

MISSISSIPPI - MEXICO TRIP DIARY

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MISSISSIPPI:

I was happy to be met at the Jackson airport by Jane and Jake Friesen (and their daughter Janet) upon arrival at noon. After a quick drive-in lunch we went to visit Dr. Daniel Beittel. Dr. Beittel is the AFSC representative, and holds a number of other influential positions and is the former president of Tougaloo College. He has taken a personal interest in the Friesens and has lent a great deal of moral support. In our conversation he suggested among other things that he is still convinced that there is a place for the Mennonites and Friends to work at this business of reconciliation without being fully identified with the movement. He also helped us to see that the democratic process threatens existing power structures - both white and Negro - and that it will thus meet with resistance.

In the evening Jake and I met with the Valley View Community Center Board. Ten of the twelve members, including Jake, were present. Jake had prepared the agenda and personally taken it to each member to remind them of the meeting and to use the occasion to discuss other business. The meeting was entirely in the charge of the directors from the community. One could observe that they regarded this as their program and that they were seriously experimenting with how to be truly responsible. The major item on the agenda was to decide if Jake should be permitted to remain on the Board. It seemed that Jake had reported certain irregularities in Head Start to the officials and this was being interrupted as injurious to the Center. Since the dispute involved both Jake and the Chairman, Mr. Otho Williams, they were asked to leave the room and I also excused myself. This gave me an opportunity to serve in the role of peacemaker while the Board deliberated. By dismissing the letters in question from consideration it was determined that both had the same general hopes and expectations for the future. Thus, when Jake agreed to write another letter to interpret the item which had been misunderstood in the previous correspondence, reconciliation was achieved. Both seemed relieved. When we were permitted to re-enter Otho explained that the misunderstanding had been clarified whereupon the Board voted to reinstate Jake to full membership. Only later did we learn that earlier they had voted to expell him. The move of reconciliation was all the more encouraging when we learned that Otho had placed a \$500 bet (with checks drawn) that Jake would be required to leave the community in 30 days. We believe the rift has been temporarily healed, permitting Jake to continue working at the problem from the inside, but the factors which caused the dispute are still there and, incidentally, we are uncertain regarding the current status of the bet.

SEPTEMBER 7: We arrived in Prentiss after a two hour drive. Here we visited with the George Derksen couple who have been under Senior VS assignment to HPI and the Prentiss Institute since last November. We also saw HPI representatives James Norman and Mrs. Bertha Johnson and her son Dean, President and Assistant respectively of the Institute. Mr. Derksen has been working to improve the farm and thus relieve Mr. Norman to supervise the 380 dairy cows distributed to needy families in the five county area and Mrs. Derksen has helped with a clothing distribution program. Their work has had its frustrations. Derksen gets caught in the undefined relationship between HPI and Prentiss Institute and the laxity which permitted the farm to degenerate to its present condition. In spite of these discouragements, he feels the experience has been invaluable. While they may not have been able to accomplish everything which others expected of them and they expected of themselves, they appear to

have surpassed everyone's expectations in the area of reconciliation, bridge building and public relations. Everyone from Norman to the Johnsons agreed to that. In balance it is my opinion that they have made a most worthwhile contribution.

Our return route was chosen to permit us to visit the Delta Ministry center called Mt. Baulah located near Edwards. The only staff members we found in the six or so vast buildings which had formerly been a school was Fred Lowry who was about to leave for an important staff meeting in Greenville that evening. The office of the director is vacant; the funds are used up and generally it appeared the whole operation had all but ground to a halt. Before we left we expressed our desire to remain in touch and cooperate if possible with whatever is to be.

The usual weekly Valley View community meeting did not materialize due to conflicting meetings and consequently we had some time for informal discussions with people who happened to be around.

SEPTEMBER 8: An early morning start permitted us to be in the heart of the Delta by mid-morning. A meeting at the home of Anzie Moore in Cleveland had been called by Titus Bender, MCC Peace Section representative, located at Meridian. Its purpose was to discuss ways in which to help Negro families who are being expelled from the plantations (in some cases starved off) and more particularly, to study the feasibility of a truck farming, cannery cooperative. Mr. Moore had invited some ten local people to meet with us. Also present was Al Winham of the Delta Ministry staff. Before getting at this item of business we were asked to consider a need for clothing - more particularly shoes - for children attending Head Start or unable to attend for lack of same. We were told that many of these children came from the 2,900 Boliver County families who have an annual income of less than \$500. We were also told that for every white child that dies in the Delta, nine Negro children die. The need is unmistakable and caused us to propose to John Hostetler that MCC assemble 500 bundles consisting of a pair of shoes, a pair of socks and warm sweater/sweat shirt (approximately costing \$10 each) for distribution by the Boliver Head Start social workers by November 1.

Next we addressed ourselves to the more difficult question of how the problem of abject poverty could be reduced if not eliminated permanently. To our disappointment, no plan which was projected had anything approaching majority support. Later we were comforted to realize that the problem had been studied by such giants as the Ford Foundation and the Department of Labor without even a limited solution attempted. What are these rather formidable obstacles?

- The Delta is a plantation economy. This is very little industry. Plantations, until mechanization of recent years, were dependent on Negro "slave" labor. Thus the process of segregation and exploitation are as deeply ingrained here as anywhere and are being relieved only as fast as absolutely required by law and/or as the need for such labor is replaced by machines and then often with no regard for the continuing responsibility for these people. When a Negro family comes off the plantation it is as dispossessed as possible.
- The land is valuable (ranging from \$300-\$500 per acre) and its sale is dominated by white citizens of the area. Thus it is practically impossible for a Negro family to even obtain rather modest plots of land.

