

## Letters from Mississippi -- Fall 1964 and Summer 1965

<http://dickatlee.com/issues/mississippi/>  
(links in original, updated 13 July 2013)



**"Make them live  
in a valley of fear . . .  
a valley guarded by our men  
who will both be  
their only hope  
and the source of their  
fear"**



MISSISSIPPI EYEWITNESS 23

Adolph Hitler, 1939

**"Mississippi Law:"** an oxymoron of law enforcement violating rights, a stereotyped southern phenomenon then, but increasingly ubiquitous now, in the actions of militarized local police and the "anti-terrorist" Dept. of Justice  
*(quotation and picture: Ramparts Magazine's stunning "Mississippi Eyewitness")*

### Background

I was in my sophomore year at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1964, when Heather Tobis (later the remarkable Heather Booth) came to the university to recruit students to go south to Mississippi.

The preceding summer, the legendary Freedom Summer, had seen the first widespread use of northern whites in Mississippi black voter organizing carried out by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the new Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and the umbrella Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). Although the black civil rights movement had been making huge strides on its own, at the cost of many murders of its activists, it wasn't getting the steady high profile in the rest of the country and government that the use of whites could bring -- particularly if there were the kind of violence and murders that were so often ignored by the press when black activists were involved. In many ways, the black activists made it clear they would have rather continued work on their own. Many, perhaps most, of the northern whites didn't understand at the time that we were to a significant extent racially and culturally clueless and partially blinded by white privilege. But though the black local activists often resented the whites, they apparently felt obliged to accept the publicity value a white contingent could provide.

Unaware of this dynamic, and spared of it in my later participation in the Summer of 1965, I was quite taken with Heather and her spiel, and resolved to go. I remember vividly riding South through Chicago on a night train, watching through the window as the streetlight-lit avenues stretched off to the side and disappeared, and wondering if I would make it back alive. I spent a total of only ten days prior to the 1964 election in Mississippi, mainly on the Gulf Coast and neighboring towns inland. But a lot can happen in ten days.

Given the violent opposition to formal registration, the MFDP that summer had done local party organizing and elected delegates to the Democratic National Convention, to be seated in place of the the regular Democratic delegates from Mississippi. In the end this effort was blocked by a Lyndon Johnson afraid to lose the Southern vote. So the goal that fall was instead to get black Mississippians to vote in a parallel election -- the Freedom Vote -- not only between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson, but also between the regular party candidates and the MFDP's own candidates. Ironically, I found Johnson to be liked by most of the ordinary people I encountered in the black communities I visited in Mississippi, because of his connection to the idolized JFK.

It was an intense experience in many ways, to say the least, fraught with both real danger and the racial frictions within the movement. Whenever I hear "She's Not There" by the Zombies, which was playing on a car radio at a dangerous time, I get a chill in my back. When I returned to Chicago, I tried to capture the whole experience in a single letter to my family and friends. But more importantly, I resolved to go down the following summer and try to make a real difference.

The summer of 1965 was aimed voter registration. I went to Mississippi via a long orientation session in Washington and several intermediate stops in Mississippi before ending up in Columbia, the county seat of Marion County. I worked there with Curt Styles -- a superb human being and a wonderful project leader -- and 3 white co-workers. Because there hadn't been any prior MFDP presence there, we ended up doing more SNCC-type activist civil rights organizing. We experienced phone harassment, malnutrition, fire bombing, shooting, jailing (including beating), and community fear-based apathy. But we also experienced warm support and gutsy (mostly on the part of the younger people) participation in the black community. And that we survived is partly attributed to a mayor determined not to have his town become another Selma or Philadelphia, despite what might have been contrary wishes on the part of some of the area's law enforcement.

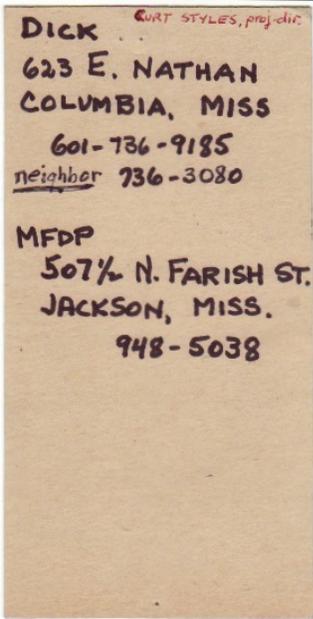
Beyond this background, I'll let the letters -- particularly the long November 11, 1964 and August 9, 1965 summaries -- speak for themselves. I hope they will add some frank, honest reality to whatever you may know of the voter work done in Mississippi.

