

Letters from the South

Pittsburghers' fight for civil rights extended beyond their own backyard. They also participated in the national struggle by going to Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi to work on voter registration, to conduct "Freedom Schools" where they taught reading and math to black children, to open community centers offering legal and medical assistance to the poor, and to organize the Freedom Democratic Party to challenge the whites-only Mississippi Democratic Party.

We are fortunate to have a first-hand account of what the experience was like from two young college students from Pittsburgh who worked for civil rights in the South. **Obadiah Simms III**, an African American, was jailed with other freedom riders in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1961, and young white student, **Gail Falk**, spent time in the Meridian, Mississippi, jail after participating in the 1964 "Freedom Summer." Their letters home were published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* on June 24, 1961, and January 4, 1965, respectively.

► **Read each letter and respond to the questions that follow it. If possible, record your answers on the computer so you can edit them later.**

Obadiah Simms III:

The 21-year-old son of Rev. Obadiah Simms, pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church on the Northside, and Mrs. Simms, Obadiah was a sociology major preparing for the ministry at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia, where he was first arrested for participating in a "sit-in" campaign. Released on bond, he was arrested again one June 1, 1961. Charged with taking part in "freedom rides," which pressed interstate buses to accommodate black passengers, he was jailed in Jackson, Mississippi, and sentenced to 30 days in the Hines County workhouse. This is a letter he wrote to his father from his jail cell.

The Pittsburgh Courier, June 24, 1961

N.S. Pastor's Son Writes from Mississippi Jail:

"God's Presence Felt in Every Cell"

By **OBADIAH SIMMS III**

Hinds County Jail
Jackson, Mississippi
June 10, 1961

Dear Dad:

It's Saturday evening and we have just finished supper. The morale of the group still is very high. We expect this thing to break any day. We spend our time singing, praying, writing letters, and reading. There are 84 of us in my cellblock. It is full, and more students are arriving every day. We are praying that this will break in the near future.

There are almost as many whites here, who have been arrested with the "freedom riders," as there are colored. It's such a grand feeling to see dedicated people fighting for a principle that is greater than laws and customs.

I don't know what the people are doing in Pittsburgh, but I hope that they, especially at Metropolitan Bap-

tist Church, are praying for us. Please take this to the association and tell them we are asking for their prayers.

This is a great thing, and I am so grateful that I have a chance to be in on the momentum of it.

As I told you in my last letter, we have a project in which we are encouraging people to spread our slogan, "**Free the Freedom Riders at Once.**"

It is now Sunday morning. Last night was one which I will never forget. We sang songs of freedom.

Let me explain what happened. We are on the fifth floor, and the girls are on the third floor. The regular inmates are between. Well, last night we would sing a song, and the girls down below would answer us. The regular inmates between the fifth floor and the third also joined in.

It seemed as if the Holy Ghost got into everyone. Some were crying and became almost uncontrollable. Our

objective appeared so clearly at that time. You could hear the emotional, determined cries for freedom all over the jail.

We are not old men. The majority of us are still in school. To see the dedication and determination on the faces of my fellow inmates and to hear the echoing answer coming from the girls singing such songs as "How Great Thou Art," "Swing Low," and "Freedom Is Coming By and By" was one of the most rewarding experiences that anyone could ask for.

Freedom has to come soon. You can see it on the next man's face. You can hear it in his voice. There are some folk who are willing to do the same thing tomorrow for a cause that is more vital than missiles, going to the moon, or pacifying Castro.

I can better understand now the plight of Africa, the leadership of Gandhi in India, the Hungarian revolt, and every other revolution that was

attempted to secure the basic rights of man.

We here know that there is a God. His presence is felt in every cell block. You can even see His presence in the face of the jailor. This has been an experience of re-birth for all of us.

Yes, Dad, this thing has to break. The prelude to freedom is here. We are simply waiting on a formal decision and the manual opening of the doors.

