

# FREEDOM SUMMER

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## PROLOGUE

### In Search of the Volunteers

[E]very single thing that happened each day was new to me. I was being bombarded with information, bombarded with experiences . . . and my little psyche just almost cracked.<sup>1</sup>

You felt you were a part of a kind of historic moment; that something very profound about the whole way of life in a region was about to change; that . . . you were . . . making . . . history and that you were in some way utterly selfless and yet [you] found yourself.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the kind of goals that I have in my life for social change, it was the highest possible experience I'll ever have . . . In terms of participating in history, it was the best I'll ever do, but it . . . [took] its toll on me; . . . [emotionally] it set me back . . . [Luckily] I didn't come out with any physical disabilities so, at least, physically I . . . survived.<sup>3</sup>

[It] was very inspirational. I mean, I think the whole thing about . . . beginning to think about what I was going to be doing as a woman and . . . what I was going to do with my life. Was I going to be a professional? Was I going to go to law school? . . . So much of what I'm in now goes back to it. So much of the work I do now goes back to my memory of that time.<sup>4</sup>

It totally flipped me out . . . for the first time the pieces fit . . . this felt like me . . . besides the good I think we did, it was my personal salvation as well.<sup>5</sup>

It was the longest nightmare I have ever had: three months—June, July and August of 1964. (Sellers, 1973: 94)

WHAT IS the "it" to which all these speakers are referring? What shared experiences produced such varied, yet intense, reactions in so many people? The event in question is the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign, or, as it was simply known at the time, the Summer Project.

Spearheaded by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the project lasted less than three months, from early June until late August. During that time, better than 1,000 people, the vast majority of them white, Northern college students, journeyed South to work in one of the forty-four local projects that comprised the overall campaign. While in Mississippi, the volunteers lived in communal "Freedom Houses" or were housed by local black families who refused to be intimidated by segregationist threats of violence. Their days were taken up with a variety of tasks, principally registering black voters and teaching in so-called Freedom Schools.

What this capsule summary misses is the unrelieved fear, grinding poverty, and intermittent violence that beset the project. These elements combined to make the summer a searing experience for nearly all who took part. Just ten days into the project, three participants—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—were kidnapped and beaten to death by a group of segregationists led by Mississippi law enforcement officers. The subsequent search for their bodies brought scores of FBI agents and hundreds of journalists to the state. Despite their presence, the violence continued. One other volunteer died before summer's end and hundreds more endured bombings, beatings, and arrest. Just as significantly, the volunteers experienced the sense of liberation that came with exposure to new lifestyles—interracial relationships, communal living, a more open sexuality—new political ideologies and a radically new and critical perspective on the United States. By all accounts, it was a remarkable summer for a remarkable group of young people. And one that would have enduring consequences for both the volunteers and the country as a whole.

At the outset, the Summer Project reflected the liberal idealism so characteristic of America in the early Sixties. Though not without tensions and contradictions, the project *did* embody the ideals of interracialism, nonviolence, and liberal/left coalition that were so much a part of the progressive vision of the era. And so it was with the volunteers themselves.

Poised on the eve of the summer campaign, project workers represented the "best and the brightest" of early Sixties youthful idealism.

Overwhelmingly drawn from elite colleges and universities, the volunteers tended to be extraordinarily bright, academically successful, politically active, and passionately committed to the full realization of the idealistic values on which they had been taught America was based. For the most part, they were liberals, not radicals; reformers rather than revolutionaries.

In short order, however, both the volunteers and the country were to be dramatically transformed. As a nation we would descend in a matter of years from the euphoric heights of the New Frontier to the domestic unrest of the late Sixties. If Freedom Summer was a kind of high-water mark of early Sixties liberalism, the foundations on which it rested crumbled soon afterward. Interracialism died amid the calls for black power and black separatism less than a year later. Nonviolence was widely repudiated, at least rhetorically, in the wake of Watts in 1965. The liberal/left coalition failed to survive the summer. The end came in August at the Democratic National Convention when party regulars elected to seat the lily-white Mississippi delegation rather than the challenge delegation that had grown out of the summer campaign.

