The Freedom Schools, a Brooklyn librarian concludes, have fostered "equal access" in more ways than one . . .

Mississippi Summer

MIRIAM BRAVERMAN

This spring a group of librarians who wanted to participate in the civil rights movement set up the Friends of Freedom Libraries, an organization permitting librarians to provide professional services in the struggle for freedom. In June I went to Mississippi as a representative of the Friends of Freedom Libraries. Traveling over 1500 miles in nine days, I visited Jackson, Indianola, Greenville, Greenwood, Vicksburg, McComb, Hattiesburg, and Meridian in an attempt to observe as many Freedom Libraries as possible. In the leadership and ranks of the Mississippi Freedom movement, I found widespread interest and enthusiasm for the library as integral to the arsenal of weapons of the nonviolent movement. Each civil rights headquarters houses a library, which is used by students, parents, and teachers. In the story of the Indianola Freedom Library can be seen the problems and triumphs of many of these libraries, and the role the freedom movement has played in integrating public libraries in Mississippi.

Indianola, Mississippi, is in Sunflower County, in the part of the state known as the Delta. The population of the county is 14,730 white, 30,855 Negro. One third of the whites and 90.8 percent of the Negroes earn under $3000 per year. Cotton and soybeans are the main crops, the largest cotton producer being the Parchman State Penitentiary with its convict labor force; Senator Eastland is second, with a 2000-acre plantation.

In summer 1964 the Indianola Project, as the civil rights center is called, had an attractive Freedom Library, frequented by many children, especially when parents and children over ten were at work picking cotton. The librarian, volunteer civil rights worker from the North was completely new to library work; and the library had no catalog, but the one-story brick building contained a wide variety of children’s books. Adult and teenagers’ sections shelved books under such subjects as “Negro History” and “Science.”

I was not able to view this library, for in March the building in which it was located was fire-bombed and burned to the ground. Today more books are being collected and the workers look forward to building a community center and a new library.

The Freedom Libraries I visited were similar. The Greenwood library was arranged imaginatively, while in Hattiesburg and in Vicksburg rows of unattractive stacks reach up to the ceiling. In all the libraries, young people are the main users. When a civil rights worker is present, the youngsters flock in.

They don’t need Esperanto

What are the Freedom Libraries’ collections like now? They vary, depending on a project’s connections with publishers, teachers and librarians in the North. Meridian had only about 300 books, but they represented the best collection I saw, of new and up-to-date books, strong in the most popular subject, the Negro. It also had something no other place boasted — a complete, brand-new set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Children’s books, another popular area, were scarce, but most of their books, said the project director, are in cartons awaiting the building of the community.

Miriam Braverman is young teens district specialist of the New Lots Branch, Brooklyn Public Library

November 1965
center, a memorial to James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. Most collections were uninviting in appearance, the shelves filled mostly with outdated, or often too advanced textbook type material. Many of the books sent are completely unusable. Among the unused cartons of books lying under a carport in McComb is Esperanto for Americans; Indianaola received 20 volumes of the annual report of the Smithsonian Institute, books, incidentally, that could have brought $200 to $300 had they been sold, and shipping costs would have been saved! Vicksburg received 50-150 copies of discarded texts, written in, with bindings broken, math and science books ten-15 years old, pre-1929 books on the American economy.

The reference and periodical collections are meager. Jackson has only four odd volumes of a 1939 Compton’s, and the only dictionary has no spine. The situation for periodicals varies. Hattiesburg has the best selection, five subscriptions of each issue of Ebony, two of Commentary, and Freedomways, Liberation, Nation, and The New Republic. Jackson gets only Paris-Match—a subscription, no doubt, left over by a volunteer last summer.

What do the libraries need most in the way of books? First, books by and about Negroes, fiction and non-fiction, for adults, teenagers and children. Also, new adult fiction and the classics, such as Hemingway, Faulkner, etc. Children’s books of all kinds; beginning books on foreign languages for teenagers are very important. Books on the new math, algebra, child care, etc., as well as copies of the Bible are in demand. One 15-year-old boy browsing in the Greenwood library told me he had lately read Grapes of Wrath, Native Son, Gift from the Sea, Kipling’s poems, and The Sea Around Us, and he is using a German-English dictionary as he took German in the Freedom School last summer.

