FINDING FREEDOM
Memorializing the Voices of Freedom Summer

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The Mississippi Summer Project of 1964 was a complex and creative campaign that took place at a

    crucial turning point in the civil rights movement. It was part of a multipronged initiative designed to
    engage the entire nation with the plight of African Americans in Mississippi and shift the spotlight on the
    violence and injustice there. “Freedom Summer,” as it would later be called,¹ involved a coalition of
    several organizations, but the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was its driving force.
    In 1960, youth from sit-in movements founded the organization on a shared commitment to non-violent
direct action and the empowerment of local communities. Throughout the early 1960s, SNCC developed
direct action sit-in strategies, participated in Freedom Rides, started projects throughout the South, and
eventually turned its focus to voting rights and voter education.² SNCC began their activism with sit-ins
that tested new integration laws, but they generated an expansive vision of social change, as illustrated in
the Summer Project of 1964.

From 1961 to 1963, SNCC initiated voter registration drives in Mississippi with little success. Frustrated
by the escalating violence and the murders of key allies in the local Mississippi community, Bob Moses
suggested that SNCC focus all its resources on Mississippi and reinvigorate its work by recruiting
volunteers from a national pool of college students. In 1963, a similar small-scale effort called "The
Freedom Vote" involving a few students from Yale and Stanford had generated significant media
attention (Sinsheimer 217-244). But Moses' proposal was extremely controversial among those already
committed to the movement. Why should uninformed outsiders be invited? They might jeopardize
delicate relationships with local people, relationships forged through hard work. Would Mississippi
blacks be able to work with privileged white college students as equals? Were nonviolent strategies still
relevant and effective, particularly in the face of escalating violence from the white Mississippi
community? Was integration still a goal or were there better ways to cultivate political power at the
grassroots level? Did the activists have allies in the federal government or were these allies stalling on
promises they had no intention of keeping? Would bringing in these outsiders strain the capacity of
SNCC’s organization or, even worse, change it? Had they prepared the local Mississippi community
enough for the influx of volunteer workers? (Clayborne 96-111; Hogan 143-154; McAdam 28-34)

These debated raged within SNCC as they planned their strategy and recruited volunteers for “the
Summer Project” from all over the country. Voting rights were a key focus of SNCC’s efforts in
Mississippi. While the Mississippi population was 49% black, only 6.9% of that population was
registered to vote (Andrews 69-70). Clearly very tangible social changes would take place of African
Americans could vote. However, by this point in their efforts, activists knew just how enormous the
obstacles to voting were, so Freedom Summer was much more that a voting rights campaign. There were
three major focuses: 1) Educating and registering African American voters; 2) teaching youth in Freedom
Schools by providing instruction in core subjects while emphasizing black history and citizenship skills;
and 3) building community centers that offered health care, recreation, and necessary social support
systems. In addition to these three major focuses, there were other related efforts: public relations and
communications, research projects, legal efforts, the Delta ministry project, the Medical Committee for
Human Rights, the Free Southern Theater, and the “White Folk’s Project,” an effort to organize white
working class allies in the Gulf Coast region. Freedom Summer was a comprehensive effort to reimagine
Mississippi and introduce African Americans to the rights, privileges, and support systems enjoyed by

¹ Sinsheimer, John. Freedom Summer: The Mississippi Mississippi Summer Project


other American citizens. Hence, SNCC needed to build communities from the group up, addressing community needs while building a foundation for future grassroots activism.

In working towards these ambitious goals, Freedom Summer brought together very different groups of people. There were the civil rights movement activists from organizations like SNCC and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Most of these were northern-educated college students. There were local Mississippi citizens and activists. These risk takers were willing to endure reprisals, and many lost their jobs or family during their involvement with the movement (Ditmer 170-302). These Mississippi activists founded the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which managed the coalition of organizations running the summer project, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the political party that would challenge Mississippi’s segregated Democratic party at the national conventions. Finally, there were the volunteers, about 800 college students who had been recruited from all over the country through universities, churches, and civil rights organizations. In mid-June 1964, the three groups met in Oxford, Ohio at Western College for Women to prepare for the summer’s work. The volunteers had applied for the summer project, providing references and undergoing interviews. Each volunteer provided funds for weekly housing and food expenses as well as bail in the event of arrest. Though Berea College in Kentucky was the initial site for the orientation, the National Council for Churches, the sponsor of the orientation, found Western College as a quick replacement when Berea pulled out in early May.

The orientation that took place at Western College for Women in Oxford is significant for many reasons. It illustrates many of the growing pains social movements often experience as they reach out to recruit and train new members. Activists first had to train new volunteers in how to survive in Mississippi and then teach them how to register voters, teach in freedom schools, and organize community members. How could the activists transfer all of what had been learned in previous struggles to the new recruits? How could they create a shared understanding of their goals and a unified sense of purpose? How could white students of privilege begin to understand the institutionalized oppression that the people of Mississippi had experienced? Because the Summer Project took place in 27 different counties (Holt 195) all over the state, the Oxford training was the only moment when all of the activists were in one place, making it an important opportunity to develop group solidarity and launch a publicity campaign. The national media eagerly filmed white college students preparing to nonviolently face violent opposition. SNCC activists had begun to wonder if the American public had become desensitized to images of black bodies facing violence. Would the American people become interested in the injustices in Mississippi if they saw their own sons and daughters in the fronts lines of the struggle?

