

MISSISSIPPI SUMMER PROJECT:
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Last Summer in Mississippi

by Alice Lake

THE dialogue occurred in July behind a small white country church with a single spire and a green roof. One of the participants was a man, over six feet and a heavy 200 pounds. He had sandy hair, and a paunch swelling under a sweaty blue shirt with a sheriff's insignia on its sleeve. The other was a slim girl, not quite 22 years old, startlingly pretty, with short, light brown hair, bright blue eyes, crooked teeth, and a smile that lighted up her whole face.

It was an unusual conversation because it was friendly, and these two were not friends. The man was a deputy sheriff in Madison County, 30 miles north of Jackson, the Mississippi state capital. The girl, Ruth Kay Prickett, of Carbondale, Illinois, was a volunteer in the Mississippi Summer Project, which brought to the state over 500 young college students. She had arrived in the county a few days earlier to open a rural Freedom School for Negro teen-agers.

Although these two did not know each other, both had heard stories. In the newspaper the sheriff read, the volunteers were described as dirty, smelly, unwashed beatniks. Looking at Kay, immaculate in a white piqué, V-necked blouse and a sharp-pleated, coffee-colored skirt, he must have wondered. "I had heard ugly things about his kind too," Kay says. "I'd hate to say whether they were true or not. When there is no communication between the races, hearsay stories grow on both sides."

The sheriff drove out from Canton, the county seat, to the one-room church that housed the Freedom School to get Kay and the other two white teachers—Karol Nelson, 25, a tall blonde from Dinuba, California; and Natalie Tompkins, 21, from Melrose, Massachusetts—to register with the local police. This was a requirement of questionable legality for the 42

summer workers in Madison County, who were running a voter-registration drive, manning a community center and seven schools, and organizing a farmers' cooperative among the Negroes, who number almost three quarters of the county's 33,000 population.

The simple task turned out to be more than he had bargained for. When he arrived, Kay and Karol were taking books from cartons and placing them on newly built pine bookshelves. Natalie was giving a French lesson to two Negro girls. While the others continued their chores, Kay took the surprised visitor in hand, deliberately turning on her most naïve manner and the full force of her dazzling smile. She invited him inside to see the school—"we'd both profit from it," she said sweetly. She showed him the library, 1,000 books, mostly on Negro history, and offered to lend him one. He declined hastily. She suggested he visit the school when it met that evening. Again he declined.

Behind the church, where his car was parked, the two talked for over half an hour. Kay asked what he thought of the voter-registration drive. In Madison County only 500 Negroes out of 10,000 eligible are registered to vote, a percentage even lower than the state-wide figure of seven per cent.

"I kind of hate for them to vote," the sheriff answered slowly. "This county is seventy-two per cent nigger. If they get in power, they're really going to be rough on the white people. I just don't trust the nigger. They're not like us."

Kay drew a deep breath but kept on smiling. They talked about the nearby Negro church that had burned to the ground a few days earlier.

"I bet your people burned that church just for the publicity," he said.

Kay answered innocently, "I wasn't there. Were you? Do you have any facts on which to base your opinion?"

The two found one bond. The sheriff was a Mason and so was Kay's father. He brightened. By the time he drove away he was in high good humor. "Now, don't you worry, little girl," he said. "We're not going to come out here and beat you up."

Yet, through the summer Kay and Karol and Natalie had reason to worry. They lived about 12 miles outside of Canton

in two Negro farm homes on a dirt country road, surrounded by stalks of waving corn and the dark green leaves of cotton plants. In a nearby community, bomb threats forced three other volunteers to leave Negro homes. A fire bomb was tossed onto the lawn of the Freedom House, Canton headquarters for the civil rights workers. On Canton's main street (named, by some irony, Peace Street), white drivers openly displayed rifles on the back seats of their cars. The girls had one lifeline to summon aid in case of trouble—a telephone in a small Negro grocery store four miles away. Soon after the deputy's visit they lost the lifeline. A sheriff drove up to the store one morning and told its proprietor that he'd be in a peck of trouble if he continued to let those white girls use his phone.

"The nights were the worst," Kay said. "At first we jumped at every noise. Then we got used to the sound of the cows chewing grass outside the window and the clank of the chain dragging at the pony's ankle. But when the dogs started barking at midnight, we turned out the lights and hardly breathed in the dark. Once a car stopped and honked invitingly. Another time we heard footsteps running near the house, with the dogs in growling pursuit."

