

Pilgrim's Rest, Mississippi  
August 18, 1964

Dear Friend:

Congressman Donald M. Fraser, for whom I have been working this summer, was kind enough to grant me three weeks leave without pay to come with some 100 new Freedom School teachers to Mississippi as part of a suddenly stepped-up effort by the Summer Project.

If I were an essayist, I could surely do something spectacular and creative with my impressions of the last few days. They are undoubtedly among the most vivid and extraordinary I have ever gotten. As it is, I can simply apologize for forcing you to contend with the following unstructured hodgepodge.

I'm sitting on a front porch, in a rocking chair, in Pilgrim's Rest, Mississippi. You won't find it on a map. It's less a town than a "community." A couple of hundred people reside in something like ten square miles bounded by parts of the vein-like dirt roads that pervade Holmes County, and everyone is related to everyone else. We're about two hours north of Jackson, and not too far from Lexington, which is on a map.

Most of the people in Pilgrim's Rest are Negroes, and the remainder control it. That goes for Holmes County as well. Two-thirds of the residents of Holmes County are Negroes, and the sheriff, Sheriff Smith, used to divide his time, before he got hit with a federal injunction against abusive behavior, between spitting in their faces and beating them up.

Fifteen years ago a sixteen year-old boy was told by a white man to steal a saddle, so that the white man could re-sell the saddle in the next county. The boy did. Somehow, the local whites decided that it was the boy's father who had taken the saddle. So they beat up the father — who incidentally did not even know that the saddle his son had been told to steal was missing — shot him, wrapped him in barbed wire, and dragged him up and down the road for a while.

Last week a fifteen year-old Negro boy was driving his white boss's tractor down the road when the boss came along in a truck and forced the boy and the tractor off the road. The boss demanded that the mother make good the two hundred dollars' damage to the tractor. The mother sold all her livestock, and when that wasn't enough, the boss came out with the sheriff and made the women sign a paper she wasn't allowed to read. She thinks now it was a forfeiture of her welfare payments.

I guess the fact that she's still alive just goes to show things are getting better in Mississippi.

Myself and a second new Freedom School teacher are staying with Mr. and Mrs. Jodie Saffold, Jr. and their three young daughters, Clementine, Clevine and Margaret. Like many but not all the farmers in Pilgrim's Rest, Jodie owns his own land. He raises corn, cotton, hogs and cattle. They bring him around \$3,000 per year.

Jodie owns a pistol, which never leaves his side, and three rifles. He hunts

a little, but they're mostly just for self protection. The entire Negro community, and the white as well, is armed to the teeth in Pilgrim's Rest, and that goes for the rest of Mississippi as well.

Until I came along, Jodie had never been addressed in conversation as Mister. To his friends, he is "Brother Saffold," to a white man "nigger."

Some of the Negroes in Pilgrim's Rest think that I and the five other civil rights workers were sent by God. Most of the Negroes understand that we are Northern college kids. But the kids in Freedom School can't even point out Mississippi on a map of the United States, much less Minnesota, or New York, or California, and it's decidedly unfair to expect them to understand who we are or why or from where we came.

Jodie Saffold built his house himself. There are four rooms, no plumbing, not even a well, but just a cistern, a wood stove, on which Mrs. Saffold cooks the world's best meals, some dressers and beds, and a great big old television set. It's a nice TV, but the Saffold's rarely watch it, probably because few of the programs or advertisements impinge in any way on the Saffold's world or the reality of rural Southern Negro existence. Mostly, the Saffold's sit on their front porch in rocking chairs and wait for the neighbors to drop over.

After I told Jodie how much my guitar cost he decided I was the richest man in the world and "warn't nuthin make him b'lieve diffrent." He spends a lot of time lamenting his lack of capital, but one wonders if he'd really like to have any more. There is a hinge missing on each of three doors in the house, so they have to be lifted rather than swung open. It's very unlikely they would have ever been repaired had I not suggested it, even though the job would cost nothing and take no time. The words ambition and industriousness are unknown down here not only because they are long, but also because they are alien concepts.

