

11 July 1965
[Laurel, Mississippi]

Dear Dad,

Sorry for the tie up in communications. Things have moved fast and irregularly and I haven't started the practice of writing regularly. This should be the start. We are currently in Laurel at the following address:

c/o Box 771
Laurel, Mississippi

The idea of this whole project is that it is being run by the FDP [*Freedom Democratic Party*]. As a result, it is on paper under the control of the county executive committees of the FDP, and they were to request a certain number of volunteers. We were all to go to a three day orientation in Hattiesburg, after which the volunteers were selected.

However as the people started coming out of jail in Jackson, with nothing to do but go back into jail, people from the various projects around the state started coming down and snapping them up before the orientation. As a result of this "illegal" operation, only a bit more than half the volunteers were present for orientation. There was resentment among project people who were trying to abide by the rules (even though the executive committee is supposed to be in charge, it is the project directors who really direct the immediate operation, so they felt they had a right to choose who they thought would be best for their area, and some yielded to the temptation to do just that). However it seems no attempt was made to revise the request figures as regards this operation, so some projects ended up with twice the proportion of people, others with none.

John Handy, director for the Greenwood Project, met me in Washington and invited me down. I was planning on leaving with him until Wednesday night, while I was sitting in a laundromat in Hattiesburg. Jake (Arthur Jacobs), whom I had worked with in Biloxi last year, walked in and asked me if I would be going to Marion County. Strictly, this was outside the FDP organization, because it had not been opened up yet. Our work would be more of the sort that was done by COFO [*Council of Federated Organizations*] last year. However, there were no requests for Marion County.

We got together a group of about seven people to go to Marion County (Columbia et al); then we found out that two girls (a Negro from Greenwood and a white from Columbia Univ) had finagled (much speculation on the methods used) permission to go into Marion County, though unofficial. Now they had been in there for a day at a time on several occasions and as a result claim all sorts of contacts. Jake, on the other hand, was brought up there, and Curt Styles (another guy I knew in Biloxi, who will be working with us) was born there. Also, Jake and Curt are considered two of the best workers in the fifth congressional district, and apparently feel quite a sense of responsibility toward it.

Meanwhile, John Handy and another guy I had ridden down on the bus with, and two white girls I had also met in Washington left Thursday afternoon for Greenwood. We were getting ready to

go up to West Point in the first district for a short time until Curt checked out Marion County to see if the girls had done any damage during their initial visits. (I talked to several kids who knew the white girl from Columbia, and they felt she was relatively irresponsible; the two of them disappeared in Hattiesburg and were an hour or two overdue when someone found them window shopping downtown.)

On the verge of our leaving, a phone call came in indicating that Handy's car (belonging to one of the white girls) had had a fire bomb tossed into it and been blown off the road, seriously injuring at least one passenger. All transportation north of Jackson was suspended. (We just caught a pickup truck leaving for north of Jackson with two white girls driving and four white kids sitting in the open back, ETA at about 1 a.m. passing through three towns.) We spent a fretful night (I knew everyone in that car). It was only early Friday afternoon that we finally found out that the car had gone from Hattiesburg to Laurel and then to Greenwood, let the girls out, and headed for Greenville. Someone started following it and finally for some reason, Handy parked it and the two guys took off through a couple of fields and got a ride back to Greenwood on another highway. In the meantime, someone bombed and burned the car.

By the time we got a ride on Friday it was midafternoon. We all piled into a pickup in a rainstorm and went to Laurel (Jake decided he didn't want to leave the fifth district since it's in trouble and West Point has enough people working there already). So we got to Laurel safe and sound, the place where the office was bombed while we were in Washington. What happened was that someone put a timed cocktail on the gas pipe. In the meantime, someone else lit the former SNCC [*Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*] office, in a condemned section of town next to the white business district; the fear for the business district attracted all the city fire engines by the time the bomb went off here at the COFO office, breaking the gas line and making an effective blowtorch on the wall of the building. No fire engines for a half hour, and all they could do was keep the walls wet until the gas could be turned off. The worst part was that we have no more electricity or gas -- luckily the building inspector hasn't come around (a lot of people think that COFO has been scared out of the area): he would have a good excuse to condemn the building, I have a feeling.

The staff has been demoralized because people have been scared now and everyone was thrown out of the community homes in which they were staying. All the guys now sleep on the office floor; the girls have found a temporary staying place. I hope our being here helps morale a bit; they had just made their first big canvassing effort in a while when the place was bombed. We're helping them canvas now. The feelings I get from this are very complicated -- I won't mention or delve into them at this point, but maybe you can get a feeling of what it would be like to spend two hours with a man who has absolutely nothing and, though disabled by a broken neck, can't collect welfare because someone told the department he drinks.

We as yet have no definite plans for the trip to Marion County. Will let you know as soon as these become relatively concrete. Good luck to all of us....

[For the complete set of my Mississippi 1964-65 letters, see
<http://dickatlee.com/issues/mississippi>]