Kay and Karol shared a big double bed in the front bedroom of the home of John and Mary Higgins, a middle-aged couple. Natalie lived down the road with the Forbes family, who worked 50 acres of their own land, 21 planted in cotton, the rest in corn, butter beans, sweet potatoes, okra. (The Negro families who offered hospitality to the three girls still live in Madison County. For their own protection their names have been altered.) Mr. Forbes, a heavy, friendly man, said firmly, "If I catch someone round my gate, I'm going to take a shot at him." One Sunday night he almost had that opportunity.

"Some of the married sons and their families were down visiting from Jackson," Natalie recalls. "At about eleven P.M. all four dogs started to bark, and we heard someone running. One of the boys went into a bedroom for his rifle. It's like an armory here, rifles in every room. We turned out the lights and saw a dark car parked on the road near the cotton field. The men took their rifles and prowled around outside. Then we heard the motor start up and the car pull away. Just to

make sure, two of the boys spent the night in the carport with their rifles ready." Apologetically she added, "I guess I'm the all-time chicken around here, but I was scared."

What made these girls come to hot, humid Mississippi, where people of their own color treated them as enemies? Should they have stayed home, as some advised, and let Mississippi Negroes struggle alone to win their rights? What were their goals? Did they succeed in accomplishing them?

All three girls come from middle-class homes. Kay was a senior at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale; Natalie had just graduated from the University of Massachusetts; and Karol was a teacher in Pacifica, California, after graduating three years earlier from the University of California. From a glance at Kay's animated face, it would be easier to imagine her twisting at a sorority dance than teaching school in a hot little Negro church. Like most girls her age, Kay likes to have fun, loves parties and has a healthy interest in young men.

"Why did I come? I feel segregation is morally wrong," Kay says. "I believe that if we don't help to right that wrong, our democracy may wither away. And I hoped that the summer would make me a better person. Last May a speaker from C.O.F.O. [the Council of Federated Organizations, set up by the four major civil rights groups to run the Mississippi program] spoke on our campus, and when he had finished I raised my hand and asked, 'Where do we get the applications?' Some people had money to help and others had time. I had the time."

Behind the decision lay 21 years of Kay Prickett's life. "I guess my idealism comes from my father," she says. "He has great ideas. He taught us not to throw paper on the highways, and to believe that everybody was equally human, no matter what the color of his skin."

Kay's mother, Juanita, 46, agrees. Mother and daughter look alike, have the same vivacious manner and quick, breathless voice. "I was born in Oklahoma," Mrs. Prickett says, "but my people come from all over the South and I was raised with Southern attitudes. I changed my point of view when I met a wonderful man named Ralph Prickett, a man who used words like 'us' and 'ours' instead of 'I,' 'my,' 'me.' My philosophy is that the world should be a better place because you came through it. That's the way Kay feels too."

Mrs. Prickett did not have an easy time shedding her own racist childhood. In a gym class at Southern Illinois University in 1936, she and other students were asked to clasp hands and form a circle. "When I saw there was a Negro girl beside me, I broke into a cold sweat," she recalls. "But I did it, and I said to myself, 'My land, it doesn't feel any different from any other girl's hand.' I've come a long way since. A few months ago our son Charles, who's twenty, brought home a Negro boy to visit with us. It was a new experience for me. It made me feel ten feet tall."

Nevertheless, neither Juanita nor Ralph Prickett acquiesced easily in Kay's plan to summer in Mississippi. "It wasn't that we were out of sympathy," Mrs. Prickett says. "We were just plain worried about her safety. We tried up to the last minute to persuade her not to go. I was in tears the whole last week."

Only one family member never reconciled himself. Kay's maternal grandfather, 70 years old, is an unreconstructed Southerner who told Kay flatly, "You can choose between the niggers and me." All summer he wrote her pitiful pleading letters. "I love you so much," one read, "that I've hurt ever since you've left. Yet I feel like you've deserted us for the niggers. If you would call me any time of the night and say, 'Grandpa, I want to come home,' I'd drive right through the night until I reached you."

Except for one childhood incident, Kay never knew persons of a different color until she started college. "When I was seven," she recalls, "and my father was a coal chemist with a mining company, he brought home a visitor from Japan. Charlie and I were enchanted, and the next day we took him to see our school. The war had ended only a few years earlier. We were shocked and ashamed when in front of the schoolhouse the other kids yelled, 'Kill the Jap!'"

Kay grew up in De Soto, a community just outside Carbondale which boasted that no Negro would dare spend the night there. Even Carbondale maintained a segregated movie theater until a few years ago. In college some of her friends became interested in civil rights. "For a while," she says, "I dated a boy who was blond and blue-eyed but had almost all Negro friends. At one party we were the only white couple. At first I was self-conscious, but in an hour I really forgot all

about it. Last year a group of kids joined the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. I was shy about going to their meetings. I didn't want to go rushing in. One spring day I was sitting in the cafeteria just before a SNCC meeting, and a friend asked me to come. I guess that started my commitment. There are twenty kids in our SNCC chapter at S.I.U. Six of us spent the summer in Mississippi."