Before I go any further, I'd better explain just what a Freedom School is. The two primary purposes of the Mississippi Summer Project are the registration of voters and the establishment of Freedom Schools throughout the state. Here and there, all over Mississippi, little groups of Northerners have drifted into towns and countrysides. Each group finds a church or abandoned building and lets it be known throughout the Negro community that Freedom School starts next Monday.

When the kids come, at least around here, they don't know exactly what to expect, and we don't know exactly what to give them. But most of their reading levels are pitifully behind their actual ages, so that's a logical place to start. It's not too difficult to interest them in the idea of going to school in the summer. The novelty of being spoken to in a civil manner by a white person attracts them. So does the fact that they are not asked to contribute frequently to causes of vague definition, the real purpose of which is to enhance the teacher's income. Evidently, extortion among Mississippi teachers, white and Negro, is widespread.

We teach them some songs; we give them books to read; we show them what fractions are; we throw a baseball around; we listen to their stories of what white

men get away with in Pilgrim's Rest just because they are white, and we try to explain to them why that's the case and what they can do about it.

Bobbie Jean Powell is 10 years old. She is ebony black and one of eight illegitimate children. She lives with her mother and sisters and brothers, her aunt and her aunt's eight illegitimate children, and her grandparents, 20 people in all, in a four room house on a white man's plantation.

Before we came to Pilgrim's Rest, there was probably not much more in Bobbie Jean's future than a few illegitimate children of her own. But one day we asked the kids to write a poem about anything they pleased. So ten year-old Bobbie Jean wrote a poem she titled "The Girl Worthwhile."

If you have no wealth of silver  
Neither have rich of gold  
If you lack the beauty of feature  
Of other girls half as old.

It would be some consolation,  
That prompts a cheery smile,  
To have a true conviction  
That you are a girl worthwhile.

But simple girls worthwhile  
Are easily singled out.  
Very small things soon tell the world  
To just how much they amount.  
Tis not title of singer.  
Nor the wardrobe all in style,  
But the quality of the heart that is worthwhile.

Now girls worthwhile are in demand,  
There is room for them everywhere;  
Their thoughts are pure,  
Their words are true,  
Their love, the world longs to share.

Clean of deceit and schemes unique,  
To gain some selfish end,  
Their souls aspire to do the right  
And none but gracious acts attend.

For 10 year old Bobbie Jean, and a dozen or so other exceptionally bright Freedom School students, the chance appearance of our friendly white faces in Pilgrim's Rest this summer has decisively altered their lives.

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About half our time is devoted to voter registration. As with so many other things here in Mississippi, one has to dispel from his mind traditional

conceptions of law, legality, and justice before he can indulge in the process of registering voters in the proper spirit. Anywhere else, what we're doing would be justly regarded as revolutionary or at least extra-legal.

We ask them to fill out a questionnaire, these thoroughly impoverished Negroes in homes miles apart with two or three rooms and three times that many kids. They tell us their names, ages, lengths of residence in Mississippi (invariably lifetime) and in Holmes county (usually lifetime). Then they sign the form, or make their mark, and when it's done we're not sure what they've done, and what they are entitled to do.

We'd like to make more grandiose claims for the benefits of informal registration in the Freedom Democratic Party than we do in practice. Partly, we are self-defeated. Negroes in Mississippi are deathly afraid to register to vote, and the only feasible way to bring them within ten feet of the voting process is to assure them that, to the contrary, they are not really registering at all, but just sort of signing a petition.

They can't vote, because they haven't really registered. They are "registered" Freedom Democrats, as it were, but they've never been to the court house, and so nobody who really matters, and certainly no man or institution who or which has any power or control in either a legal or political sense in the sovereign state of Mississippi is aware of their existence.