## **Documents**

### **Note on the letters:**

- I have intermixed my letters from various civil-rights activity locations with the portions of my parents' letters to me which bore on what I was experiencing; these were not detached parents.

- The letters are in date order. However, given delays in delivery and the fact that the "August 9" letter was written and mailed in instalments, events referred to in this mixed set may not appear in strict chronological order.
- The quality of the copy I had of the 1964 letter was sufficient to permit text scanning, with much correction. However, the 1965 letters were hand-written or poor carbon copies, so I ran them through dictation software and then edited corrections. I've attempted to keep them as true as possible to the originals, except for a few punctuation clarifications and paragraph breaking in the August 9 letter, and the addition of links to people and background information, illustrations, and occasional *[explanatory comments]* and *"[snip]"* deletions of non-germane personal material.
- Because of the number of letters and amount of detail, I've also provided a kind of overview outline for those looking for something in particular.

	<p><b>Overview of Letters</b></p> <p><b>1964 Letter</b> November 11, Chicago, IL</p> <p><b>1965 Letters</b> June 25, Washington, DC June 30, Washington, DC July 2, Washington, DC July 3, from home July 7, Hattiesburg, MS July 11, from home July 11, Laurel, MS July 17, Laurel, MS July 21 &amp; 27, from home August 9, Columbia, MS August 12, Columbia, MS August 24, Columbia, MS Jail/beating (2013 note) Departure (2013 note) December 21 (to mayor) Epilogue (2013 note)</p>	<p><b>Maps</b> State of Mississippi Mississippi Congressional Districts Southern/coastal Mississippi (1964) Columbia sector (July 1965) Columbia (July-August 1965) Columbia streets Nathan Street corner Courthouse Square Columbia chase</p> <p><b>Interview (2005)</b></p> <p><b>Supplementary information</b> People * Permission slip draft (1964) Calendars: June-August 1965 Pittsburgh COFO/bail-fund notes (1964,65) Columbia tied-up phone problem (parent notes, 1965) Money and shipping (1965)</p>
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Three of the songs, one from a labor tradition, two from gospel, which were very important to us in Columbia and for which we composed verses.



Which Side Are You On  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iAIM02kv0g>



Keep Your Eyes On The Prize  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K\\_TrfgezgvE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_TrfgezgvE)



Wade in the Water  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhjGzBCow88>

\* **Site discoveries:** While putting this site together, I realized that some visitors would be unfamiliar with some or all of the players, famous or otherwise, that are mentioned in these letters. So I searched for information to which I could link their names that would put them in context and included this in a "people" file. Several of these searches led me to fascinating resources, of which there are undoubtedly hundreds more. Here are three primary sources in particular:

1. In the case of Biloxi project director Dickie Flowers, I stumbled on an aspect of the Mississippi Freedom Summer project that I'd forgotten about.

Because of the dangers involved in this work, particularly in remote places, it was considered necessary to have a way for people to call a central coordinating office at no charge. Before the era of 800-numbers, such a service was called a WATS (wide area telephone service) line. While looking for Dickie, I stumbled on what appears to be a full set of transcripts of the traffic on the Freedom Summer WATS line, in what looks at first to be a graphic of crude typewriting, but is text-searchable. What a resource!

<http://www.crmvet.org/docs/wats/>

2. In the case of Greenwood project director John Handy, I found the "Mississippi Summer Project -- running summary of incidents, 1964," a remarkable daily itemization of individual "incidents" in Mississippi towns that summer:

<http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/manu/id/8764/rec/2>

3. While looking for information on Curt Styles, my project director, I came upon a book written about Columbia at exactly that time by Rev. Bill McAtee, a white minister who, along with another white minister and three black ministers, helped Columbia's visionary mayor shepherd the town through a crucial time in what may have been a uniquely (and relatively) benign process of desegregation:

*Transformed: A White Mississippi Pastor's Journey Into Civil Rights and Beyond*

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1617031151/>