The six students needed financial support, \$150 each for transportation and living expenses and a \$500 pledge of bail money in case of arrest. The Pricketts are not rich. Juanita is a remedial-reading specialist, and Ralph Prickett only recently started a second career as a schoolteacher. But friends on the campus—faculty wives, the university chaplain, the Student Christian Foundation—gave teas to raise funds. Each student received \$10 a week during the summer, enough for pocket money and board and room.

The start of the trip seemed a lark—at first. On Sunday, June 21st, Kay arrived by bus at the peaceful green campus of Western College for Women, in Oxford, Ohio, where the National Council of Churches was conducting a week-long orientation session for the summer volunteers. She was one of the second group of 250 youngsters planning to teach in Freedom Schools and man community centers. The first wave, mostly voter-registration workers, was already filtering into Mississippi.

It looked like a gay college weekend. All day buses spilled out youngsters with sleeping bags and guitars. Cars pulled up with stickers from the University of Oregon, Harvard, Yale, Antioch, Oberlin. New York, Massachusetts, Illinois and California were most heavily represented, but students came also from Wyoming, Kansas, Oklahoma. Girls wore bright cottons, and the boys chinos and open-necked shirts. Immediately they began singing. From the start it was a singing movement.

Many had made sacrifices to come. One girl used her college graduation money to finance the summer. Another took the funds she had saved for a trip to Europe. A third arrived on what was to have been her wedding day. She had jilted her fiancé when she found his ardor for civil rights did not match hers.

Greeting the volunteers were sober staff workers familiar with Mississippi jails, scarred by beatings or bullets. They minced no words about the dangers. There was Bob Moses, leader of the project, 29, shy, serious, a New York Negro who had gone to Mississippi in 1961 and never returned to complete his doctorate at Harvard; his pretty wife Donna, 23, tiny, dressed in brief white shorts, her black hair in a single braid down her back; Annell Ponder, 30, dark and beautiful, a crease of worry etched across her forehead; Jesse Morris, slender, tense, with a phenomenal memory; Jimmy Travis, 22, lanky and nervous, only recently recovered from a sniper's bullet that nearly killed him.

On Monday morning Bob Moses spoke to the entire group. "As you come into Mississippi you bring with you the concern of the country. It does not identify with Negroes. It identifies with whites. With that concern comes a little more protection for you. It is still up for grabs whether that protection can be transferred to the Negroes of Mississippi."

He was interrupted by a staff worker approaching the stage. Moses squatted on his haunches and the two whispered briefly. Then for a silent moment Moses remained bent over, rocking back and forth. He straightened wearily and continued, voice flat, unemotional, eyes bleak behind thick glasses. "Three of our people from Meridian, two staff workers and a summer volunteer, have been missing since yesterday afternoon."

Rita Schwerner, 22, painfully thin, dressed in faded blue shorts, her wavy hair piled loosely on top of her head, followed him to the platform. She too seemed unemotional. Later she broke down. "The missing three are my husband Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, of Meridian, and Andrew Goodman, of New York." She wrote their names on the blackboard, and the place—Philadelphia, Neshoba County. In the heat no one stirred. Only a few days earlier Andy Goodman, 20, had sat in one of these auditorium seats. He was in Mississippi a scant 24 hours before he died.

On the surface the volunteers seemed curiously untouched. They jammed the telephone booths to wire their congressmen to demand a federal search. They stood noisily in line for lunch. "I felt tense, like when President Kennedy died," Kay

said at the lunch table. "I sort of connected it with myself but sort of not. I thought this might have been done to scare the rest of us away." Had she been scared? She shook her head. "No, I'd never known violence. No one ever threatened to do anything to me. I had no concept of things like that."

Through the week, speaker after speaker urged any youngster who had doubts to return home. "If you don't feel ready for this kind of thing, it is noble, not shameful, to leave," said Vincent Harding, director of the Mennonite House in Atlanta. "Don't worry if you're not ready. No one is ever ready to go to Mississippi." Each evening the telephones shrilled, calls from anxious parents begging their children to leave. Yet not one youngster did.

Subtly the college-weekend air had changed. Volunteers flocked to the bulletin board where the latest news from Neshoba County was displayed. One boy confessed, "I've got cannon balls in my stomach." A worship service, held at 11 P.M. after a tightly scheduled day, was heavily attended. Until 1 A.M. one night the students danced Israeli folk dances taught by a Negro girl from Texas. Then they prowled their dormitories, looking for company.