Keep spreading our slogan, "*Free the Freedom Riders A Once.*" Yes, Dad, something is going to happen. Progress is our most important product, and this progress cannot be curtailed once it has started. This is a fact which has manifested itself through the annals of history.

Jail is only a stepping stone. It is no higher than the nearest hill. Every hill can be climbed if enough effort is put forth.

Please spread our slogan and tell Metropolitan Baptist Church that 93 "freedom riders" are asking for prayers.

Tell all I said hello, and give my love to the family.

Love,
Obadiah

Responding to Obadiah Simms' letter:

- Why do you think the morale of the students, locked away in a southern jail, was "still very high"?
- Simms writes, "It's such a grand feeling to see dedicated people fighting for a principle that is greater than laws and customs." What "principle" were they fighting for? What "laws and customs" were they opposing?
- This cause, he writes, "is more vital than missiles, going to the moon, or pacifying Castro." Using library or Internet resources, identify the key national and world events that would have inspired Simms to use these examples. (Why the reference to missiles? Who was Castro and what was his role in international relations? What was the status of the space program in 1961?)
- Using the same resources, read about revolution in Africa, India, and Hungary. Is Simms correct in comparing those struggles to the American struggle for civil rights? Why or why not?
- What do you think motivated the white students who joined in the demonstrations?
- What was the slogan adopted by the civil rights advocates? What did it mean?
- Simms says, "Jail is only a stepping stone." What do you think the next step would be?

Three and a half years later, another young Pittsburgher wrote home with a story very similar to Obadiah Simms' account.

- Before reading her letter, use your library or Internet resources to develop a brief list of major events—national, international, and civil rights-related—that occurred between 1961 and 1965.

Gail Falk

*The following letter was published in the **Pittsburgh Courier** on January 4, 1965. The author, Gail Falk, was a student trained by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to work for civil rights in the South during the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964. The **Courier** describes her as "a young Pittsburgh girl dedicated to the cause of equal justice and equal opportunities for all, regardless of race, creed, or color" who stayed on "in that hotbed of racism after the long, hot summer." When she returned to Pittsburgh, she was a frequent speaker at community meetings and received an award from the **Courier** for her contributions to the civil rights effort. Ms. Falk was the daughter of Dr. Leslie A. Falk, noted physician and field secretary for the Medical Committee on Human Rights who later joined the faculty of Meharry Medical College.*

The Pittsburgh Courier, January 2, 1965

Pittsburgh Girl Pens Shocking Story About Mississippi Jails

By GAIL FALK

Meridian, Mississippi
November 28, 1964

It is 4 o'clock in the morning. Outside it is pouring rain. What a contrast is this warm, comfortable double bed where I sit drinking a cup of tea to the bed where I spent the first half of the night.

I have just been released from the Meridian city jail.

At 7:45 this evening, I was just about to leave the COFO office with Luke to pick up some high school students who were waiting to go testing the public accommodations sections of the Civil Rights Act.

Just as I was starting the car, two men leaned their heads in the window and asked for the keys to the new COFO office, which we had just opened a block up the street. They said they had a search warrant. We didn't have key—which we told them. They told us we had better tell them who had the key or else they would break down the door. I asked them to show us the warrant before we told them.

They refused. I pointed out that we were not in a position that allowed us to trust white Southerners like themselves and so we could not give them the information they wanted unless they showed us the search warrant. And so one grudgingly pulled the warrant out of his pocket.

They told us that a record player stolen by someone named Kominsky was in the new office. I remembered seeing a record player in the office earlier in the day and making a mental note to ask Eric about it because we needed a phonograph at the Freedom School.

I had not given a second thought to seeing a record player there because it was with a stack of supplies that were part of a huge shipment that had just arrived by truck from New York City on Thanksgiving morning. I described the phonograph I remembered seeing—a tan portable. The policeman said, yes, that was the one.

