

Miss. Freedom Summer Project

Part 15

Tuesday – today, 9:05, Aug. 18

What a day this has been! Hectic & exciting. We were looking forward to the arrival of the ministers & trying to do so many things. George as usual had all kinds of typing & mimeographing of reports. The Center was jammed with kids, young ones to play, & older ones to prepare for the library read-in. Bradford was calling to see about the long over due check from Jackson & about a ride to Jackson for a COFO-SCC meeting of all Project Directors.

Three women asked to be taken to Cleveland, so after returning with the mail, I shaved & took off. It was 9:30 then & the lawyer from Ruleville was due at 10, so there was need for haste. The ladies learned that they had failed their tests, as we'd expected, & agreed to meet me at 8:45 tomorrow to go back to the Courthouse to take the test again.

We arrived back in Shaw at 10:30 to find the lawyer already there talking with George & Grace about area development. We talked over the proposed library read-in with the students, Bradford, & Mel (he'd taught 3 non-violent workshops with the teenagers and so the coming demonstration was, in a way, "his baby"). The lawyer suggested, while the students were meeting in the library (the project's) to plan the final details of their strategy, that the move be postponed. He felt that representatives of the Press and FBI should be present to publicize the event & to help keep violence down. John went along with this – he'd just been in the meeting with the kids, giving them sober facts of no bail money available & the possibility of arrests.

The students were very disgusted at the suggestion that they

wait another week. They had been prepared to go last Tuesday but had followed Bradford's advice in good faith. The students argued back and won concerning the integration of the library. These teenagers were already veterans, having, with the help of the local COFO staff, organized the boycott that caused their school to be shut down for the summer. It was decided that because of the danger just boys would take part, this to the disgust of the girls. Three were chosen. Each decided to ask for a specific book – one was on Shakespeare, and another on science, as I recall.

They donned white shirts & ties in order to make as neat an appearance as possible. We didn't bother to call the Sheriff, but the FBI in Jackson was notified in the hope that they would monitor the affair.

I had hoped to witness the integration, but had to take someone up to the Courthouse in Cleveland. By the time we returned the students had already left for the library. Roger and I drove downtown and saw quite a scene. A crowd of displeased looking whites lined the sidewalk across the street from the little storefront library.

We couldn't see much of what was going on inside, but outside were sheriff's deputies and quite a number of white-helmeted state troopers. We would loved to have stopped and taken pictures but didn't believe this was safe, so I continued to drive very slowly down the street. As we came to the railroad tracks we spotted the large black bus that had transported the state troopers to the scene. Most of them, with big black riot guns pointing skyward, stood by the bus. They were ready to move in if necessary. (We later learned that the FBI had called both the Sheriff's office and the State Police.) Again, I would have loved to stop to take pictures but didn't want to risk arrest. I did snap one picture of the bus & troopers with my box camera – unfortunately it turned out blurry due to the car motion. We drove back down through the center of town, but when it became apparent that we wouldn't be allowed to park

close by the library, we drove back to the Freedom Center.

Shortly thereafter the three students returned and told the crowd of admiring adults and youth what had transpired. They had gone into the library and found the sheriff and some deputies and troopers there, along with the librarian. All of the chairs had mysteriously disappeared, no doubt to discourage their staying around. They asked for their books by title, as they had rehearsed. The librarian treated them courteously, giving them the books they wanted. The students left and returned to the Center. They posed for pictures, holding the books that they had taken out. Everyone felt very proud. Though the library was supported by the taxes of Black residents, as well as whites, no black person had taken out a book before this day.

There were some repercussions to this. A few threatening phone calls (to a relative of one of the students, I believe), a firing from a job, and our COFO bank account was closed out by the bank. Suddenly we were "undesirable" to them. No doubt they knuckled under to pressure from the local White Citizens' Council.

Another interesting development. One night when we stopped at Joe's grocery store for a snack, Joe asked me to stay for a minute after the others left. He took from under the counter a pistol and showed it to me. He reported that he was now getting threatening phone calls from angry whites resenting his selling food to us. He was frightened for his family but angry himself about this. He told of how his father and other Italians had once been looked down upon by the Protestants of the town. They had known hatred and discrimination but had survived it until Joe and his generation had become accepted. In fact, we had been told by our black friends to be careful what we said around Joe, as he was reporting to the White Citizens' Council what went on in his store. Joe was now feeling some of the heat that the rest of us had been experiencing. He swore and said to me that he would take care

of any SOB who harmed anyone in his family. Later, when I relayed this to some of the others at the Center, they expressed some sympathy for the man – really caught in the middle.

The last night of our stay in Shaw there was another Freedom Rally with various speeches expressing gratitude toward Roger and myself. We were urged to tell the story to as many people in the North as possible. Two comments made to us after the meeting especially stand out. One lady thanked us for helping to open the eyes of the people to their situation. She stated that now she knew that things didn't have to stay the same as they had been. Another much older lady also thanked us and declared, "I may not live to see the day of freedom come, but my grandchildren will!"

Just one more section of the journal that includes reflections on some of the events, and then a posting on further developments.