The days were jammed with classes. Kay attended the general sessions in the morning and the meetings for Freedom School teachers in the afternoon and evening. She learned that her students would be tenth to twelfth graders, and that the curriculum would be equally divided among academic subjects and citizenship education, Negro history and Negro rights. In Mississippi there is no compulsory education law, and the average Negro attends school for only six years. His education costs the state annually less than half what it spends on a white child. One speaker said, "The Negro child is trained to accept without question. Teach him to ask why and the system will fall."

"Friday was our last night in Oxford," Kay says, "and most of us didn't go to bed. I wandered around all evening and ended up in the laundry room of our dorm, where several of us talked until four A.M." On Saturday afternoon the volunteers piled into chartered buses that would take them as far as Memphis. Kay, Karol and Natalie learned that they would proceed from there to Columbus, a town on the eastern

border of Mississippi. The bus drove through the night, arriving in Memphis at 5 A.M.

"I kept worrying about my knife," Kay recalls. "It was just an innocent Scout knife, but I cherished it because my brother Charlie gave it to me. Yet I knew I had to get rid of it." Earlier Bob Moses had said, "We will not allow any staff member or volunteer to carry a weapon. This is absolutely bedrock." In the Memphis bus station Kay solved her problem. She asked a woman if it would be all right to give the knife to her little boy. The gift was accepted with delight.

In Memphis the three girls learned that they had been re-assigned from Columbus to Greenville, a town near the Mississippi River in the rich Delta country of the northwest. The reason: Columbus Negroes were too frightened to open their homes to civil rights workers. Each volunteer was to be housed in a Negro home. Such hospitality might be perilous. Some hosts lost their jobs. Tear gas was lobbed into one home, and shots fired through the windows of others. Many feared that after the students left, modest homes, built with pennies laboriously saved, might go up in flames.

"As we approached the Mississippi border," Kay recalls, "we kept looking out the window. We weren't exactly scared, but we were thinking of what might happen. When we saw a big billboard reading 'Welcome to Mississippi,' we all laughed nervously."

They arrived in Greenville at noon after two sleepless nights. Immediately Kay saw a friend from Carbondale. "I was too keyed up to sleep, so we walked through town, expecting somebody to jump out and massacre us. But it was quiet—on the surface, at least."

For Mississippi, Greenville is a quiet town. It is the home of Hodding Carter, whose newspaper, the *Delta Democrat-Times*, is one of the few liberal white voices of the state press. Yet even in Greenville there is some harassment. "In my two weeks in the town," Kay says, "I lived in two houses. It was thought safer not to have a civil rights worker remain too long in one place. Negroes there work desperately hard. My first hostess rose at four A.M., and worked from five until mid-afternoon in a restaurant. Then she came home and took in washing, which she scrubbed on an old-fashioned board.

That's the way we did our washing too. A little girl of about six watched Karol the first day, and politely told her that she was using the wrong side of the scrub board. We bought some food in a Negro grocery store. The proprietor was very friendly until white people came in. Then he acted as if he didn't know us."

In Greenville the girls had their first taste of Southern Negro hospitality. One night 35 workers were invited to a fried chicken dinner. Another day they feasted on spaghetti in a local home. Six hundred people jammed into a steaming hall for a dance on the eve of the Fourth of July. Kay danced with the local boys until she was ready to drop. "They were so anxious to dance with us. Most of them had never even shaken hands with a white person."

At Oxford the problem of sexual contacts between white and Negro had been discussed frankly by the ministers. For Kay it soon became a practical dilemma. A 16-year-old boy developed a crush on her. One night he asked if he could kiss her. "I've never kissed a white girl before," he said shyly. Kay's answer was firm. "I don't want you to treat me as a white object any more than I treat you as a black object. I'm a real person and so are you. If the only basis for physical contact is the difference in our color, then there's no basis at all."

Teaching briefly in a Freedom School, Kay learned something about the gaps in Negro education. Federal District Judge Sidney Mize had just ordered three Mississippi school districts to integrate in the fall. His own personal disapproval of the order was implicit in a gratuitous statement that Negro brains were smaller, and thus inferior. Kay and her students decided to write Judge Mize a letter, giving him the true facts. Together they trooped to the white library, where they were pleasantly received, to marshal their evidence. "These were high-school students," Kay says, "but they didn't know how to use an encyclopedia, and they had never been taught how to consult a card catalogue. They're naturally intelligent but they're shy about talking up. I had to be careful not to make the mistake I made in college, that if someone is not verbally adept, he's not quite bright. Everyone doesn't go around yakking the way I do."

