

Miss. Freedom Summer 1964 (Part 7)

The service at the black Baptist church Sunday evening was certainly interesting. It began with prayer offered by a deacon – it was a singsong prayer, simple yet full of fervor, punctuated by many “Amen’s.” The deacon then read from the First Chapter of Genesis; right after this he burst into a song – a melancholy sounding one that the congregation took up. (There are no hymnals – either for the pianist or the people) The choir, about 6 teenage girls, sang a number of songs – their voices were very loud and clear; once you got used to them, they were enjoyable.



Singing Freedom Songs—sorry about the poor scanning of this!

The pastor invited us to speak. George Robbins spoke first; then when the pastor learned that we were ordained ministers, he invited us up to the pulpit. I spoke on the need for them to do God’s work in the Movement and specific ways they should be following Him – by registering, by joining the Movement & standing firm together. I started with the story of the statue of Christ found in a bombed church. Had no hands, but the people refused to restore it; they were reminded by it that

they were Christ's hands and feet. Roger spoke last, stressing the great need for action if their faith is real. He told the story of people gathered to pray for rain. Pastor asked, "Do you believe your prayers will be answered?" "Yes." "Then where are your umbrellas?"

There were just a few present – the pastor spent a deal of time –much of it very humorously – explaining why had stayed home. There was a bit of rain that night, but enough to discourage anyone who really wanted to be there. were wondering if word had spread that we would be there & were frightened, as was their pastor.

More on Sunday the 8th – A.M. Before church.

Just found my notes taken when we were at Choctaw interviewing people. We stopped at the home of Mr. Barney T. Mosely. His mother-in-law Mrs. Summer commented, "Barney himself said, 'They're scared of killings & beatings mostly – they're not too scared of losing plantation jobs since they aren't too much any how.'" (However, we were to find that some are afraid even of losing their \$3 a day.) While talking about the plight of the Negro farmer as compared to the large plantation owner, Barney commented, "Negroes just own patches, not much land." He stated that these usually are 40, 60, or 80 acres. (We also found several who worked 18 to 20 acres.)

While visiting in the home of Sampson Cox we learned that E.C. Fisher had lost his job for housing Wally. Mr. Fisher owns what must be the nicest Negro house in Shaw, a lovely green house located down the street from the Center. Also a Mr. Greenwood of Cleveland was fired because his wife was active in the Movement; he worked for the same firm that fired Mr. Fisher.

Mr. & Mrs. Jake Burnett are both on welfare now. He worked until he was 70, . she until 65; a doctor ordered them to stop because of their health. They have no cash savings of any

kind. He share-cropped until 1954 when he went on welfare – \$30 a month at first, then \$32. In July, 1962 his wife went on, and his check was cut down. They are a friendly, warm couple with little to look forward to. It was also evident that they were reluctant to talk about any ill treatment by whites.

Mr. & Mrs. Silas Gaston are also an old retired couple. Each receives \$18 a month welfare money; Mr. Gaston gets \$40 a month 5.5. and his wife \$20. Thus on \$98 they are to live – hardly enough for the “abundant life” most Americans share in. We’ve found this to be typical of the older couples we visited; few Negroes are able to save anything from their low wages for retirement. Most of them work until they are physically unable to continue.

Mr. Gaston stated, “It’s hard to rent; can’t buy land if you’re colored.” “They’re scared, & you can’t blame them. A fellow has to live, & his job is the only way.”

As we were walking along the street we saw an elderly Negro lady slowly approaching us. Since she seemed to want to say hello we stopped to talk with her. Her name is Mary Haynes, and she stated that she had prayed that we would come to her. She was gone from her house (which Earney, our guide, passed by any way, which made us wonder about him. Also later that evening when we returned to pick up him & Mrs. Haynes to go to church, he wasn’t around.), but fortunately was waking from the house of a friend when we met.

We went with her to her house; she soon proved to be a gold mine of information. She told us that the white employers are telling the Negro laborers to report to the C-R Workers that the Negroes are paid \$1.25 an hour (actually 30 cents is the rate.). One of the worst employers is Earl Kegler. He has a number of Negroes who serve as informers. Two of them who live right in Choctaw are John Sack and Matt Tribbett; they have one of the better jobs – they receive \$5 for driving a tractor

12 hours a day.