The volunteers were no less affected by the turbulence of the era than was the nation as a whole. The vast majority were radicalized by the events of the mid to late Sixties. Many of them played prominent roles in those events. Virtually none were unaffected by them.

The central theme of this book is that to fully understand the dramatic changes experienced by the volunteers and America during this era requires a serious reappraisal of the Freedom Summer campaign. For Freedom Summer marked a critical turning point both in the lives of those who participated in the campaign and the New Left as a whole. Its significance lies both in the events of the summer and the cultural and political consequences that flowed from it. The events of the summer effectively resocialized and radicalized the volunteers while the ties they established with other volunteers laid the groundwork for a nationwide activist network out of which the other major movements of the era—women's, antiwar, student—were to emerge. In short, Freedom Summer served both as the organizational basis for much of the activism of the Sixties as well as an important impetus for the development of the broader counterculture that emerged during the era. This book, then, represents a retrospective account of the Freedom Summer project and an assessment of its impact on both the volunteers and American society as a whole.

As straightforward as this focus is, it is quite different from the intent with which I began the project some seven years ago. At that time, my interest centered less on the Freedom Summer campaign or those who

participated in it, and more on the links between those participants and the later social movements of the Sixties and Seventies. A series of fortuitous events in the early 1980s prompted me to broaden the focus of my research. The story bears telling, if only to provide a bit of background for the book.

Before embarking on the project described in this book, I spent six years researching and writing a book on the origins of the modern civil rights movement (*Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, The University of Chicago Press, 1982). In the course of that research I was struck by the number of references to whites trained in civil rights organizing who went on to prominent roles in the other major movements of the Sixties. I had been aware of the debt those later movements owed to the black struggle, but having myself come of (activist) age only in the late Sixties and early Seventies, I had experienced the debt as primarily one of tactics and ideology rather than of personnel. Certainly, few of the activists I knew in the early Seventies had participated in Southern civil rights organizing. But then the number of persons engaged in social action had multiplied so rapidly between 1964 and 1970 that one could hardly have expected the ranks of latter-day activists to have been dominated by the relatively small number of pioneers who had been active in the early Sixties.

If the personnel debt was not numerical, how was it to be characterized? My sense of things was that the importance of these early white civil rights activists lay in the political and cultural bridge they had provided between the Southern black struggle and the college campuses of the North and West. They were pioneers in an important diffusion process by which the ideologies, tactics, and cultural symbols of the Southern civil rights movement were introduced to the population—Northern white college students—that was to dominate activist politics for the remainder of the era. In this view, there had not been three or four discrete movements in the Sixties, but a single, broad, activist community with its roots firmly in the Southern civil rights movement and separate branches extending into various forms of activism (principally the black power, anti-war, student, and women's liberation movements).

Asserting this view was easy. Systematically studying the extent and significance of these ties was quite another matter. Nonetheless, that was the research project I was determined to tackle once the book on the civil rights movement had been completed.

Such a project, I reasoned, had to proceed from a systematic base. It would not do merely to amass anecdotal evidence of the involvement of individual activists in both the civil rights and some other movements of the period. Knowing that Tom Hayden participated in Southern civil