In Greenville the three girls were restless. "There were too

many teachers and we felt we were not getting involved with the movement as much as we'd hoped," Kay explained. When a phone call came on July 9th from Jackson headquarters, asking if they would like to start a new Freedom School in rural Madison County, Kay hesitated only briefly. She had become friendly with a boy, another worker in the Greenville project. "I was the only one of the three with any ties," she said, "but I had come to Mississippi for civil rights, not boy friends." The next day they set off by bus for Canton.

They learned quickly that Canton was not liberal Greenville. Within minutes after the driver dropped them at a gas station, the police arrived, summoned by the owner, who spotted "those beatniks from the North." They were questioned briefly and allowed to proceed. They spent their first night in Canton with a young Negro couple who both had just lost their jobs for trying to register to vote. In the middle of the living room was a crated bathtub, ordered a month earlier. Now there was no money to install it. Yet Kay, always ebullient, was excited by her surroundings. "There's a fig tree out back, and I ate my first fresh fig," she told a friend breathlessly.

The story behind their school was exciting too. At the beginning of the summer, leaders scouted through towns, hunting students, homes for teachers, a school site. Now Mississippi Negroes were coming to them, begging for more schools. A thousand youngsters had been expected to enroll. By midsummer there were already 2,000 in 22 communities.

Two days before the girls reached Canton, a retired Negro schoolteacher had telephoned the Freedom House there. A church was available, he had housing for three teachers, and at least 40 pupils were eager to start. The next day he walked into the Freedom House and sat down. "I've come for my teachers," he said firmly.

He drove the girls on July 11th to the Higgins and the Forbes farms. By Mississippi Negro standards, the home of John and Mary Higgins, where Kay and Karol lived for the next six weeks, is middle class. It is a firmly built, green clapboard structure, with a tin roof blazing in the sun. The small living room has dark red upholstered furniture. A rug covers the unvarnished floor, and pink and gray paper, peeling near

the ceiling, decorates the walls. ("At night," Kay said, "we listened to the mice scrambling around behind the wallpaper.") There are four bedrooms, a dining room, where the refrigerator sits, a kitchen with a gas stove. Although there is electricity, a television set and a freezer, there is no plumbing. Water is hoisted in a bucket from a deep cistern out back, carried in pails into the kitchen and warmed on the stove. The outhouse is a primitive structure where chickens are frequently underfoot, and where in the heat of the day wasps buzz in swarms. Frequently they also invade the house.

"We took a bath every night," Kay says. "It was so hot you had to. We soon got the trick of lugging in two bucketfuls of water and kneeling in a large washtub to soap ourselves. When we washed our clothes, we used a scrub board and two tubs, one for soaping, the other for rinsing."

The girls helped out with the family chores. Kay hauled the water. Karol sometimes did the family ironing, and they both shared the dishwashing. Often they fixed their own breakfast. "I made an omelet," Kay said, "and Karol promptly burned the toast in the oven. There was a toaster, but the only electrical outlet was the ceiling fixture and the toaster cord was too short to reach."

Two meals were served daily—breakfast, and at mid-afternoon, dinner. At other times the girls were free to raid the icebox for cheese, watermelon, and raw milk from the Higgins cows. Beef was rarely served, but there were fried chicken, sausage, brains, hominy grits and golden corn bread; and from the garden, tomatoes, okra, potatoes, beans. The diet was starchy, and Kay, who is five feet six and weighs a slim 125 pounds, kept worrying about getting fat. She and Karol vowed to diet, but their resolve broke down as they visited Negro homes where steamy molasses cakes had just been baked.

Security regulations hemmed in their life. Although the Higgins front porch with its comfortable rocker catches a stray breeze, they were discouraged from sitting on it. Passing cars, a potential source of trouble, could see them from the road. They used the Forbes car to drive to school, but they were not allowed to go farther without first notifying the Canton office. When the grocery telephone was forbidden to them, they had no way of notifying Canton at all. Exploring

the country roads on foot, except in a small area of Negro homes, was out. After dark they left the house only to go to school or a church meeting.

The girls learned one regulation with some pain. They could not ride alone in a car with a Negro boy. If they drove with Negroes, they sat by themselves either in the front or back. No one had told them this rule when they arrived. One evening after a meeting in a Negro church, Natalie asked a local boy to drive her a quarter of a mile to a grocery store to buy a pack of cigarettes. The innocent trip took ten minutes, but the next day, at the request of the sheriff, the boy was fired from his job. The police spread the word that the two had been seen hugging and kissing in the front seat. (In Oxford, Vincent Harding had warned, "Mississippi whites feel threatened when they see Negro and white together, and they respond to the threat with violence.")

