty, fined \$109. He has now appealed the case.

Also on December 3 Marv Rich had his nose broken by a small mob at one of the polling places. Martiss Crawford was threatened at gun point at another; Eric Orr was hit in the face at another; Earnest Chanes received threats at the polling place where he worked, but they didn't materialize. Also, at least one voter was threatened with arrest if he voted for the Negro candidate.

Since the election a bullet has been fired into the home of another of the chief canvassers, Mr. Welton Stokes, and a phone call to Freedom House reporting the beating of the successful Negro candidate was made, but it turned out to be a hoax.

THE COMMUNITY CENTER

The Community Center in Canton is closed and has been closed for about two months. The staff met and felt that it was best to close the center. At that time, Martha Wright and Jo Ann Goiman were working there daily. Some of the problems they encountered were the unruliness of the young people, who are the determining factor of whether the center succeeds or fails. Through long staff meetings and discussions with local people and staff people, it was a consensus that the only way the community center would succeed and progress in Canton would be through the people themselves not only showing a desire for it, but also doing most of the work in constructing and building it. And this has not been the case in Canton. The center was merely a place where they could come and have dances and steal what they could. However, there were a few kids who used the library effectively. A few young people and several adult community leaders are presently discussing what should be done next. The staff is hoping that their decision will call for much more community involvement.

REPORT ON RANKIN COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

Staff: Sears Buckley Jr. - CORE
Martha Wright - CORE
Sandy Watts - CORE
Myrtis Evans - COFO work study: CORE

First I must explain that Rankin County is somewhat of a new project. The 4 people began working with and staying in the community around December 10, 1964. Prior to that I, George Raymond, had begun a series of meetings in people's homes, talking out the immediate situation that they are confronted with, to attempt to make them aware of the need for people to get together and discuss these types of problems, so that they may see the basis for organizing. This worked very well; these meetings went from the homes to the churches (from 5 people to 400 people when James Farmer spoke there during the Freedom Vote).

After the staff moved in they began working closely with the people in meetings and in canvassings. During the freedom vote no staff people were there other than for meetings. The local people themselves went out and got more than one thousand votes, which I feel is good. The FDP decided to undertake a congressional challenge, where Mrs. Devine of the Fourth District, Mrs. Gray of the Fifth, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer of the Second would challenge the seating of the five Mississippi Congressmen, and they wanted Mississippi Negroes in Washington to give evidence to support the challenge. This was explained to the people in Rankin County. And they said they would like to work on it. Within a three week period the people got together and bought a bus costing \$500. They also had enough gas money to transport the bus to and from Washington. And they got 35 people who were willing to make the trip, understanding that they might face jail when they returned to the state. (Incidentally, the bus broke down before it made it out of the state).

On January 4, 1964 the first freedom day took place in Rankin, about 20 people showed up, but they were not able to register because the sheriff and deputy said the registrar was busy helping the judge select the jury because court would open in a week. The next day two people were able to fill out applications for registration.

After these two attempts the people came together and discussed what had happened and what was their future plans. After the people returned from Washington, D.C. they got together and decided to go back to the court house in mass to attempt to register once more.

Since the first freedom day harassment from local white and police started. More than 8 people have been arrested, tickets have been given on a mass scale. Close to \$900 in bond and fines have been paid. Local people raised and paid the money themselves.

The Rankin County movement is starting out as truly a movement of the local people who are eager and able to carry on pretty much on their own, using the staff only as advisors and resource people. Their plans for a community center, for example, are solely theirs and when they build their building we don't anticipate the kinds of problems developing that have closed down the Canton center.