By this time Sandy Watts joined the group talking to the officers, one of whom introduced himself as Raymond Davis, sheriff of Lauderdale County. Sandy explained that Joe, who had the only key, was not available. He had gone to Clarke County, where two COFO workers, Linda Allenstein and Greg Kaslo, were missing.

When I heard that, I began to worry in earnest, for fear that this stolen property case had been plotted to take our minds off what was happening in Clarke. Sandy told the officers that Kominsky had told her he wanted to give the record player to COFO as a present.

About this point, Luke and I got back in the car because the kids had been waiting a long time and I saw no reason for us to hang around. But when I started the motor, Sheriff Davis told me to cut it off, that we weren't going anywhere.

A couple of minutes later, he started to herd everyone off to the police station. I told the sheriff that six children were waiting for me at a place that had had no phone. At first he wasn't going to let me go, but I kept talking about how their parents would be really worried, and finally he let me go, telling me to come straight back to the police station.

I went straight to the Freedom School and gathered together the kids there who were all set to jump in the car and go testing. I told them just what had happened and that I would take them home instead of testing.

I emphasized to them, first of all, that the serious thing was not our going to jail but that Greg and Linda in Clarke County were missing and to keep that in mind if they were asked to help in any way that night.

I told them that we would be depending on them to explain to as many people as they could—when an article came out in the Meridian Star the next day accusing COFO of receiving stolen goods—that they were not guilty. And, finally, I told them that if all or most of the COFO staff were locked up, then we

would be depending on them to keep things going in Meridian.

The best thing about that whole crazy night was how good I felt after I had talked with them. They responded in such a grown-up, responsible way—understanding the potential seriousness of the situation but not at all panicking.

These are the students I have worked with the most consistently this fall, and I had a feeling that if we should be put in jail, these kids—although the oldest are just high school seniors—really could take over and do a good job of holding the fort and keeping up the programs that are started.

I drove them home, one by one, making arrangements with one to call the COFO office to make sure whoever was there knew what was happening. I got another to call the police station to tell them I was coming. Willie Clark had an appointment to see the manager of the Burger Chef. I dropped him there and circled around, hoping that no police car would see me (which they didn't) while we waited for him to finish. It was too hostile a place to leave him alone.

Finally, Willie came out. The assistant manager, whom he talked to, was very sympathetic and agreeable to complying with the Civil Rights Law. But he said he was leaving in a week and that the manager was sure that he would lose a lot business if he served Negroes.

We were told at one of the girls' houses that everyone who went to the COFO office was being arrested (this turned out to be untrue) so I made detailed arrangements with Willie to go to the office in an hour, telling Roscoe when he went, and to Jackson if it turned out that everyone who knew about Greg and Linda was in jail.

Finally, about 9:15, I drove to the police station. As I walked in, I could hear Freedom Songs from the area where I knew the cells were. I was shown into Sheriff Davis's office. They made up an information sheet on me, including complete finger printing. They asked a lot of questions about what I knew about the case, and I kept telling

them that I knew nothing except that I had seen the record player.

They booked me and I asked several times what I was charged with. All they would say was that they wanted to ask us some questions. I saw that they wrote down “D & S” as the charge. I asked what that stood for, but they did not answer.

I asked to make a phone call. They would not let me. They said our lawyer had already been called (which I doubt was true). It turns out that they did not permit any one of the eight of us to make a phone call in the time we were there.

They were told repeatedly, both before and after we were in our cells, that two people were missing in Clarke County and we needed to check on them. We pointed out that would be held responsible if anything happened. Some of the officers seemed concerned, but none let us call.

I was taken to the “White Women Only” cell, where Louise Somlyo, Judy Wright, and Sandy Watts were all cheerfully singing Freedom Songs. In the cell next door, Eric Weinberg, Frank Wright, Joe Morse, and Luke Kabat were singing, too. Our cell I judged to be about 9’x16’—dull and bare but clean, painted, and heated. There were three beds—metal cots, each with a sheet and a blanket. Also, there was a washbowl and a toilet.