rights activities long before his rise to bona fide movement "stardom" in the late Sixties tells us nothing about the frequency of this phenomenon. What proportion of white civil rights activists went on to pioneering roles in the antiwar movement? Student protest activity? Women's liberation? And what was it about their early civil rights experiences that disposed them to do so? These were the types of questions I hoped to answer. But to do so required systematic access to a large number of individuals who had been active in early civil rights organizing. Freedom Summer seemed to offer that access. What recommended the project as the starting point for my study was the fact that it marked the first widespread entrance of young whites into the movement. Whites, of course, had long been involved in the civil rights struggle. With but a few notable exceptions, most of the leading figures in the abolition movement had been white. During the 1930s, the white-dominated American Communist Party had sought to champion the cause of black civil rights in cases such as the one that involved the "Scottsboro boys."<sup>8</sup> Others, such as Anne and Carl Braden, fought the good fight through the lean years of the Forties and Fifties. A few whites, most notably Glenn Smiley of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), had been active in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A minority of the Freedom Riders were white. But in all of these cases, the number of white participants was small. By contrast, the 1,000 or so whites who came to Mississippi for Freedom Summer represented a deluge. The sheer size of the project guaranteed me access to large numbers of white activists, *provided* I could find a list of all the summer volunteers that also included the name of the college or university (if any) each was attending at the time of the project; the only way I could think to track the volunteers in the present was to go through the alumni associations of their respective alma maters.

The search for this list came to resemble a quest for a (not so) holy grail. Fortunately my continuing work on the civil rights book occasioned numerous visits to libraries and archives throughout the South. These trips gave me the chance to inquire into the existence and whereabouts of the list. The bad news was that I was repeatedly told by librarians and archivists that they did not have, nor had they ever heard of, any such list. The story was the same at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in Atlanta. There, the head librarian, Louise Cook, said she too had never heard of any such list. She did though have a variety of other materials on the Summer Project that I was welcome to go through. True to her word, the list I hoped to find was not among these materials. Given what *was* there, however, the absence of the list hardly mattered. For there, nicely organized and catalogued, were the original five-page applications filled out by the volunteers in advance of the summer. Better still, the



applications included those filled out, not only by the volunteers, but by an additional 300 persons who had applied to the project, been accepted, but for whatever reason had failed to go to Mississippi. I had serendipitously stumbled onto the makings of a kind of naturalistic experiment. Here were two groups—volunteers and no-shows—that presumably looked fairly similar going into the summer. One had the experience of Freedom Summer. The other did not.

The unexpected discovery of data on the no-shows enabled me to add two other questions to the original focus on links between movements with which I had begun the project. The first was simply the question of differences between the volunteers and no-shows *before* the summer. Were they really similar going into the summer? Or were the volunteers so different from the no-shows as to make any subsequent comparison of the two groups meaningless? The second question depended on a negative answer to the first. Assuming the no-shows *were* a defensible comparison group, *how* did the broad contours of their lives post-summer differ from the biographies of those who had participated in the project? Finally, as the study progressed, I came to regard one additional question as of equal importance to the previous three. It wasn't merely the comparison of participants and nonparticipants that was intriguing, but differences between the male and female volunteers as well. Given the clear differences in the ways men and women were raised in the early Sixties, it was simply impossible to view their participation in the project as having meant the same thing either to themselves or to others. Hence a fourth question: How did the experience of the Summer Project and the consequences that flowed from it differ for the male and female volunteers?

I have spent the past six years trying, in a variety of ways, to answer these four basic questions. To do so, however, required that I first be able to locate as many of the applicants as I possibly could. Here the original project applications came in very handy. One piece of information that had been asked of the applicants was the college or university in which they were presently enrolled. This enabled me to assemble lists of applicants to be sent to some 269 alumni associations around the country. As expected, they proved to be my single richest source of addresses.<sup>7</sup> There were others, however. Those applying to the project had also been asked to list the names and addresses of their parents on the application form. Notwithstanding the fact that the United States is a highly mobile society, approximately 20 percent of the parents were still at the same addresses in 1982–1983 as they had been in 1964. In turn, they supplied current addresses for 101 sons or daughters who had applied to the project. Academic directories were also searched for names that matched those who had applied to the project. Lists of applicants sharing the same

undergraduate majors—another item asked of those applying—provided the basis for this search. Still other addresses were produced in a variety of idiosyncratic ways. Once contacted, many of the applicants were willing and able to supply addresses of others with whom they had stayed in touch. Friends and friends of friends put me in touch with still more applicants. So too did the publishers of at least two applicants-turned-authors. Others contacted me after hearing about my project. One even turned up as a guest at a party where I happened to be talking about my research.