The Friends of Freedom Libraries, designated by the Mississippi movement as the New York Liaison for gathering library materials, counts among its supporters the Junior Members Round Table of ALA, which voted in Detroit to support the Friends of Freedom Libraries. For those interested in making contributions, a bibliography of books on the Negro was sent from Mississippi; and we are now expanding it into the area of children’s books and other subjects on all levels. These booklists, as well as information on planning trips to help sort collections may be obtained from the Friends of Freedom Libraries, c/o Mrs. Louise Heinze, 216 E. 13th Street, N. Y. 10003.

The public library movement

Despite protests of some librarians in the South that the Freedom Schools retard public library development in the South, the upsurge in the Negroes’ demand for books should be credited to the Freedom Libraries. In summer 1964, for example, there was no public library service for Negroes in Indianaola. In October, project workers told me, about 15 people tried to enter the “white” library, asking for cards. They were given applications and told that the board of directors would meet to consider them. The applicants returned to ask about their cards, but the board, it seems, never met.

A few months later, when a segregated library was scheduled to open in the Negro section, a small protest demonstration by Negroes and white civil rights workers was held in front of the “white” library. After the opening, the number of demonstrators, arrests, and clubbings increased, some victims spending three to four days in jail. Several Negroes dismissed from their jobs, were told frankly it was because of their requests for library cards. These incidents, it should be noted, stemmed from requests for the privilege of using public library facilities.

After the opening of the Negro library, teachers in the Negro schools were given cards to distribute for that library. Many cards were torn up by the children; parents went to the school to protest. Today the library sits in the poor section of town, pristine in its painted, air-conditioned glory, completely boycotted by the Negro community. Should a Negro look there for books on Negro history, he will be quite disappointed, for there is only a single volume on Negroes: The Story of Negro Folklore.

In recent months Negroes have obtained cards in the “white” library and take out books, but all the chairs have been removed, so that no one can sit down to read or do reference work. Nor has any public pronouncement notified Negroes that they can use the libraries. Civil rights people, however, have been encouraging their use.
Public libraries in other cities show variations on this theme. The Hattiesburg Public Library, which shut down in August 1964 for a “preschool inventory” when a group of Negroes requested admission, opened in November requiring Negroes who wanted to use the “white” library to “make a special application subject to review by the entire administrative board” (see LIBRARY JOURNAL, Nov. 15, 1964, p. 4490); in June, the chairman of the meeting of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party told me, it was still a “white” library. Vicksburg requires two cards of the Negro: one for the “white,” another for the “Negro” library. The Negro library, not allotted a budget from which the librarian can order books, must request shipment from the “white” library. In the Vicksburg Freedom Library, a crudely lettered sign reads: “Do you have a card for the (heretofore) white library? Why not? Go get one. One Man — One Book.” Jackson permits Negroes to use the main library, though here civil rights workers may not withdraw books, since they are not considered “permanent” residents. (They generally give civil rights headquarters as their address to protect their Negro hosts who would otherwise be harassed.)

Finally, in the few public libraries I visited, in the rural areas, the collections do not reflect the interests or the needs of the local Negro population nor are they especially good in meeting the demands of the white population. In one community a local clergyman who has a good personal library is being constantly called on by white people for books they cannot get in the public library.

Federal aid and freedom

The libraries are now signing compliance forms with the Federal government stating that their services are available, regardless of race, in order to qualify for Federal funds. But there is an ocean of difference between signing a form and desegregating in fact. My visit, coinciding with some turbulent events which revealed the mood and temper of the Negroes in the Mississippi movement, dramatized this point. I saw people piled by police into garbage trucks, arrested for violating a Jackson city ordinance forbidding demonstrations. I spoke to many as they were released from jail, still in a state of shock from the brutalities they had experienced or witnessed. It is not surprising, then, that many boys and girls should prefer to use the Freedom Library. They work after school, do their homework at night and are afraid to risk walking in the white section at night. This is underlined for Negroes in Greenwood, one SNCC worker said, where Byron de la Beckwith, acquitted for the murder of Medgar Evers rides the streets of the Negro section, particularly in front of the civil rights headquarters.

The Freedom Libraries, therefore, play a role in making available to the local Negro population books they cannot get anywhere else. Until the social system of Mississippi becomes less repressive for the Negro, the Freedom Libraries will continue to be needed.