All summer Natalie felt guilty about the incident. "What I worry about most," she said, "is the danger we are to others. Sure, the sheriff says he's not going to kick us, but he might kick someone else because of us. In a way, I'd feel better if we were kicked."

The girls had recurrent moments of cabin fever, particularly on quiet Saturday nights. It was dangerous to be seen with the Negro boys who lived in the farmhouses around them. They could not attend parties of the civil rights staff in Canton because of the hazards of driving at night. This was the time when white boys their own age, who lounged at the gas stations during the day, climbed into their cars and went scouting for trouble. Even receiving and sending mail was uncertain. Mail exchanges were made whenever a civil rights worker drove out from Canton, but the Canton staff never had enough cars for its needs.

On one August day, ready to explode after a week of isolation, Kay and Karol broke security rules and went into Canton to get their mail and telephone their parents. A Negro neighbor drove them three-quarters of the way, and then they started walking in the 100-degree heat. Kay recalls, "On the edge of town we stopped at a gas station to use the bathroom. The attendant started asking questions, and we told him we were civil rights workers. He stared rudely and then

said with deliberation, 'If I'd known that, I'd have made you use the colored rest room round back.'

"That's all right with me,' I said. 'A toilet's a toilet.'

"Yeah. Next time you use the nigger toilet."

To get to the Freedom House they had to walk through the downtown area. Karol had a headache, so they looked for a drugstore. The first one they saw had a sticker on the door reading "White Citizens Council for Racial Integrity." (The Citizens Council, a dominant force in Mississippi, was the first group in the state to call for defiance of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.) They headed for the next place, but it had a Citizens Council sticker too. In fact, all the stores had identical stickers. "We both were shocked," Kay says. "We had no idea that the opposition was so out in the open."

Brief contacts with whites were unpleasant and carried overtones of danger. The girls had hoped to visit white churches and talk to their parishioners, but the experience of other Canton workers was discouraging. One volunteer, turned away from a white church, discovered that the gas tank of his car had been filled with sugar. On another quiet Sunday two volunteers, rebuffed at church, were set upon by hoodlums and beaten.

It soon became instinctive to distinguish friend from enemy. If a car drove down the road with a white arm protruding from the window, Kay and Karol scurried inside to their room. "I always got shook up when white cars came by," Kay said. If the arm was black, they relaxed and waved. The two were walking home from Freedom School one day when a large, sweaty man with a ruddy complexion stopped and offered them a ride. They refused politely. He struck up a conversation. "You're both purty gals," he said, "some of the purtiest I've ever seen. But I seen you the other day up at that nigger store talking to the worst nigger slum in the country. Why, that nigger slum can't even count to ten."

"Yes, we've been talking to Negroes at the store," Karol said, "and we'd be glad to come to your home and talk to your wife and you too."

"I wouldn't let the likes of you in my house. Why don't you go home where you belong?" Then he pulled up the brake and started to get out of the car. The girls didn't wait

to discover his intentions. Hearts pounding, they strode away on the double. He stared but did not follow.

Each girl reacted differently to the summer's tension. Natalie was the most cautious. One day white friends of hers, working in the project in another part of the state, drove up for a visit. "Until I saw who they were," she said, "I almost had heart failure."

Small irritations dogged the Freedom School all summer, and Karol met them with impatience. School was held in the evening because many students chopped weeds in the cotton fields all day. (Three dollars for a ten-hour day was good pay.) The girls were always prompt, but their students strolled in a half-hour to an hour late. "I just don't feel I'm doing half the things I could," Karol grumbled. "In Mississippi every day is like Sunday afternoon at home. It's like quicksand, and you can't get out of it."

Kay is a particularly stable young woman. Small setbacks don't usually bother her, and she doesn't worry or get depressed easily. Yet even her equable disposition was ruffled as the lonely summer wore on. "I seem to run a gamut of emotions," she wrote in August to a friend. "Some days I'm easy-going and relaxed, and others I'm impatient and restless with everyone. One afternoon when Karol said it was too hot to walk to Canton, I felt so angry and frustrated that I almost cried."

Occasional parties lightened the monotony. One Sunday the girls and about 20 Negro neighbors went swimming in a nearby pond, after first chasing out a horse and some cows. A few weeks later they joined 300 persons at a large Negro farm for a picnic and county convention of the Freedom Democratic party. Kay and Natalie attended a deer hunters' picnic held on one of the back sloughs of the Pearl River, lined with huge old cypress trees. Food was served from big black iron kettles, one filled with fried fish, the other, a variety stew with meat, lima beans and even lemon peel.