The result of these varied efforts were verified current addresses for 556 of the 959 applicants for whom I had applications. Of these, 382 (of a total of 720) had been participants in the project while another 174 (of 239) had withdrawn in advance of the summer. Foreshadowing a major difference between the two groups, the percentage of no-shows I was able to obtain addresses for—73 percent—was considerably higher than the 53 percent figure for the actual volunteers. Exactly what this difference meant was to become clear only after I had started contacting the applicants.

Contact with the applicants took two forms. First, all of the applicants were mailed questionnaires (see Appendix A) asking them about their experiences during Freedom Summer, their activist histories, and the broad contours of their lives, personal as well as political, post-Freedom Summer.<sup>8</sup> This was the only way I could compare data on the large number of applicants with whom I was dealing.

However, I also realized that any real understanding of the complex issues I was addressing required that I talk at length to at least some of the applicants in both groups. Between August 1984 and July 1985 I did just that, interviewing forty volunteers and another forty no-shows, selected at random from among all of the applicants in each group.<sup>9</sup> More than half of these interviews were conducted in a hectic three-month period during the spring of 1985, during which I camped my way around the country, interviewing applicants as I went. All told, I logged 22,000 miles and interviewed forty-eight people in the course of the trip. The "sessions" lasted anywhere from two hours to two days and took place under an equally wide range of circumstances. Along the way I took part in a Native American sweat in Colorado, a bar mitzvah in Buffalo, an anti-apartheid demonstration in Washington, D.C., and a formal Japanese tea ceremony at a commune in California. By turns, I felt confused, exhilarated, depressed, and enriched by my contact with the applicants.

The end result, though, was that the trip "worked" in the way I had hoped it would. I came away with a much clearer sense of what Freedom Summer had meant to the volunteers and how it had shaped their lives

in ways that clearly distinguished them from the no-shows. The somewhat superficial differences between the two groups that had been apparent in their questionnaire responses came alive in conversation. The two groups may have been similar before the summer, but they emerged from it clearly very different. Just as important, these differences were to *make* a difference, not just in the lives of the volunteers, but in the evolution of the New Left and what would come to be known as the "60s experience." Caught up in a unique confluence of biography and history, the volunteers were among the first white students to sense the possibilities inherent in the moment. Many of them climbed aboard a political and cultural wave just as it was forming and beginning to wash forward. In a sense, the remainder of this book is about that wave; its nature and course, the unique biographical and historical circumstances that produced it and the mark it left on those who tried—and in many cases are still trying—to ride it. And what of Freedom Summer? If it didn't exactly produce the wave, it certainly gave it momentum and helped fashion many of the specific political and cultural elements we associate with it. Perhaps most important, Freedom Summer created one of the major means by which this emergent Sixties culture was made available to its ultimate consumers: white, Northern college students. The Freedom Summer volunteers served as influential carriers of the new culture. How they came to play this role and the consequences, both personal and societal, of having done so is the subject of this book.

## I

## America on the Eve of Freedom Summer

ALL OF our lives represent, in C. Wright Mills' (1959) phrase, the "intersection of biography and history." While we may be only dimly aware of the historical currents that are shaping our lives, we can rest assured they are. For most of us, however, the confluence of biography and history is somewhat prosaic. That is, if not seamless, there is a certain predictable match between each of us as social products and the historical era in which we grow to maturity. Who we are raised to be is relatively consistent with the broader social world we encounter as adults.