- The Negroes of the Delta know how to do only one thing and that is the unskilled labor required to grow cotton. They do not possess the skills needed today. The public schools are the poorest within the state which is reputed to have the poorest schools in the nation.

And so one could go on and on. The fact remains that the task is too great for even big agencies and no one has created a plan which would permit a group of agencies to attack the problem jointly. We were convinced that any attempt to settle plantation families on farms would need to be based on low acreage which would in turn require intensive farming like truck-vegetable farming. It was agreed that Titus should be encouraged to determine what help might be available from a Foundation which has contacted him, and on what terms, and the rest of us agreed to keep the others informed of developments.

SEPTEMBER 9: Our first call, after a considerable delay, was with Sheriff Jack Cauthen in Canton. The wait permitted us to observe the going and coming in this rather somber courthouse atmosphere and to see the deputies as they came and went. The demeanor of the sheriff was stern (he sported a black eye which he volunteered was "legitimate" - whatever that was meant to mean) but his attitude as expressed to us was considerably more moderate and perhaps even sympathetic. He expressed what appeared to be genuine appreciation for what the Friesens were doing in Valley View and said he wished there were more workers like them. By word and deed he is capable of violence but it was also apparent that underneath (way down under) he had a heart which could be appealed to. When asked if the civil rights unrest had reached bottom he said, "No, there is more yet to come." I guess he knows whereof he speaks.

Next we stopped at the office of Ken Dean, in charge of the Human Relations Council in Jackson. Just as we were getting to the meat of things he was interrupted by a telephone call. This permitted us to continue the conversation with a Mr. Drapper who was with the Federal Justice Department. When asked why the Justice Department (FBI) had not made more arrests in Mississippi (i.e. 40 church bombing, murders, etal) he said (implied) justice is hard to come by in a Mississippi court and in any case they did not want to put Marshall law into operation. So the strategy is to keep some pressure on which will require the regular state and local officials to live up to their trust. He too felt things had not hit bottom.

After quickly signing a contract giving MCC \$675 for Jake Friesen's services to Head Start we drove into the Negro section of town where we had lunch at the Al Winham home. Winham is a UCC minister who has become deeply involved in attempting to correct some of the injustices in Mississippi. He has been on the Delta Ministry staff for almost two years but now their continuation appeared to be in question. Seeing the end in sight he appeared anxious to show some concrete results for his efforts. Specifically his consuming interest was to get a cannery into the Delta - preferably Bolivar County where Negroes appear to have a chance to integrate county government. He would like to see the Mennonites undertake a plan which would see twenty families settled in some farming set up. One of the philosophical things he said was that he hoped the Negro would keep talking about Black Power until they themselves believed in it and then perhaps when both races speak from a more nearly equal position

perhaps reconciliation can take place. Winham feels the opposition to segregation has grown more sophisticated but not necessarily less. His concern was commendable and many ideas good but one had to feel some regret over circumstances and frustrations which reduce even strong, committed people to a state of disillusionment.

SEPTEMBER 10: After a one hour drive I was with the Gerhard Buhlers in Lexington. They arrived there one week ago to undertake a Senior VS assignment at Saints Junior College. After a short visit in their one room "apartment" we were joined by Mr. Smith whose wife is a controversial editor of the Lexington Advertiser. From Smith we learned that Holmes County has been very active in the development of the White Citizens Council. It enjoys (?) the reputation of being one of the more radical counties in the state and the tenth poorest county in the nation. Smith also told us the price they have had to pay for opposing the status quo in the County.

After a two hour wait we were given a hurried five minutes with the President, Dr. Mallory. She is a person of significant proportions - physically and otherwise. The campus is a caldron of activities for the benefit of all ages. One hundred sixty pre-school aged children participate in a federally financed Head Start project. In addition to the Junior College which enrolls some seventy-five students they also have a full elementary, junior and senior high school. Also based at the school is a federally financed retraining program for some three hundred migratory agricultural laborers. In total over one thousand people are enrolled in these several programs. The school is supported to some extent by the Church of God in Christ denomination. Mr. Buhler serves as the Dean of Instruction and Mrs. Buhler will be involved otherwise - perhaps in the adult education program.

I returned to Valley View for a 2:00 p.m. meeting of the Credit Union. Due to conflicting meetings a quorum was not present and the meeting was adjourned. Immediately Jake and I drove to Canton where we attended a meeting of the Madison County movement. The major item of business was to discuss the economic blackout the Negro community has imposed since the tear gasing during Meredith March. At points the meeting got rather emotional. It was apparent that some Negroes are running out of patience. (A word almost considered profane in some circles.) They are obviously experimenting with the uses of "black power" while at the same time attempting to fortify themselves with more of the same. Also present at the meeting was Ed King who is both nationally known and hated and who is now a candidate for Congress as the Freedom Democratic Party representative.

SEPTEMBER 11: (Sunday) At Canton we were joined by the Buhlers and together we drove to Jackson where we attended the Fondren Presbyterian Church. After a cafeteria dinner we drove to the Dr. Beittel residence for desert and an enjoyable and enlightening visit. In mid-afternoon I took a flight for New Orleans where I was joined by Don Smucker for the two hour jet trip to Mexico City. It was good to be met by the Pablo Stones, Mexico Heifer Project representative, and MCC workers John Hirschler and Steve Aschliman. A two hour meeting with the Stones, who were scheduled to leave in the morning was concluded at midnight.

SEPTEMBER 12: At noon Don Smucker and I left for Atlatomulco in the company of the Heifer Project volunteers John Hirschler and Steve Aschliman. After our 2:30 p.m. arrival we had dinner and drove out to the village of Saint Lorenzo where we saw some potatoe, oats, beans and hog projects.