The orientation piqued the interest of the public. And then, during the second week of training, Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman went missing, and there was no doubt that this was a national story of historic proportions. The disappearance of the three men was exactly the situation that the training session had preparing volunteers to avoid. From Oxford, SNCC appealed to the federal government for FBI help in finding the three men and federal protection for their volunteers for the rest of the summer (Cagin and Dray 1-46). By the end of the second week, activists knew that their friends who had just been with them in Oxford a few days before were dead. Bob Moses encouraged volunteers who had doubts to drop out of the project. Was the campaign taking irresponsible risks by sending volunteers to Mississippi? Or were they showing their solidarity with the Mississippi people who had endured such dangers for years?
The orientation took place over a two-week period with two different groups of volunteers. The first week focused on the voter registration drive and the second week focused on Freedom Schools and Community Centers. In the mornings, students attended general sessions in lecture halls like Peabody's Leonard Theatre and Presser's Kelly Auditorium. Monday, Bob Moses and James Foreman introduced Mississippi conditions and gave an overview of the project. Tuesday, they focused on African American history and informed participants about white resistance in Mississippi. Speakers including Reverend Vincent Harding and the lawyer Charles Morgan shared their experiences in the South with students. Wednesday's session explored nonviolence in a lecture by the Reverend James Lawson (the second week Bayard Rustin also lectured on nonviolence). Thursday's session covered legal issues and informed volunteers what to do if they were arrested and how to navigate the idiosyncrasies of the Mississippi justice system. Notable civil rights lawyers providing their expertise included Jess Brown, John Pratt and Jack Greenberg. Friday's session examined the role of the federal government, as John Doar from the Attorney General's office explained that there would be no federal protection. After learning about the state of affairs in Mississippi, volunteers were shocked and incredulous regarding the federal government's policies. Each afternoon, volunteers attended area meetings in classrooms to learn more about the specific community they would live in, or they learned project skills to apply to their work. Frequently, the afternoon sessions utilized role-playing workshops on the lawn to practice nonviolence or explore situations they might face within the black community ("Possible Role Playing Situations"). They needed to learn how to respond when arrested by a Southern policeman, and the volunteers also had much to learn about communicating with the local black community.

Many volunteers documented their daily experiences at the Oxford orientation in letters and journals. The various accounts reveal an atmosphere of tension and misapprehension during the first week of training, June 14-20. Many of the activists felt the volunteers were naïve, and they still doubted the premise of the summer project. Some volunteers complained that staffers were cliquish and aloof. When volunteers laughed at a racist voter registrar during the showing of a film about voting rights, the activists were so upset that they stormed out of the room, opening up a confrontation. Several documents describe a group therapy session in which staff had to explain their very real fears for the volunteers and volunteers had to confront cultural differences that had led to their insensitivity (Sutherland-Martinez 7-9; Sugarman 15-22). Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were among those training the first week, and, by Sunday evening at the end of that week when the new batch of volunteers were arriving, staff thought that their worst fears about the three missing men might be confirmed. Monday of the second week of training, June 21-28, began with an interruption during the first overview session. Bob Moses and Rita Schwerner explained that Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman had missed their check-in time the night before and the situation was dire. Immediately, volunteers were organized to write, telegram or call their congressmen to request federal assistance (Belfrage 8-12; Smith Young 245-246). While tensions among the volunteers and staff persisted during the second week, the disappearance of the three men set the tone, creating emotional bonding and a heightened sense of reality.

All orientation participants share one memory: the important role of singing freedom songs. Frequently Mississippi residents like Fannie Lou Hamer or some of the SNCC Freedom Singers led the songs. Sessions always began with singing and ended with singing. Several confrontations and awkward moments were disarmed with singing (Smith Young 246). And the media captured much of this singing, particularly in the angst filled moments just before the second group left on the buses to go to Mississippi. While the moments of singing represented much of the intense group bonding taking place, volunteers also remember stark isolation, loneliness and soul searching as they began to contemplate their own mortality and the ethical dilemmas posed by civil rights.

The orientation for the Summer Project was too brief, especially considering the vast differences between the world of the volunteers, the SNCC activists, and Mississippi. Several volunteers relied on their nonviolence training as they endured arrests and harassment throughout the summer. Others found themselves in situations that summer where they had to improvise and do things they had little or no preparation to do. Still, the training that took place at Western College for Women was a critical threshold, one that activated important
debated that would continue to develop within the civil rights movement and inspire a new cadre of activists who would go on to contribute to social change movements over the next decade (McAdam 199-233).

