

Students Register Negro Voters in Virginia

'We tried to give them a shot in the arm'

by Diane Milder

"We are a little fed up with this voter registration business . . . we want our colored people to live like they've been living for the last 100 years—peaceful and happy."

Sheriff Z. Mathews
of Terrell County

Ironically, some Bucknellians also wanting to see the Negro peaceful and happy decided that through a voter registration project they could help accomplish this end. Two professors, two seniors, four juniors, three sophomores and two freshmen made the trip down to Petersburg, Virginia during Spring vacation with their minds "stayed on freedom." Thirteen individuals joined with the National Student YWCA in helping to bring the possibility of a "full and creative life" to every member of this Southern community, and by so doing enhanced their own lives considerably.

Dr. William Becker, Susan Case, Nancy Fenton, Bruce McGraw, Dr. David Martin, Diane Milder, Betsy Neary, Harriet Parker, Carol Provan, Diane Richters, and Amy Treston traveled by car on April 11, from 8 a. m. to 3:30 p. m., only to be ushered into a funeral home upon arrival in Petersburg. (We were later joined by John Pagano and Doug Scholl). Oddly enough, it was here that we were to begin a most enlivening experience.

We were now part of the second annual Spring Project for Voter Registration in the South, run by the National Student YWCA. Miss Rosetta Gardner, a regional director explained briefly that the Y had joined with the League of United Voters, and in Petersburg, with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to get an accurate account of the Negro population eligible to vote, and to inform and encourage them to register. At the funeral home we met students from four other colleges: New Rochelle, Clarkson, Lyndon and Pottsdam State; together we totaled 30 people. The previous week 13 students from three colleges came during their vacation for the same purpose.

The 'Byrd Machine'

But vacation or not, we found ourselves in a lecture situation. Before we could become part of this town and be able to work peacefully within it, we had to comprehend its uniqueness and understand the atmosphere that has been passed down from generation to generation.

Petersburg is the largest, oldest, and most important city in Virginia's South Side, or "Black Belt." It played an important part in the history of the country and cherishes its proud conservative past. It remains "steeped in antiquity." The city is run by the "Byrd machine," named after Harry Floyd Byrd, a conservative

Democrat who has local politics in the palm of his hand. Not until recently has the machine had any opposition—White or Black.

In the last election, the growing Negro vote finally gained enough power to elect a Negro to the city council. Economically Petersburg is poverty-stricken. Petersburg has 6.2% unemployed compared to 4.2% in the state. A corporation has been formed to attract industry to this area which now houses the Brown and Williams Tobacco Corporation. Out of a population of 40,000, half of which is Negro, approximately 10,000 Negroes are eligible to vote. According to the pre-Easter figures only 35% of these people had registered.

Mr. Herbert Coulton, field-secretary for the SCLC asked us to help "give the people a shot in the arm . . . to arouse the apathy" that has been bred through discouragement, disappointment, and disinterest.

Poll Tax . . .

. . . Student Complaints

Civil rights groups have only recently integrated downtown shops, bus stations, movie theaters and lunch counters. Ironically the YMCA is still strictly segregated. The city is now waiting to hear a court decision on hospital segregation which is pending. In the business area, the Negro is striving to establish more fair employment practices. Presently, only token job integration has been achieved in many firms which profess no discriminatory policies.

With such information in mind, the group of volunteers was taken on a bus tour of Petersburg. We were shown the six political wards where we were to work, some historical battlefields, and the downtown area.

Following this the Bucknell group went to their respective host homes. These were Negro homes which ranged in status from well-to-do to lower-middle class. Living with these families gave us an opportunity to get to know some adults in the Negro community on a very frank and informal basis.

Later that evening we were given detailed instructions on canvassing procedure and techniques. We received street maps of the city and registration kits equipped with: flyers explaining registration; sample registration forms; and data sheets to record responses.

We were informed that Virginia has an annual \$1.50 poll tax which must be paid for three consecutive years in order to register. If payment is missed for any year a 5% interest charge is added. The deadline for payment is May 1 in order to be qualified to vote in the November state and local elections. In terms of our job, this meant we had to convince the

unregistered Negro that voting was the most effective means to strengthen his position, and that \$5.00 should therefore be no obstacle.

We were told to classify responses into eight categories: (1) sponges into eight categories: (1) less definite time commitment (3) interest, but no commitment (4) no interest (5) interest, but can't afford to pay (6) not home (7) needs instruction in reading and writing (8) already registered. As part of the procedure we were to explain the new registration form which has only recently been accepted legally. Under the old system Negroes had to respond on a blank piece of paper to a confusing questionnaire.

The last topic of the evening exposed us to some of the social restrictions of Petersburg. We were warned not to flaunt the mores of the community, although we might disagree with them, for fear of arousing hostility. Miss Gardner's watchwords were "Be alert, but not afraid." In closing she emphasized that the purpose of the program was "to help and to learn."

Phew, the preliminaries were over!

Anticipation ran high the next morning at 9 as we gathered at SCLC headquarters for our assignments. We were bussed to a central point in the ward being covered and branched out in teams of two, to canvass our respective streets. Along with the out-of-town group were local Negro students from segregated Peabody High School and Virginia State College who canvassed with us. These people were in the field many months before we came and will continue to follow up our combined efforts.

When possible, we were paired according to opposites in sex, color, and age. We found that this was educational as well as effective. At noon we met for lunch and were transported to Virginia State College cafeteria where free lunch was provided.

Here we made some valuable discoveries: institution food is all alike, so are college students, dorms, and complaints (the women are asking for later curfews, small world, isn't it?). Following lunch and some free time, we boarded the bus once more, and were on the field by 2:30 with new assignments and new partners. We canvassed a long afternoon until our feet signalled 6:30 p. m. On the field our problem was apathy, not hostility; if we were helpful or successful in our plea, deep appreciation was expressed. We were all tired, but never too tired to smile.

Gold Roads—Cement Sidewalks

After dinner, at about 8 p. m., our evening activity would begin. Somehow we mustered up enough energy to participate. Interest seems to work wonders for perseverance. Monday night we discussed questions and technicalities that had arisen during this first day. We exchanged techniques of winning people's confidence and getting around their fabricated excuses.

The rest of the week's daytime activities ran close to the schedule, and we grew to become seasoned canvassors.

Tuesday evening by choice we met for a panel discussion on local Petersburg affairs. While we were waiting for representatives from the civil rights groups to arrive, freedom songs filled the air. Members of the panel represented the NAACP, SCLC, the Petersburg Improvement Association, and the Friends of Petersburg, a small sympathetic White group.

Topics under discussion included the town's political machine, future voter education, job opportunities, and school enrollment. The civil rights leaders expressed their disapproval of the churches' emphasis on other-worldly rewards rather than a decent life now. Should the ministers be preaching how to walk on golden streets when their people do not have cement pavements?

For many students the social party Wednesday night was the highlight of the week. A complete cultural exchange took

place, naturally and to every one's pleasure. (See other article).

Thursday around noon a group of volunteers went shopping in the downtown area. Here in what would normally be a comfortable atmosphere some individuals encountered high tension. How hard it was to ignore our Negro friends and be silent about our purpose in town. That evening the adults of the group were entertained by Col. and Mrs. Worrall, active Whites in the movement. The rest of us had free time to associate further on the Virginia State campus. Their student Union provided us with more than ample facilities: ping-pong, shuffleboard, pool, cards, checkers, records, snack shop, etc.

Friday was spent in summarizing and re-evaluating the past week's work. Although statistics were not available for the full five days, of the 3,124 homes

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Voter Funds

Of the \$568.35 collected for the Petersburg Registration Project in contributions made by sympathetic Bucknell students, faculty, administration, and organizations, approximately \$153 was spent for traveling expenses. Only after arrival in Petersburg was the group informed that certain room and board fees that were anticipated would not be required after all. Thus, living expenses were reduced to approximately \$176.

Consequently, the remaining project money, \$238.98 has been placed in an account in care of the Committee on Equal Educational Opportunities, a branch of the Christian Association. Grants will be available for students participating in civil rights projects in the future. Application for these funds can be made to the Chairman of the Educational Opportunities Committee who will consult with a special board to decide upon the money's allocation. May all the contributors know that they share in the good they have helped to cultivate.