

*Midnight in the Delta - Terror*

## SUMMER 63, TERROR

Before the folk-sing ended Jane Stembridge found us there. Jane was on the SNCC staff, working in the Greenwood office. We first met her earlier that summer. During the first week of the Jackson demonstrations she had come to Tougaloo for the state SNCC staff meeting. Late one afternoon she appeared on our front porch, asking for the King's house in a very Southern voice. Her blonde hair and gentle attitude made her look almost sweet, hardly like a SNCC veteran. We invited her in and began talking about the South, the Movement, and, especially, about what was happening in Jackson and the Delta.

Jane was our age but left graduate school (Union Seminary in New York) in the first spring of the Movement, 1960, to work full time in the Civil Rights struggle. She was one of the first white persons on the SNCC staff in Atlanta. Her background and reasons for being in the Movement were much the same as our's. Jane was from Georgia and Virginia; her father, the Rev. Hank Stembridge, was a Southern Baptist minister who had been forced to leave the South because of his stand in favor of integrated church worship services. Now, in 1963, Jane was one of the oldest veterans in the Movement. She had been working in Mississippi since the winter of 1963. She had not been made bitter or defeated by the experiences of the past few years. She still had hope, still had love, still believed in all the things we sang about. Bob Moses obviously thought highly of Jane and let us join their long conversations. Jeannette invited Jane to join the long line of Movement people in the state (and out of the state) who made their Mississippi "home" at the King's house.

It was good to see Jane again in Leflore County and on such a joyful business as the SNCC Freedom Sing. We invited her back to Tougaloo with us. We left the cotton field

and drove in to town. Jane waved at everyone we saw, black and white. One white man recognized her and did not wave back. He did give a vigorous hate stare. I noticed but made no comment. We all knew that many people in Greenwood would like to see Jane dead with the rest of SNCC. We stopped by the office and let Jane run in. In a minute she returned with a tiny paper bag of her "things." (Revolutionaries in Mississippi always seemed to travel light.) Soon we were out on Highway 49 East, heading south, through Tchula and Mileston, through the fields of Holmes County near Providence.

(Jane, already known as the poet of the Movement, described this road in a required staff report to the Atlanta SNCC office:

#### FIELD REPORT

Pieces  
of cotton

are  
caught in

the weeds

on  
the  
edge

of  
the  
highway

from  
Greenwood

to Tchula. ) 3

By the time we reached Yazoo City it was dusk. We had not been followed so we were not too worried. At Yazoo the road begins the long climb through the Kudzu vines up

into the hills that guard the Delta. As we left the plain and the cotton fields, even the darkness of the Hills seemed welcome.

On the drive home Jeannette and Jane were laughing as they talked of growing up in the South, of Sunday School, of revivals and church dinners. I added my opinions about the Methodist Youth Fellowship and Jane talked of Baptist Training Union. From our mood it might have seemed we were returning home from summer church camp.

Jane talked to us about Miss Lillian Smith, the author whose books meant so much to all of us. Jane knew her very well; the beautiful spirit revealed in the writing of Killers of the Dream was real. This book was a powerful influence on most of the Southern whites in the movement and read and respected by many of our black friends. Jane told us of her many wonderful visits at the house on top of Old Screamer Mountain in north Georgia. "Miss Lil," as Jane called her, wanted to visit Mississippi, but her poor health prevented that for the moment. Lillian Smith was one of the most faithful supporters the Movement had. She had been thrilled at the development of the nonviolent campaign, from Dr. King in Montgomery, through the 1960 sit-ins, the Freedom-Rides, and on. She kept up with every phase of the current struggle. The climb through the Yazoo Hills especially reminded Jane of the Smoky Mountain foothills approaching Miss Lil's mountain. Jane told us that the stream at the foot of the Georgia hills was called "Tugaloo River." That was not the we spelled it nor pronounced it at the college, but it must have been the same Indian word.

Our journey was pleasant. We soon crossed the Big Black River into Madison County, passed the old Indian Mounds at the dying town of Pocahontas in Hinds County, and made the turn towards home, at the intersection of Kickapoo and County Line roads. Back

on campus we settled down in the living room, turned up the air-conditioner, and put some Bach suites on our stereo. Jane laughed at the way we sort of apologized for our two greatest luxuries in life. But she enjoyed the house, as did so many other tired warriors. Jeannette soon fixed one of her wonderful meals and we spent the rest of the evening talking with Jane and with students who dropped by.

Joan Trumpauer decided to spend the night with us so she could have time to talk with Jane. The two women wanted to swap Movement stories and Southern and family tales. Jeannette and I went to bed around midnight, leaving these two Southern Belles to talk all night about possible second cousins or in laws in Georgia and Virginia.

Someone was softly calling my name. I awoke and sat up in bed, instantly, totally alert. I noticed that it was about 12:30 a.m. Jane and Joan stood in the doorway. Joan spoke, "Someone's coming, Rev. King. I think they are almost here now."

In this situation "someone" meant the same thing to Jeannette and me that it did to them--some white persons were coming, possibly to bomb us or shoot into our home. We got out of bed quietly. We never turned on any lights. This was hardly the first time this had happened. Some kind of instinct often seemed to be operating to alert us. John Salter often experienced the same thing. There were many times when we would hear a car passing by out of County Line Road. We could usually tell (how, we never understood) when the sound of a car meant danger. Perhaps it was the way a car sounded, slowing down or speeding up. Frequently we would hear a car approaching, laugh, and say, "Go back to sleep. It's probably just some students coming in late." Usually nothing happened. At other times the sound of a distant car would be heard and one of us would say, "That's one

of them. They're going to shoot." Soon we would hear several blasts from a rifle or shot gun or some other weapon as the car noise sped away.