But the heart of the summer was their work, and they loved it. In addition to teaching five evenings a week and preparing their classes, Kay and Karol used free hours for voter-registration work, trudging in the hot sun down miles of dusty roads, knocking on the doors of Negro farmhouses.

Here they met tenant farmers too poor or too tired to attend Freedom School or go to church. Many of the houses were constructed of unpainted, weathered boards, looking as if a light breeze would bring them tumbling down. Front steps were rotting, and milk crates served as porch furniture. Old chamber pots held lovingly tended vines. The rooms were dark, often lighted only from the fireplace or by kerosene lamps. In one house two bulging paper bags were tacked high on a wall. Here Sunday clothing was safe from the mice. Walls were plastered with old newspapers. "In one place the effect was charming," Kay said. "The ceilings were pasted with brightly colored magazine pages, making a collage that would rival some of the pieces in the Chicago Art Institute."

The shacks were swarming with flies and children. "I counted six children in one," Kay said, "the oldest only seven. Their bellies were swollen and their eyes lackluster. They looked like pictures of starving Africans." The mother wore a ragged housedress. She looked close to 40, but she told the girls she was 22. She kept saying, "Yes, ma'am" until Kay could stand it no longer. "I wish you wouldn't call me 'ma'am,'" Kay told her. "The two of us are exactly the same age." It was dangerous to stay long in the houses of tenant farmers. If their employer knew that civil rights workers had visited, they were likely to lose their homes.

The registration drive that engaged Kay's energies was not aimed at bringing Negroes down to the county courthouse to register. In Madison County this is still an almost hopeless task. Their job was to register Negroes in the Freedom Democratic party, formed in the spring of 1964 as an alternative structure to the white Democratic party, which systematically excludes Negroes. The goal was to file 100,000 forms at the national Democratic convention in August in order to challenge the seating of the white Mississippi party. Even the simple form, ten questions long, frightened some persons. "If I fill it out," one widow asked, "are you sure it won't knock out my job or anything?"

At one shack Kay and Karol waited patiently on the porch while an old man walked slowly in from the field where he was ploughing. He had a sad, stoic face, a reddish-bronze cast to his skin and an immense, quiet dignity. When they shook

his hand he looked surprised but said nothing. As Kay launched into her glib patter, explaining the Freedom Democratic party, he stood quietly, murmuring an occasional "Yes'm." There was no flicker of recognition when she mentioned the participation of national Negro leaders, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, but his eyes lighted up when she said she lived with the Higgins family. She asked if he wanted to register, and he spoke for the first time. "I don't know about that," he said. "No one ever talked to me before about such things."

Disappointed, the girls shook hands and left. "You're never sure you're getting across," Kay sighed. "You don't ever get any feedback."

But when they returned the following week, the old man greeted them with a smile. He announced proudly that he was ready to sign, and that he also would like to attend the Freedom School. He was 74 years old.

Although the school curriculum was designed for high-school students, the girls constantly revised it for their pupils, who ranged in age from four to 60. Ten adults came regularly and brought their children. There were four age groups: tiny children, just learning to read; those in the upper elementary grades; teen-agers; and adults. Some of the adults were almost illiterate; others were young men and women halfway through college. With 15-mile distances to travel and a paucity of cars, the students usually arrived in groups. One night a young man drove up in a panel truck that disgorged 13 youngsters of assorted ages.

The church that houses the Freedom School is a pleasant one-room structure, its hard wooden benches holding some 75 persons. During the first week the girls realized that anyone seated before an open window, with light streaming out, made an easy target for a shot from a passing car. A few days later they saw a white man peeping in a window. So they set their younger pupils to work making water-color designs on white butcher paper to tack over the windows. The effect was like muted stained glass. One slogan, decorated with curlicues, read simply: "Everybody want freedom. Willie want freedom." Tacked to the pulpit, neatly printed on blue cardboard, was a section of the Declaration of Independence: "We

hold these truths to be self-evident. . . ." Below the pulpit were a blackboard and a desk.

Each lesson was tied in to the students' own lives and to the freedom movement. The two French students conjugated "We love freedom." To a science class Kay described the scientific method, emphasizing the necessity for seeking facts before reaching conclusions. A math class centered on installment buying, with an analysis of how much interest a purchaser ended up paying for his stove or television set. Hate was never taught. The groups discussed stereotypes—the rich white man, the poor white, the sheriff—and tried to understand why individual whites acted as they did. Negro history, of which all were abysmally ignorant, was the most popular topic.