In Oxford, Ohio, few paid much attention to the presence of the orientation at Western College for Women during the first week of training. However, after the publicity about the disappearance of the three men, several debates ensued that would have a significant impact on the community. Despite the fact that they were not in the South, white supremacists in the area still managed to harass civil rights activists with threatening letters (Anonymous). Spies from the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission even attempted to infiltrate the training sessions. Occasionally staff and volunteers would encounter harassment at local restaurants and gas stations.

After the second week of training, Western College administrators took some head from their alumnae who disapproved of the “rabble rousers.” Community members debated the issues in the local paper, wondering if their community’s “Oxford Ohio” byline attached to national news stories should be a point of pride or shame (White). Despite the fact that the administration of nearby Miami University had no knowledge of the activities across the street at Western, there were several Miami University faculty, students, and staff who got involved with the orientation activities, and some even would up volunteering for the summer.8

The most remarkable impact of the orientation sessions on the Oxford community happened through the formation of the Friends of the Mississippi Summer Project (FMSP). During the second week of training, several community members drifted over to the Western campus to witness the training sessions. The role-playing exercises in particular made a significant impact on them and galvanized them to take action. One young volunteer explained that she had been able to come for the summer because members of her church community had raised money for her subsistence funds. This group of concerned Oxford citizens swung into action (Stark; Delaney). They gathered books and supplies for the Freedom Schools, recruited sponsors for more than 30 volunteers to provide subsistence funds, helped fix cars so they couldn’t be bombed, and raised money to support SNCC’s transportation expenses down to Mississippi. Within the span of 48 hours, they had organized resources and a small community that would continue to meet as an organization and support the civil rights activists for the next two years (“Newsletter”).9 Their newsletters shared important news from the front lines and demonstrated their continued engagement with the activism in Mississippi and the national discourse on civil rights. While there were other “Freedom Centers” throughout the country that provided support to SNCC the Oxford FMSP was among the strongest and best organized of such groups, proving that a small group of concerned citizens can make a difference. Miami University agreed to merge with Western College for Women in 1973 and, with this transition, community members have passed down the local history, but the dedication of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Memorial in 2000 was an important step in making a permanent marker of the site where events took place that transformed our nation.

In contrast to civil rights history that only tells us about leaders and martyrs, Freedom Summer adds new and important facets to our civil rights narratives. It illustrates the complexities of grassroots organizing, the delicacies of coalition building, the unique power of youth-led activist movements, and the risk-taking and resistance that always come with social change. Freedom Summer activists found innovative and imaginative ways to speak truth to power and join Mississippi to the rest of the nation. At the same time, they placed the Mississippi people in charge of their own destiny, transforming political participation in local and national politics. Our world has changed dramatically since 1964, but there is still much to learn from these events as we study how a social movement opened up new possibilities to the nation.
References

1 Sally Belfrage named the campaign "Freedom Summer" in her 1965 book detailing the events she experienced as a volunteer. Until that time, the campaign was called "The Mississippi Summer Project" or just "Summer Project."

2 After the violent response to James Meredith's integration at University of Mississippi and Freedom Rides, the Kennedy administration urged SNCC to focus on voting rights instead of desegregation (Hogan 50).

3 See Bruce Hartford's essay at http://www.crmvet.org/tim/fs64orgs.htm for more about the "Organizational Structure of the Mississippi Summer Project."

4 In addition to these student volunteers, there were also 300-500 professionals, doctors, lawyers, clergymen and clergywomen, who volunteered for one to two weeks at a time throughout the summer (Hartford).

5 After a call from a Mississippi alum and trustee of Berea College, the president of Berea decided to withdraw in early May 1964 (Glowers). In addition to the training site of Western College, a small number of students who couldn't make it to Oxford in June were trained at LeMoyne College near Memphis (Adickes 50-51).

6 For accounts of the first week of training consult Ellen Barnes' Journal in the Western College Memorial Archives, Tracy Sugarman's Stranger at the Gates, Len Holt's The Summer That Didn't End, Cleveland Sellers' The River of No Return, Stokely Carmichael's Ready for Revolution, and Elizabeth Sutherland-Martinez's Letters from Mississippi. For the second week, see Sally Belfrage's Freedom Summer, Jane Adams' Journal in the Western College Memorial Archives, and Elizabeth Sutherland-Martinez's Letters from Mississippi.

7 See Mississippi Summer Project Running Summary of incidents for an account of the constant stream of violence focused on the project (McAdam 257-268).

8 Two students from Miami University participated as volunteers: William Ninde (Hattiesburg Freedom School) and Margaret Dobbins (Columbus Freedom School). Ellen Barnes, another student, attended the orientation session. Roland Duerksen, who became a faculty member at Miami University, volunteered in Mississippi. Tom Tolg, a Miami graduate student, recruited volunteers for the Summer Project. One Western College for Women student, Judith Hampton, participated in 1965 in a project that continued past 1964.

9 The Friends of the Mississippi Summer Project was primarily composed of white community members. There is also anecdotal evidence that members of the black community assisted activists by providing car repair and other services to activists.

Works Cited


THE MISSISSIPPI SUMMER PROJECT