A few weeks earlier, on the night of the Fourth of July, we were especially nervous and alert. There had been some firecracker explosions and we were concerned that we might confuse that sound with gunfire. Salter and I had been standing on my back porch as a car approached out on the road (several houses away). John told me that this car had the guns. I knew he was right. We stepped into the kitchen and turned out the lights. There was the expected noise--clearly gunshots. So when we felt the terror that we all experienced so often, we all respected the feeling. No one thought this was silly. The Terror was real.

So this night Jeannette and I knew that some danger threatened us. Had we not had house guests I am sure that I would have awakened knowing there was danger. All the house lights were out. I checked the locks on both doors. The porch lights were on, as usual, making it difficult for anyone to come directly to either entrance of the house without being seen. We had no weapons so there was nothing more we could do but wait. In less than a minute we heard the sound of a car out on the road. There was no sudden rush of speed--and no gunshots. But we did not relax. The sound drew closer. That meant the car had turned off the road and on to the campus. Now the car was moving very, very slowly, and moving towards us.

The headlights of the car were not turned on. In front of our house the car made a turn, continuing past the side of our house. This was away from the main part of the campus; students never drove down this way at night and the few faculty members who lived

back along these gravel paths would not be out this time of night. The four of us gathered in the middle bedroom, on the side away from the road, looking out into the darkness.

The car made another turn, into the travel lane between our house and the vegetable garden. Now it was moving so slowly we could hear the soft crunching of the gravel under the tires, almost like immense footsteps. Then we heard a second sound. Another car was coming.

A loud rattling noise was moving towards us, a most welcome familiar sound, for it could only be the old truck used by the campus nightwatchman. In the distance we saw his headlights bouncing as the truck moved across the ruts and holes of the campus roads. The car behind our house suddenly changed gears, backed, and turned around, then sped away towards the campus gate. There the car's lights suddenly came on. It passed through the arches, out on to the paved highway, and headed towards Jackson with great speed. We relaxed, had some cake and cold milk, and soon went back to bed, to sleep peacefully until morning.

Mississippi meant fear for all of us. Fear--seen first in the great mass of the poor plantation blacks or city slum dwellers who feared that the little they had would be taken away if they dared demand more and join the struggle; the fear of the small group of successful, middle class blacks, that the plenty they had might be lost if the Freedom Movement drastically changed the system; the fear that had frozen the souls of the white church goers and immobilized the white moderates; the paranoid fear of change and

outsiders, the fear of brotherhood/sisterhood, the fear of life that dominated the hearts of most whites in the state.

Fear was always with us, a constant, abiding Presence: fear of pain and violence (certain in jail, possible anywhere, anytime); fear of the sudden whim of any white policeman--and his guns, his clubs, his dogs; fear of the forces of evil revealed in the hate stares of so many white men and women and children; fear of the night for the danger that could come in the deep darkness that followed the beauty of the setting sun, of the long post-midnight hours when Mississippi crawled close to destroy its enemies; fear of the day, of the rising of the sun when the first heat of morning meant that you had to go out from the shelter and attack Mississippi; simple fear of thirst and hunger in prison; of the bitter cold of the barren Delta in winter, of the awful heat of a crowded "freedom house" in summer; fear of your own weaknesses and of the fragility of the gentle bonds that held together the circle of warriors; fear of that which you fought and sometimes joked about; fear of that which you knew truly did exist--and the greater fear of that unknown which just might exist; fear of the power of hate and of the weakness of love; fear of the ugliness of poverty and fear of the very beauty that is the mask of Mississippi. Fear--and the very fear of Fear--built the Terror in the souls all of us.

Escape--or hiding--or running away--or release was always on our minds. Everyone found their own way. In SNCC and the Movement some were silent; some laughed; some joked; some boasted; some cursed Mississippi and that America which both reflected and guaranteed the existence of Mississippi. Some fought and destroyed their friends; some fought and destroyed themselves. Some used sex, or alcohol, drugs, dice, cards, songs,

poetry, photography, art, music, religion, slogans, gardening, dreams, nightmares. Some of the things that could restore us could destroy us.

In the Movement in Mississippi in 1963 all of us were weak and all of us were strong; all of us were timid and all of us were brave; all of us stumbled and all of us stood up straight; all of us hurt each other and all of us helped each other; all of us hated and all of us loved; all of us lied and all of us preached truth; all of us were slaves and all of us were free; all of us were very old and all of us were very young; all of us had our breaking points, and all of us did break at times. Only some of us survived the breaking, with the helping hands of those who saw us fall and reached to embrace us, and by the Grace of God. The only real strength for so many of us was in the warmth of the bodies and arms of the circle, the band of brothers and sisters in the beloved community.

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." 4

- 1) native Miss + ordained minister in UMCA
- 2) educated Tulare / B.U. / rd Harvard
- 3) he IC captain in 1963 books
- 4) in 1964 he and his wife families in Freedom Square
- 5) he LG in MFDP
- 6) Delta Ministry
- 7) now the Mississ