There were other shocking areas of ignorance. Most of the adults equated citizenship with voting. Asked if he was a citizen of the United States, one countered, "Well, am I?" Some of the children did not know what state they lived in or what other states bordered on it. There was unanimous disapproval of Barry Goldwater, but few knew why they were against him. The high-school students were sharp in discussion but often deficient in reading ability.

Kay stormed, "These kids are so bright and their school shortchanges them so badly. Their textbooks are second-hand. Their high school has only two typewriters. Last year they finally got the equipment to start a woodworking class for the boys, and then found there was no money to buy wood."

Karol, with three years of experience in teaching middle-class white children, said, "Socially these youngsters are much more mature than my students at home. They've assumed responsibility since childhood. They're very sophisticated in dealing with people. But in academic areas they're far behind. At home some students start off the year with an insolent 'show me' attitude. Here they have a blind faith that you have something to offer them. Working with them sometimes makes me ashamed for myself, because I'm not always sure I can live up to that faith."

If the girls ever had any stereotyped ideas themselves about the Mississippi Negro, the summer dispelled them. "We've

heard about how backward the Southern Negro is, how lacking in self-respect," Kay said. "This just hasn't been true among the families we've met. Not one is defeatist or apathetic. When we stand in front of the store and talk to them, it's they who are in danger from a passing white car, but they're quite willing to chance it. They have a caution bred in their bones, but they never cower. One woman I met at church works in the fields, but she has such dignity, such natural manners. She stands like an American Gothic type, straight and spare. And some of the boys—it would be a crime if they didn't get to college."

What did the summer accomplish? All three girls feel that they got more than they gave. Karol said, "Living with Negro people, we learned the meaning of true hospitality. They were willing to take us into their homes before we proved our mettle. Merely by doing this, they showed their belief that all white people were not alike, even though whites they knew lumped Negroes in a single category. Knowing them has made me more hopeful about the future. With the young people freedom is in the air. They won't rest until they achieve it. Perhaps it won't take as long as we had believed."

At Oxford in June, staff officials set modest goals for the Mississippi Summer Project. How many were achieved?

"The most important thing we can do is just to be present," said Vincent Harding. Over 1,000 were present, more than 500 student volunteers, plus staff workers, ministers, doctors, lawyers. Kay says, "We were the first white persons who ever called those Negro women 'Mrs.,' the first to shake many black hands. If we did nothing more than be friendly, if we didn't teach anything at all, it would still be all right."

"We plan to open community centers, Freedom Schools, to stress voter registration, to teach Negro farmers about untapped federal sources for financial aid," said Bob Moses in Oxford. Thirteen community centers functioned, 47 Freedom Schools. Consumer cooperatives were started, and even a Negro chamber of commerce. These will continue. Many community centers will keep their doors open, some under the sponsorship of the National Council of Churches. Schools are still meeting, some in the evening, others as a substitute for

inadequate public education. Massive voter registration was not achieved, but federal suits in several areas are expected to forbid registrars from discriminating. Freedom Registration forms, filled out by 65,000, have shown the country unmistakably that the Mississippi Negro wants to vote and the integrated Freedom Democratic party gained a measure of recognition at the Democratic convention, which voted to seat two of its delegates.

"We are working to train leaders in the community," said Staughton Lynd, Freedom School director. Young and old flocked for guidance to the Freedom Houses and then went ahead to develop programs to break the 100-year political, economic and social stranglehold on Mississippi Negroes. Typical is a young longshoreman who now devotes every night in a Gulf town to voter-registration work. Before the advent of the civil rights workers, he spent his nights relaxing in front of his television set.

"We want to give the young people a desire to learn," Staughton Lynd said. Books were a rarity in rural Negro Madison County until Kay and her co-workers opened their library and encouraged students to borrow a book a week. They introduced provocative new names—James Baldwin, Robert Frost. They encouraged youngsters to go to college and told them about available scholarships. They taught their students to ask why.

"Mississippi will not change until there are white people working with Negroes to change it. You had better look for these," Vincent Harding said. This was an area where the project met little success. White moderates—and there are some—were still too fearful to speak up. But the national publicity given the summer project—publicity which stemmed directly from the white skins of its participants—shocked others in the North and West into a realization that a police state existed in America. A C.O.F.O. official said, "Now, for the first time since Reconstruction, we can expect Northern support for Negroes here."

At the end of the summer Kay and Karol went home. Natalie remained, one of more than 100 volunteers to continue the struggle started in the hot summer of 1964. Kay, now

back at S.I.U. for her last year of school, is optimistic about Mississippi and the chances of its Negroes to achieve their rights as American citizens. Soberly she knows that outside aid will still be needed for a long time. As for her role?

“I’ll be back,” she says.

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