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I guess what we're doing more than anything else is educating them. When you've never voted, because you've never been allowed to vote, your understanding of democracy is not imposingly sophisticated. The idea that simple mathematical certainty provides for election of a Negro sheriff if every eligible Negro voter exercises his rights in a county where his race constitutes 2/3 of the population completely escapes men whose preoccupation for generations has been cheating starvation and sustaining an attitude of obsequious obedience toward white men.

I'm not sure what happens from here. My job is done when I have sent on to the Jackson office the fifty odd Freedom Registration Forms filled out and signed by residents of Pilgrim's Rest and neighboring communities whom I have personally contacted. Apparently, the plan is to conduct a "special" election in November in which members of the Freedom Democratic Party may cast ballots for Negro candidates to fill ordinarily uncontested positions. Also, by the time you are reading this, the attempt by the Freedom Democratic Party to be seated in place of the regular Democratic Party at the Convention will have succeeded or failed.

Anyway, it is our understanding as we drive from house to house that the more people we are able to persuade to fill out Freedom Registration Forms, the greater will be the chances that the FDP is seated at the Convention, but I was in Washington long enough before coming here to know better than that. Would that a simple positive correlation pertained between the number of interested and eligible but disfranchised Mississippi Negro voters and the prospects that legitimacy will soon accrue to the FDP!

Two gentlemen from the Justice Department dropped in on the Saffolds last night. Holmes County is one in which the Department has initiated a suit against the voting registrar on grounds that a so-called pattern of discrimination exists. There are some 20 registered Negro voters in Holmes County, against some 4 or 5 thousand registered whites, and actual registration at the court house, like putting up summer volunteers, involves great risk. But the Saffolds, and a handful of other families in Pilgrim's Rest, have done both. Indeed, the Saffolds have attempted to register three times.

Registration to vote in Mississippi involves filling out a form, including a section where the prospective registrant lists what he considers to be the sundry duties of citizenship, and a section where he is asked to interpret part of the Mississippi Constitution.

Mr. McClellen, the registrar, does his level best to discourage Negroes even from filling out the registration form. He makes

them wait long periods, tells them if they can't finish by lunch time they shouldn't try at all, and is generally all round down right rude. In the past, once the patient, unruffled Negro succeeds in getting a form to complete, it has been a foregone conclusion that upon returning after thirty days he will be told by Mr. McClellen, without explanation, that he has failed "the test," meaning, of course, that Mr. McClellen has decided not to register him. The Saffolds have "failed" twice, and we're going down next week to see about the third time. In October, the Saffolds will be asked to testify in court about the numerous devices employed by Mr. McClellen to prevent or discourage them and other Negroes from voting.

Some very interesting people have blown in and out of Mississippi just in these past two weeks. Author John Hersey rode out from Jackson with us when we first arrived. As far as I know, he's living elsewhere in Holmes County, with a Negro family, and doing an article for the Saturday Evening Post.

Pete Seeger gave a terrific concert in Jackson last week, and topical song writer Phil Ochs and city blues singer Barbara Dane came out to Pilgrim's Rest, had dinner with the Saffolds, and brought down the church last Friday night at a meeting.

This letter is already drawn out, and it could go on forever, but I should conclude with some final observations.

Lest it conceivably seem that this experience has been all work and no play, all giving and no taking, I need only mention that Jodie has promised to teach me to milk a cow, pick cotton, play the harmonica, and ride a horse. We've been to visit the Williams Sisters and the Christian Harmonizers, two semi-professional spiritual groups, at their homes, and had a regular command performance. Revivals are next week in Pilgrim's Rest. All week long there's hell, fire, and brimstone preachin' each night, and on Sunday the children (usually 13 or 14) who think they've "got religion" are baptized by being thrown in a pond, and thus brought into the church. Also next week, we're going to visit S.C. Williams, reputedly the best blues guitarist for miles around.

