



Time Code: 0:00 – 5:50

In June of 1964, about 500 students from colleges in the North met on a college campus in Oxford, Ohio, for weeklong training sessions sponsored by the National Council of Churches.

"We had to tell these young people exactly what they were getting ready to get involved in," says Mississippi native and then-SNCC staff member Hollis Watkins. "They had to be prepared to go to jail, they had to be prepared to be beaten, and they had to be prepared to be killed. And if they were not prepared for either one or all three of those, then they probably should reconsider coming to Mississippi."

SNCC and CORE staff lectured the volunteers on the dismal status of blacks in Mississippi; they taught them voter-registration techniques and non-violent philosophy. They also gave the Northerners rules for survival in the segregated South. "No interracial groups travelling, day or night, unless absolutely necessary," recalls Bob Zellner, the white SNCC staff member from Alabama. "And if that happened ... whoever was in the minority would be hidden, covered with blankets, laying on the floor boards, whatever."

The mostly-black Mississippi staff members of the civil rights groups, SNCC and CORE, were shell-shocked and bitter after several years of trying to register black voters. Some had been jailed and beaten repeatedly. Most of the white volunteers were used to privilege—or, at least, safety. The chasm between the two groups showed up early at the training sessions in Ohio. SNCC staff showed film of a fat, drawling Mississippi county registrar turning away would-be black voters, recalls white volunteer Robbie Osman, then a 19-year-old from New York City.

"Someone had tried to register and he was sending them back and being vaguely threatening," Osman says, "and it seemed to us, the young white college students, that this guy was as ridiculous, as pathetic, as caricature a racist as we ever expected to see. And we laughed. And to our complete surprise—I speak for myself, I really didn't expect it—this horrified the SNCC veterans. Folks stood up and said, 'How can we go to Mississippi with you? How can we put our lives on the line with you guys? You really don't have a clue as to what's going on, do you? You really don't know what this guy represents in the context in which he really lives.' And I think it was a moment in which we all had to stop and realize the gap between us. If we were to reach across it, it was gonna take a lot of reaching."



But if the volunteers had any doubt about the gravity of their mission, those doubts could not last. On June 21, the day after the first Freedom Summer volunteers arrived in Mississippi, three young civil rights workers disappeared. They'd been pulled over by a sheriff's deputy near the small town of Philadelphia.

One of the missing was James Chaney, a 21-year-old black Mississippian and a staff member with the Congress of Racial Equality. With him were two young white men from New York: fellow CORE staff member Michael Schwerner, and summer volunteer Andrew Goodman. The disappearance made national headlines and drew a high-profile response from the federal government; President Johnson ordered 200 Marines and eight helicopters to join in the search for the three.

The earlier murders of Herbert Lee, Louis Allen, and other blacks had gone virtually unnoticed outside Mississippi. The country's strikingly different response to the loss of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner drove home a central point of Freedom Summer.

"The very reason that we were there as white college students," says Robbie Osman, "was that unless the country's attention was focused by the presence of those people that this country was accustomed to caring about, namely white college students, nothing would happen. And if it was only people who this country was not accustomed to caring about, namely black Mississippians, then nothing would happen."

The bodies of the three young men were found six weeks later, buried under an earthen dam. Mississippi authorities failed to charge anyone for the killings. In 1967 the federal government convicted seven whites, including a Neshoba County sheriff's deputy, Cecil Price.

Time Code: 5:50 – 8:41

During the summer of 1964, Unita Blackwell's home became a focal point for civil rights activity. "You would look out there," she says, pointing out her window at the road, "and the highway patrol would be sitting there in the white [car], and police would be right here, and they would always be, because this was the corner, you know, where I lived."

Blackwell was SNCC's Summer Project Director for Issaquena County. She'd lost her other jobs, picking cotton and cleaning the homes of whites, because she'd tried to become a registered voter. "It was a freeze-out. So you don't have any money or get any means of living, so SNCC was paying—I think it was eleven dollars every two



weeks we could get hold to. So that was my major job, as an organizer," Blackwell says.