She told us that 3 weeks before Barney Mosely left his job with Frank Rittle to work with another man for better pay (This one did pay \$1.25 an hour, money badly needed to pay Mrs. Mosely's medical bills.) Rittle got mad and wouldn't pay Barney for 2 days work he had done; not only that, he went and saw that Barney was fired from his new job, and now he won't hire him back. (Which again makes us wonder about Barney; he never mentioned this when we inquired about such abuses.) We soon found that this was a widespread practice, followed to "keep the niggers in line."

"Welfare money," Mrs. Haynes stated, "is given to us just like they want to." Mrs. Haynes received \$21 one month and \$14 the next. Since she must pay \$10 a month rent plus food & other items, this worried her white landlord who talked to the caseworker Ruby Webbs and got her to raise it.

She now receives \$37 a month from her own 5.5. account, but has been unable to get her husband's, who died in 1949. She is unable to work because of various ailments, and like most Negroes is in debt. She claimed that a number of people who do work are also receiving welfare aid – often more than those who can't. She cited Tom Spry, aged 65, as an example. He earns \$30 a week working for Mr. Rittle and receives \$50 a month in welfare aid.

Since he had heard so much about the Dan Sullivan plantation, George asked her about it. She claimed that he ran a "penitentiary place." "Folks can't work any place else but there. He scares them so they won't leave." He pays them whatever he wants, and he harbors a number of criminals. As this jibed with other reports we had heard, we tend to believe this. It is well known here that Senator Eastland's huge plantation in the next county harbors a number of Negroes who are kept there in bondage through black mail for past unprosecuted crimes, including even murder.

"White folks went around and took the guns of colored folks – about 12 years ago." Mrs. Haynes brother had a 44 Winchester which he refused to give up. "I didn't buy this to give it to you." He had a 100 acres of land from which he was soon afterwards driven away.

Bob Flannigan, she reported, is the only white man who has stood up for the rights of Negroes. She related to us an interesting incident that occurred in 1962: A white man attempted to break into a Negro's house to shoo~ him. As he broke through the door the Negro shot and killed him. (She told us with great feeling that God was with him since he only had one bullet for his gun!) He ran immediately to Mr. Flannigan's house where Mr. F. told him to wait. When the Sheriff came to arrest the man, Mr. F. said, "There better not be pin prick on this man. I've got enough colored men on my place to blow Rosedale sky high."

While they were talking a lot of white men came to seize "the nigger" who dared to defend himself against a white. "The road was just full of people," Mrs. H. avowed. "Mr. Bob kept him in his house and saved him. Mr. Bob said, 'He's in my home, and you aren't going to get him.'" And they didn't. Thanks to the watchful persistence of a white man, an almost unheard of thing in Mississippi, the man received a fair trial and was acquitted. Mr. F. gave him enough money to leave the county. and the man went North to live. He doesn't dare come back to Bolivar County.

Mrs. H. reported that another white plantation owner C. L. Beckum ordered his people, «Don't go to the church! If they let those people (C-R Workers) come, you don't go!" Since the C-R workers have spoken in the church, the whites around Choctaw are talking about burning it down. They boasted after their threats, "I'll bet they won't go in there again."

Mrs. H. is clearly one of the few in Choctaw who isn't afraid. She wishes that she were younger (she's 67) and healthier so

that she could take a more active part in the Movement. She speaks with great fire and force. She thinks that Negroes should take a more active part in the Movement and should defend

themselves with guns when attacked. She pointed her walking stick around the room as she stated, "If they would only give me one of them machine guns, I'd fix anyone who tried to scare or bother me – Rat-tat-tat-tat!!" She repeated this little speech, complete with gestures, at church that night. It must have startled the pastor a great deal.

After church that night we visited the home of Mr. & Mrs. Andrew Hardy whom we had met earlier just as we were leaving for the church meeting. Mr. Hardy is 74, & Mrs.H. 69. Each receives \$19 a month welfare; Mr. H. \$40 S.S., Mrs. H. \$15.95. He, like most of the elderly, has medical debts of \$80. With all their monthly bills it is a hard proposition to stay alive – no abundant life here, either.

"The niggers are jumping high, but if Goldwater gets it, they'll be fixed," he reported a white man as saying. He told us of during his boyhood seeing a man & woman burned up at Dodgeville. "They cut her breasts off." Sheriff Alan Anderson at Indianola got drunk and didn't go out to intervene. The woman's sister lived on James Esatland's plantation. She had her baby and raised it. For some reason Wood Eastland came to take it away. The woman got a knife and killed him. Thus for the unpardonable crime of killing a white, the white community took their revenge.

Next time is our first encounter with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer.