

Testimony From Mt. Zion.

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Edwin King, Freedom Summer 1964
Box 55673
Jackson, MS 39296

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, the Rev. Andy Young, and several other SCLC staff persons came to Mississippi in late July to help the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. They toured the state for five days speaking on behalf of the party and urging people to sign the "Freedom Registration Forms" and to attend their precinct and county meetings. As a state officer of M^DFP I was asked by Aaron Henry and Bob Moses to travel around the state for some of the visits with Dr. King. The Justice Department saw to it that the FBI provided extensive protection for our party everywhere in the state, but especially when we went to Neshoba County, visiting the ashes and ruins of Mt. Zion Methodist Church or touring the poolhalls of nearby Philadelphia where King and Abernathy played pool with the local men, then talked nonviolence--and politics. John Lewis of SNCC accompanied us on this Neshoba trip.

In the all Black Longdale community, far out in an isolated rural part of Neshoba, Dr. King commented at the ruined church, "I feel sorry for those who were hurt by this... I rejoice that there are churches relevant enough that people of ill will will be willing to burn them. This church was burned because it took a stand."¹

After prayers at the church site we went further down the dirt road to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt "Bud" Cole. They told their story to Dr. King, just as they had told it a few weeks earlier to James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner, as told to other COFO workers, and, as told, in full detail, to FBI agents, several days before the three men had disappeared. The men had interviewed them then headed home--and disappeared. Mrs. Beatrice Cole did most of the talking. Bud Cole still suffered from a injuries, including a broken jaw, received in the klan beating. This church was the only church in the county open to the Movement. Bishop Charles Golden a few months earlier had called for

all Methodist churches to be open to the Civil Rights Movement--that is, the Black churches of the Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Church. Mt. Zion accepted the Bishop's call and the call of the Movement and had agreed to host both a Freedom School and voter registration meetings and mass meetings. Chaney and Schwerner had visited their^e several times that spring and Mickey had made an impassioned appeal at the Sunday service at the end of May. Bud Cole was a church officer and Beatrice Cole was a voter registration worker. On June 16 after a routine Board of Stewards meeting ended around 9:00 p.m. a mob of white men had blocked all road exits from the church. Several men were terrible beaten and Bud Cole was beaten unconscious. Beatrice Cole told us the story. Dr. King and the rest of us listened to her words which sounded like Scripture:

They (white men) stopped us not far from the church and one of the men had some words with my husband. There was at least 20 of them there. Then one of them pulled my husband out of the car and beat him, I couldn't see what with but it looked like an iron object. Then they kicked him while he was lying on the ground. Then they said to him, "Better say something or we'll kill you."

I said, "He can't say nothing, he's unconscious." Then I began to pray...² I was praying very hard. I was just praying saying "Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, don't let them kill my husband." And then I heard a voice sound like a woman scream down the road just a little piece below me and then a man walked up with a club and I was continue saying, "Lord have mercy," and he drew back to hit me and I asked this policeman that was standing by him would he allow me to pray and this one was on the right and one was on the left. The one on the right says if you think it will do you any good you had better pray. The one on the left says it is too late to pray...³ They told me to shut

my mouth. But I said, "Let me pray."⁴

I stretched out my hands.⁵ I fell on my knees and I began to ~~to~~ pray, and as I prayed I just said, "Father I stretch my hands to Thee, I stretch my hands to Thee, no other help I know. If Thou withdraw Thyself from me, where else can I go?"*⁶ That struck the hearts of those men. The Lord was there. Because then the man said, "Let her alone," and he looked kind of sick about it.⁷

Mrs. Cole's husband had not regained consciousness during this. She then told of one of the white men raising the butt of his gun to hit her and another white man interjecting, "Don't touch her... You might as well let them live."⁸ She was finally able to arouse her husband and the white men let them get in their car and leave. The white men stayed at the church. From her home down the road and out of sight of the church she looked back at a terrible sight, a red glow in the night sky, "a lot of light coming up from around the church."⁹ She did not dare leave her husband or return to the church. The next morning she did visit the still smoking ruins. ^R She also told us of two very important earlier visits:

Those three boys... the same ones that are missing, came here on Sunday, June 21,... They stayed about 20 minutes and left in the middle of the afternoon. The white boy with the beard I saw at that meeting at the church a couple of weeks ago when they talked about setting up a special school... The FBI was here the Friday after the church burned down and asked us questions about it.^{10**}

Then Beatrice Cole closed this testimony of faith with a very funny comment about how the white police and klansmen had treated the black men at the church so terribly and questioned them about political act-

*Beatrice Cole later told a friend, Florence Mars, that the words of her prayer were from an old Methodist hymn. "That song always have cherished me. The Devil was sponsoring that group but the Lord was there."¹¹

ivities but didn't ask her too many questions and she, the woman, was the one with the political information and doing the voter registration work. But they didn't quite suspect a woman as a leader. They did make an effort to search her purse but all she had was Sunday School literature. I couldn't quite understand all her story but the point was the same. Some of us there thought she said she had changed purses just before the meeting, leaving the one with the political literature at home. I thought she said something about sort of lying to the police and klansmen that she didn't have anything in her purse but Sunday School literature. Either way the white men did not find about about the voter registration leaflets. Dr. King and the rest of us sort of laughed at this little story. We needed something light. We had come to comfort her, to show that we stood with the local people. But this Christian woman, with her powerful testimony of faith, had brought comfort and strength to us. And we were blessed.

later Beatrice Cobe was told by friends that the KKK was threatening to kill her; the friends advice was fleeing north. She said she would not run, "If I perish, I perish." Amen!

*Note: the FBI knew full well of the outbreak of most terrible violence seen in Mississippi in many years, of klan and police terrorism, of the church burning and the beatings, several days before the disappearance--and murder--of the three men. The FBI, even with this knowledge and already investigating the klan terrorism in Neshoba, still refused to heed the cries for help from COFO, that the men were missing. We all knew what "missing" might mean in Mississippi. The FBI knew of the terrorism for several days. It is most likely that other people in Washington, especially in the Justice Department, also knew something about the new wave of terrorism. The FBI and the Justice Department refused to help. Washington let the three civil rights workers die. Washington could have intervened and helped at least locate the men. They probably would have been beaten. They probably would not have been killed