Freedom Summer volunteers, middle-class white kids from North, slept on the floor of Blackwell's two-room house. And they took direction from her.

"That was an interesting situation. To sit in a room and talk to white people, not they talking down to me or I'm lookin' up to them, [but] we trying to figure out some strategies for us to all stay alive and work out how we're gonna get things done, registered and vote and all that."

All across Mississippi, young civil rights workers went looking for potential black voters. They also sought members for the new Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, an alternative to the regular Mississippi Democratic Party, which excluded blacks. Among the workers were volunteer Joe Morse of Minnesota and Mississippian Rosie Head.

"So it meant going door to door ... always in pairs, usually a black person and a white person," says Joe Morse, then a young volunteer from Minnesota. "There'd be a home on the side of the road and you'd have to park your car and you knew that if anybody came by while you were parked there, if it was anybody related to the Klan or the White Citizens Council or some racist, they'd know your car, and they'd know your license plate, so you're immediately putting the people you were talking to at risk."

"A lot of time we would get put out of people's houses," recalls Rosie Head, a black Mississippian who spent that summer as a voter registration worker. "They wouldn't let you pass the gate or [they'd] just say they didn't want to talk to us, they didn't want to be involved in the mess, and they would just be afraid to talk to us."

Out of half a million black Mississippians of voting age, only twelve hundred were approved as voters during Freedom Summer. Many black Mississippians were too frightened to take that walk to the county courthouse; county officials rejected most who did. But the voter registration drive had another purpose: to show the nation how some whites behaved when black Mississippians tried to assert their rights as citizens.



Time Code: 8:40 – 14:30

"We kind of envisioned ourselves as kind of the last bulwark of resistance," says David Billings, who would later teach classes in racial tolerance in Louisiana but who, as a teenager in McComb, Mississippi in the early 1960s, joined white mobs that attacked civil rights workers. "[We] felt that folk in Alabama and Georgia, for example, had caved in in some ways, but that in Mississippi we weren't going to do it. Was trained to resist what was put forward as a threat to a way of life that was sacred, and that one protected it at the risk of one's own life and even if it meant the taking of other lives."

For several years before Freedom Summer, civil rights workers had asked the federal government for protection from the Ku Klux Klan—with no success. Former SNCC staffer Michael Sayer points out that the FBI under director J. Edgar Hoover was well aware of the attacks on black Mississippians. "But the FBI policy wasn't to intervene and prevent the Klan from doing what it was doing," says Sayer. "It was simply to report back to the FBI, so the FBI could be on top of the knowledge game. But we're talking about J. Edgar Hoover here, who was very hostile to the idea of independent black political activity."

Letters and FBI documents show that Hoover, in fact, viewed civil rights workers as the troublemakers in the South, not segregationists. He directed his agents to do the bare minimum in investigating Klan violence and voting rights violations. During Freedom Summer, under pressure from President Johnson, the FBI opened an office in Jackson. But that didn't stop the terrorism. During the summer of '64, white supremacists burned down 67 black churches and homes, beat up eighty civil rights workers, and fired dozens of shots into the cars and offices of Freedom Summer workers.

"You came to see white faces as something to fear," says Dean Zimmerman, who had been used to seeing nothing but white faces back home in North Dakota. "As you encounter a white face, you immediately, your body takes on a whole different posture, your mind becomes very alert. You are constantly on the lookout for what you may have to do in a big hurry just to survive."

SNCC staff member Dorie Ladner worked in the summer project office in Natchez. She spent sleepless nights taking threatening phone calls from segregationists. She says she was so frightened, she vomited every night after supper.



"I suffered from trying to dodge white men in pickup trucks, worrying about whether or not somebody was going to bomb the house where we were sleeping, whether or not we were going to get killed."

