

The Freedom Libraries

a wedge in the closed society

Frederick W. Heinze

IN SLAVE DAYS it was illegal to teach "your property" to read or write. Both master and slave were liable to legal sanction. Today a more complex economic and social structure stunts the Negro in Mississippi and other stubbornly segregationist states. Mississippi has no compulsory education law for Negroes. The books and equipment in the segregated schools are inferior and outdated, usually discards from white schools. And in all schools Negro history is distorted, or, at best, ignored. If even in Northern society, geniuses like Richard Wright and James Baldwin found their environment frustrating to every creative impulse, one cannot calculate the impact of segregation on the Southern Negro.

It is this crippling structure that the Council of Federated Organization's (COFO's) Mississippi Project is seeking to break down in Mississippi. COFO has about 30 projects in this state working on a variety of programs: Freedom Schools, community centers, political programs, research programs, and a white community project. It is the Freedom Schools and community centers particularly that involve the COFO's library services; though it must be emphasized that all COFO programs are interdependent parts of a united attack.

FREEDOM SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY CENTERS

The Freedom Schools and community centers try to provide for Negroes something that is not readily available to them — or, indeed, to most of the people in Mississippi: contact with the world outside. Every community center and/or COFO project office (they are usually the same) has a library operating as a most important part of the project, serving as a public library

for adults, a school library for students. It is often the only library facility available to Negroes in the area, and is usually superior to the Negro, and even the white, school libraries. In addition, it often provides the first real contact with books and periodicals (apart from the local press) which these people have had.

The Freedom Schools try to provide for school-age youngsters experiences that are not part of the white or Negro school system of Mississippi — experiences, in fact, that are probably provided only in a few select schools in our country. The content of the courses varies from one project school to another, depending on the students' interests, the staff's abilities, and the subject areas in which the local schools are deficient. In Jackson, for example, we teach Negro history, current events, Spanish, and some physical sciences. These are the subjects the staff are equipped to teach.

Naturally, some Negro history is taught in all the Freedom schools. But students enjoy almost any subject we offer. Foreign languages are often popular. They are rarely taught in the Negro schools, being needed, presumably, only by the college-bound; yet we find that learning a foreign language opens up many new avenues of inquiry. The students become curious about people in other lands, aware of the common thoughts, problems, aspirations shared by all men. In short, the study of a foreign language is one step toward acquiring a world view that stretches beyond the confines of a particular "deprived" culture.

THE CLOSED SOCIETY

To appreciate the role of these schools and libraries, we must understand the terrible insularity of this state. More than any other area of the South, Mississippi is cut off from the mainstream of American society and culture. Many of the news media common throughout the rest of the country

Frederick W. Heinze is one of the COFO project workers in Mississippi

Our feeling is, however, that reading in one area is a doorway to other avenues of knowledge, and we have seen that belief confirmed. Books in the areas being discussed at Freedom School meetings are also popular; and we have seen many students begin reading Negro history and then move on to learn about other countries, history, and current events.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SEGREGATION

We have come a long way in Mississippi since last summer; but we have not come unopposed, and we have far to go. Mississippi, it must be remembered, is a police state, and COFO workers are subject to continual harrassment, arrest, and violence. For our attack on the economic and social structure of the state exposes the elaborate system of rationalizations on which it rests, and which is designed to prove the Negro inferior in every respect. A Negro learning anything at all is a threat to this carefully constructed set of beliefs. If we say, and demonstrate, that a Negro can learn, we shake the foundations of white existence. Threaten any man's existence and you are open to reprisal. Because COFO seeks to demonstrate that this way of life is a lie, we have seen murder and destruction. In October the COFO freedom house and li-

brary in Vicksburg was bombed. Shortly afterwards a church in Indianola that was being used as a Freedom School was burned. The list could go on.

Much of our effort depends on support from outside. Most of our money, our books, half of our staff, come from outside Mississippi. Funds are badly needed. But there are other ways in which professionals trained in library administration and techniques can help. COFO is always in need of trained personnel who can support themselves and provide their own bail, who are willing to spend some time in Mississippi, be it a year or two, or a relatively short time — enough time, for example, to set up a library in a particular project. Another great need is for some sort of library manual, for distribution to each project. There are few trained librarians at COFO projects in Mississippi, so we still have much to learn about setting up library facilities. Finally, librarians are in a good position to conduct book drives and to sort and ship books to Mississippi. Any person or group interested in further information or in helping our effort may contact Fred Heinze or Lois Chaffee, Council of Federated Organizations, 1017 Lynch Street, Jackson, Miss., or the Tamiment-to-Jackson Project, Tamiment Institute Library, 7 E. 15 St., New York City.

After hearing of the bombing of the Vicksburg Freedom House on October 3, the Nassau-Suffolk (N.Y.) School Library Association contributed \$20 to its rebuilding, sent these books: Ezra Jacks Keats, Snowy Day and Whistle for Willie; Lorraine and Jerrold Beim, Two Is a Team; Jerrold Beim, Swimming Hole; Dorothy Sterling, Mary Jane; Louisa Shotwell, Roosevelt Grady; Charlemae Rollins, Christmas Gift; Hildegard Swift, North Star Shining: a pictorial history of the American Negro; Elizabeth Yates, Amos Fortune; Ann Petry, Harriet Tubman; Emma Sterne, Mary McLeod Bethune; Ellen and Marie Tarry, My Dog Rinty; Jeanette Nolan, John Brown; and Langston Hughes, Famous Negro Music Makers.

COFO needs books in these categories: contemporary plays and novels; poetry; literary criticism; books by and about Negroes; history; sociology; government; and political science.





Outdoor classes at Freedom Schools in Vicksburg (above) and Hattiesburg



In Meridian, Rita Schwerner, widow of Michael Schwerner, murdered last summer, continues his work



Below, a youngster reads at the Greenwood Freedom Library



are virtually unobtainable in Jackson, let alone the smaller cities and rural areas. It is very difficult to buy a *New York Times* in Jackson, nearly impossible elsewhere; even the mail subscriptions to the *Times* sometimes fail to arrive. Not only are the more liberal periodicals, such as the *Progressive*, *New Republic*, *Nation*, and *New Leader* generally unavailable; even the more common, "acceptable" magazines can be hard to come by — such as the issue of *Life*, which reported on the Meridian hearings for those accused of murdering James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. Perhaps more shocking to a newcomer is the difference in coverage given to important national and international news by the Mississippi radio, newspaper, and television, as against reporting outside the state.

The bookstores we are accustomed to in most parts of the country are also nonexistent. The only book dealers in Jackson are the Baptist Book Store, the local college bookstores, and a "Freedom Bookstore," a right-wing propaganda dispensary. In that city a special order had to be placed for copies of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

For Negroes, this general isolation is compounded by the factor of segregation. To combat this isolation, the Freedom Schools and libraries try to bring these people into contact with society again — and a larger society at that. Often, these people come to grips for the first time with the great ideas of men. Though most users of the libraries are the students of the Freedom Schools, some adults use them, particularly those whose intellectual curiosity has been piqued through involvement in such COFO programs as the Freedom Democratic Party, voter registration, or the adult literacy classes. Even in areas where other libraries exist, the COFO library is apt to be the best one available. It is also the sole source of books for the project staff.

READING FAVORITES

The books most popular with the readers vary of course, but in nearly all projects books on Negro history are best sellers. In Jackson the Freedom School students read with interest Frederick Douglass' autobiography; historical novels, such as *Freedom Road*; Richard Wright and James Baldwin — *Black Boy*, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*.