For some few others, the course and texture of the interface between their own biographies and the history of their era is less predictable. Faced with historical circumstances unanticipated by those who helped socialize them, these individuals suddenly confront new possibilities for social action and self-conception. The interplay between history and biography takes on a disjunctive quality, as the orderly progression toward adulthood is interrupted by historical events and processes. The result is often a period of thoroughgoing resocialization, as biographies and identities are modified in accordance with the newly perceived historical imperatives. Among those rare few whose biographies fit this description are many who came into young adulthood at the time of the Depression, many World War II or Vietnam War veterans, and to a less dramatic extent, the Freedom Summer volunteers.

Ignoring differences for the moment, several generalizations can be made about the volunteers. By and large, they were the sons and daughters of American privilege. They came from comfortable, often wealthy, families, some of them patrician. They applied to the project while at-

Appendix G  
Results of Regression Analysis Assessing the Effect of Various  
Independent Variables on Current Level of Activism

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable <i>b</i>	Level of Current Activism SE( <i>b</i> )
Number of volunteers presently in contact with	.126	.283
Present political orientation	— .771 <sup>b</sup>	.318
Political orientation prior to Freedom Summer	— .821 <sup>b</sup>	.340
Participation in Freedom Summer? (yes/no)	— .702	.756
Presently married? (yes/no)	.274	.791
Presently employed full-time? (yes/no)	2.762	1.413
Gender	— .189	.223
Age	— .117	.872
Income	— 1.071 <sup>a</sup>	.319
Family income prior to Freedom Summer	.00005	.0001
Level of activism prior to Freedom Summer	— .715	.664
Level of political activism between 1964 and 1970	.294 <sup>a</sup>	.054
Number of current organizational affiliations	1.098 <sup>a</sup>	.195
Number of organizational affiliations between 1964 and 1970	— .269	.264
Number of years of college attendance	— .472 <sup>a</sup>	.158
Number of years of full time employment since Freedom Summer	.079	.010
Held activist job? (yes/no)	1.729 <sup>b</sup>	.696
Constant	10.985 <sup>a</sup>	3.416

*N* = 221.

<sup>a</sup> *p* < .01.

<sup>b</sup> *p* < .05.

## Notes

### Prologue

1. Interview with an anonymous Freedom Summer volunteer, August 14, 1984.
2. Interview with an anonymous Freedom Summer volunteer, April 22, 1985.
3. Interview with Len Edwards, August 17, 1984.
4. Interview with Linda Davis, April 18, 1984.
5. Interview with Marion Davidson, March 21, 1985.
6. The "Scottsboro boys" were nine black teenagers brought to trial in 1931 and convicted on trumped up rape charges in a case involving a white woman. The name "Scottsboro boys" comes from the small town in northern Alabama where the trial took place. Eventually the convictions were reversed due to the legal efforts of lawyers representing the American Communist Party and the national attention they succeeded in focusing on the case.
7. Of the 556 addresses I know to be current, 465 were supplied by college and university alumni associations.
8. Two questionnaires were actually produced during this phase of the project: one tailored to the experiences of the volunteers, and the other geared to the lives of the no-shows. A copy of each of these questionnaires is included as Appendix A of the book.
9. By the strictest methodological canons, only 90 percent of the interviews were truly random. What enabled me to travel around the country interviewing the former applicants was receipt of a Guggenheim Fellowship. Before learning of this award, I had been content simply to interview any volunteer I came in contact with. In July of 1984 I was lucky enough to attend a reunion of Bay Area volunteers held in Oakland. While there, I arranged to interview ten of those in attendance on a return trip in August. Upon receipt of the Guggenheim award, I drew the names of forty volunteers at random. Reflecting their disproportionate concentration in the Bay Area, fifteen of the names drawn were those of volunteers who lived in and around San Fran-

cisco. Two of these were volunteers I had already interviewed. Rather than discard the other eight interviews I had already done, I merely substituted them for eight of the names I had drawn. So strictly speaking, eight of the eighty interviews conducted were not random.