The fear of getting trapped at the mercy of white supremacists came horribly true for George Raymond in Canton, Mississippi.

"We had certain areas where we knew that if a black guy and a white woman were seen together, it was almost certain death. Canton was one of those places," says Matt Suarez, then a staff member with CORE. Despite that knowledge, somebody brought a white woman to an organizing meeting in Canton. Word got out and a mob formed. CORE staff members decided to send out three black men in one car to draw the mob away, then to sneak the white woman out in another car. Suarez rode in the decoy vehicle. His friend, George Raymond, drove.

"And about 50 pickup trucks got behind us with white boys hanging off the running boards with chains and pipes and baseball bats and screaming, 'Kill the niggers,' and all this crap," Suarez says, laughing tensely at the memory. "And a highway patrolman and a sheriff's deputy, they got in both lanes following us and put their bright lights on behind us." Suarez says he urged Raymond to try to outrun the mob. "I said 'George, this is no time to be stopping out here in the middle of nowhere.' George pulled the car on the goddamn side. They took George out, they had him behind the car, right in the headlights, so that all we could see was silhouettes, and they just beat George into the ground. They literally just pulverized him out there on the highway. The highway patrolman came over to us and he says, 'You got 24 hours to get your black asses out of Mississippi. If we ever catch you in here again, we'll kill you.' And that ended that. [They] took off and we went and picked up George off the highway, put him in the car, and drove into Jackson."

Suarez pauses. "But you can't imagine the fear that's gripping you at the time that that's happening, that you know they there, they want to kill you, they can do it, there's nothing to stop them. And that stuff stays with you a long time. A long time."

George Raymond survived that beating, and several others he received in Mississippi jails. But his friends say he changed from a light-hearted young man to a tense, bitter one. He died of a heart attack at the age of 30.



Time Code: 14:30 – 19:29

Most of us have never heard of George Raymond. People involved in the civil rights movement stress this again and again: that the movement required bravery and sacrifice not just from the heroes whose names we know, but from thousands of ordinary people. They gathered at night, usually in churches, to form strategy—and to lift one another's courage. One way they did that was through the "freedom songs."

Hollis Watkins often led the singing at Mississippi civil rights meetings. There's a recording of a 1963 rally in Jackson, for example, in which he leads in the singing of "Oh, Freedom Over Me." More than thirty years later, Watkins explains that most of the freedom songs were adapted from gospel, blues, and folk, as tools for organizing and mobilizing people.

"In the mass meetings you wanted to raise the interest, you wanted to raise the spirit," Watkins says. "And in doing that, it coincided with what would be going on in your daily activities." He sings: "'Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me 'round, turn me 'round. Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, I'm gonna keep on walkin', keep on talkin', fightin' for my equal rights.'

"And as you sang the different songs getting the spirit and the momentum goin', you could eventually get to the song where you sang the question that kind of locked people in. 'Will you register and vote?' 'Certainly Lord.' 'Will you march downtown?' 'Certainly Lord.'

"The late Fanny Lou Hamer," Watkins adds, "she was good about that. After we'd get people to singing certain songs, if they made certain commitments in songs, then she would hold them to that after the meeting."

Fanny Lou Hamer was a potent spiritual force in the Mississippi Civil Rights movement. In 1962, she and her family were evicted from a cotton plantation for trying to register for the vote. The following year she was severely beaten in a Winona, Mississippi jail, after several people she was with used the whites-only restroom and lunch counter at a bus station.

Euvester Simpson, then a teenager, spent that night in the Winona jail with Hamer.

"I sat up all night with her applying cold towels and things to her face and hands trying to get her fever down and to help some of the pain go away. And the only thing that got us through that was that ... we sang. We sang all night. I mean songs



got us through so many things, and without that music I think many of us would have just lost our minds or lost our way completely."

Fanny Lou Hamer would play a prominent role in the final chapter of *Freedom Summer*: the Mississippi movement's dramatic challenge to the nation's dominant political party.