There's danger here in Pilgrim's Rest, not so much as elsewhere in the state, but danger all the same. We are unable to buy supplies or gas in any store owned by a white within an area extending across most of Northern Holmes County in which our purpose for being in Mississippi is well known. We have been chased out of store after store with threats on our lives. We are less concerned for ourselves than for people like the Saffolds who, after we have departed, will be left along to face the full wrath of white hostility.

It is, after all, an interesting sensation to feel insecure and mortally imperilled in the midst of Americans. White Mississippians smoke Lucky Strikes, say hell and damn, drink Coca Cola, watch Ed Sullivan, and beat up and murder us Northern whites because we represent such a grave threat to their time-honored way of life as to be instantly transformed into veritable foreigners and mortal enemies.

The great gap in my brief but indispensable experience down here will have been contact with white Southerners. I'm still naive enough to think they can be reasoned with. But every time I set about to try, I am emphatically dissuaded by veterans with physical and mental wounds incurred over months and years of active service in what the SNCC workers like to refer to as the "Front Lines."

Once in France, year before last, I went to view a hunt, complete with horses, dogs, French horns, and red caps. It was fascinating, needless to say, the more so since its participants were pleased to explain the entire process to us as it went along. Last night some hunters came out from nearby Durant with their hounds to hunt foxes till the dawn on Jodie's land. Their camp was just up the hill, and I was already halfway there full of questions before I realized that my chances of coming away unharmed were, to be perfectly frank, exceedingly small.

Our summary orientation was conducted in Washington, D.C., and as we left, the three missing civil rights workers had not been found. The Director of Freedom Schools, Stauton Lynd, is a small, soft-spoken, sensitive, and intense man. A more still silence never was than when he said it was now thought the workers had run into woods, pursued by angry whites, and lain for hours, or perhaps days, in hiding before their pursuers had finally come upon them and slain them. Stauton said he wanted none of us to depart for Mississippi unless he was prepared to die. That preparation for him, he said, had amounted to a kind of final reckoning in his mind of his ideals and his expectations, of his notions of reality, justice, the future, human dignity and a score of other immeasurables. He could rest in peace, he felt, as men have rested in peace once absolved officially of their sins, when he had sufficiently convinced himself that death in Mississippi in the cause of human freedom would not be death in vain.

There is one final thing, which occurred to me at the outset, during the orientation. Fifty or so new volunteers gathered in the basement of a Washington church. It was a small room, and it could have been in Paris, or St. Petersburg, because we were revolutionaries, and we were discussing revolution. Our avowed intent was the wrecking and rebuilding of the social structure of the state of Mississippi. If that social structure were intact when we left, we would have failed, and our proposed revolution

would have been unsuccessful.

There was a girl there from Germany, though the particular country is irrelevant. She'd been here only a few months, and she was going to Mississippi with us. When I sensed how fundamentally different is our concept of revolution from the concept of revolution elsewhere on the globe, and elsewhere in history, I was proud. If things have to change, and people have to take it upon themselves to change them, it is "good", as John Steinbeck might say, to be non-violent, to be motivated by the highest idealism, to be a little naive, and little wide-eyed, to be, as every Negro seems to be without exception in Pilgrim's Rest at least, totally unvindictive. It is good to be among people who consider looking liberal a poor substitute for being liberal. It is good to be away from people who sing "We Shall Overcome" at fraternity parties, and among people who sing it in rural Mississippi Baptist churches if and when the spirit, rather than spirits, moves them. It is good, after all, if one is an American, to be proud of it and uncomplacent about it all at once.

Well, perhaps I have rambled on about long enough. By the time you see this, I'll be back in the offices of Congressman Fraser in Washington. 432 Old House Office Building is the address for comments and criticism, which incidentally, are encouraged. Finally, apologies for the impersonality of this kind of letter, but I hope you will understand the need for it.

Sincerely yours,

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Pilgrim's Rest, Mississippi

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