## Chapter 1

1. Interview with Gren Whitman, April 18, 1985.
2. Interview with an anonymous Freedom Summer volunteer, February 5, 1985.
3. There was no official poverty level in 1960. However, in 1976 the Census Bureau devised an estimated 1959 poverty standard to enable policymakers to make historical comparisons. According to the Census Bureau, a reasonable estimate of the poverty level for a family of four in 1959 was \$2,973 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976: 143). By this standard, 85.8 percent of all non-white and 43.3 percent of all white families in Mississippi in 1959 had incomes below the official poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1963). If one defines family more restrictively as a husband and wife and two children under the age of 18, the figures change somewhat. Using this more restrictive definition, only 18.8 percent of white, but 77.3 percent of nonwhite families in Mississippi fall below the poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1963).
4. McCord (1965: 35).
5. Holt (1965: 102).
6. McCord (1965: 152).
7. Shown below are the 1960 infant-mortality rates for Mississippi and the United States:

Number of Deaths, under 1 Year, per 1,000 Live Births		
	Mississippi	United States
Total	41.6	26.0
White	26.6	22.9
Non-white	54.3	43.2

Sources: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare 1963 *Vital Statistics of the United States 1960*. Volume II—Mortality Part B. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1964 *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1964* (Eighty-Fifth Edition). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

## Chapter 2

1. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of persons who made formal application to the Summer Project. Various authors have hazarded a wide range of guesses as to the total number of people who participated in the project. Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken (1971: xvii) place the number at around 500. Both Elizabeth Sutherland (1965) and Mary Aiken Rothschild

(1982: 31) estimate the total number of volunteers to have been closer to 650. My own research, however, suggests that the number was closer to Sellers and Terrell's (1973) figure of 900 than to either of the lower estimates. I am physically in possession of 720 applications from persons who went to Mississippi and an additional 239 applications from project no-shows. In addition, there is an alphabetic gap in both sets of applications between the letters I and N. That is, the applications for all persons in both groups with last names beginning with the letters, J, K, L, M, and N are missing. Correcting for this alphabetic gap, I would place the total number of applicants in the two groups to be roughly 900 for the volunteers and 300 for the no-shows.

2. The estimates of the number of students who worked in the Freedom Vote campaign are almost as varied as those for Freedom Summer. Matusow (1971: 140) places the number at 80. The better estimate, however, is 100 students. That figure has been put forth by Carson (1981: 98) and Mc-Lemore (1971: 102). In addition, the SNCC veteran Mendy Samstein included the figure in his unpublished "Notes on Mississippi," written shortly after the conclusion of the Freedom Vote campaign (Samstein Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin archives—hereinafter SHSW—Madison, Wisconsin).

3. Mendy Samstein, "Notes on Mississippi," p. 4 in Samstein Papers, SHSW.

4. This account is confirmed in Carson, 1981: 98–99, and Samstein's "Notes on Mississippi," p. 5, in Samstein Papers, SHSW.

5. Samstein, "Notes on Mississippi," p. 6, in Samstein Papers, SHSW.

6. This account is taken from Carson, 1981: 100.

7. Quoted in James Atwater, "If We Can Crack Mississippi . . .," *Saturday Evening Post*, July 25, 1964, p. 16.

8. Interview with James Forman, August 29, 1985.

9. See Holt, 1965: 157.

10. Minutes of SNCC Executive Committee Meeting, May 10, 1964, p. 10.

11. U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, *Digest of Educational Statistics*, p. 84, Table 62. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965.

12. Ibid, p. 73.

13. Summer Project applications; from the author's collection.

14. Summer Project applications.

15. Summer Project applications.

16. Interview with Elinor Tideman Aurther, June 12, 1985.

17. Interview with an anonymous Freedom Summer volunteer, June 20, 1985.

18. Summer Project applications.

19. Summer Project applications.

20. Summer Project applications.

21. Summer Project applications.

22. Interview with Judy Michalowski, August 10, 1984.

23. Interview with Chude Pamela Allen, August 14, 1984.