The one clear memory I have of how the cell looked that night is the reflection the crossed bars of the iron gate cast on the wall, with Judy’s and Sandy’s heads silhouetted against the reflection. When we ran out of Freedom Songs, we talked for a while and made up our own:

*Are you sleeping,
Are you sleeping,
Meridian police?
Meridian police?
Freedom workers waiting
Freedom workers waiting
Freedom now!
Freedom now!*

And then we sang it in a round:

*Are you sleeping,
Are you sleeping,
Meridian police?
Meridian police?
Greg and Linda missing
Greg and Linda missing
Freedom now!
Freedom now!*

About 11:30, two officers came and told us we could all go except Sandy. I went over to wash my face. Judy asked Sandy if she wanted someone to stay with her. There was not more than a couple of seconds delay, but the cop slammed the gate shut saying, “All right, damn you, spend the whole night!”

About 3:30 a.m., we were awakened and told we would have to leave because they needed the bed for someone else. Judy, worried about who they might be putting in here with Sandy, asked if one of us could stay the night. They said no. As we left, we asked what Sandy was charged with. They said she hadn’t been charged yet but she’d probably be charged with burglary in the morning. She was.

And then out into the rainy night...

At the office, we found Margie, who told us that Greg and Linda were safe and also that all the boys but Joe had been released at 11:30. Joe was probably going to be charged with receiving stolen goods—which he was. She told us that the police station had told the boys who came checking on us after they had been released that we had refused to leave, which was, of course, untrue. And finally, at 4 a.m., home to bed for a few hours...

The first thing I saw when I came up to the office the next morning was a record player, which Eric was unwrapping. Like everyone else who came into the hall, my only reaction was “Get that out of here!” However, he managed to convince us that he had just received it by bus from the New York City CORE.

Responding to Gail Falk’s letter:

- Why was Ms. Falk more concerned about the two missing COFO workers than about being arrested herself?
- What was the “Freedom School”?
- What does “testing” the public accommodations sections of the Civil Rights Act mean? Why were the local high school students planning to do that?
- Why didn’t the students “trust white Southerners like (the police officers) and give them the information they wanted (without a) search warrant”?

- Why didn't the author insist on knowing what the charge "D&S" meant—and on her right to speak to an attorney?
- Why did the three women hesitate to leave the jail when they were allowed to go?
- Why did everybody want to get rid of the new record player?

Responding to both letters:

- Both writers refer to singing "freedom songs." What are these songs—and how did they serve to strengthen and encourage the students? What is the history of songs like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"? What was their original purpose?
- Why would middle class college students like Mr. Simms and Ms. Falk choose to subject themselves to the dangers and discomfort of situations like this?
- Why did the residents of towns like Meridian consider the students "outside agitators"?
- If you had been a young adult in the 1960s, would you have joined the freedom riders or other demonstrators in their efforts to achieve civil rights and justice? Why or why not?

► Now that you have read and responded to both letters, check out the following resources for additional background on the civil rights struggle in the South. Be prepared to edit the answers you gave to the questions above.

1. Go to <http://www.watson.org/~lisa/blackhistory/civilrights-55-65/mississippi.html> and read the articles on "Sit-ins," "Freedom Rides" and "Mississippi & Freedom Summer." Go back and revise your answers, if necessary, based on your new insights into the situation that faced young workers like Mr. Simms and Ms. Falk in places like Mississippi.
2. To learn more about the dangers that faced such young people, visit the University of Missouri/Kansas City law school web site, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/price&bowers/price&bowers.htm> for a full treatment of the conspiracy trial of the 18 men accused of murdering the three COFO workers that took place in Mississippi shortly before Ms. Falk's letter was written.
3. To read more first-hand accounts of Freedom Summer, go to the University of Mississippi web site <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~archives/subj-cr.htm>, click on the link to Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive and search for Freedom Summer. You'll find scores of letters and oral histories in the Ellin Collection there.

► Rent the video of the 1989 film, "Mississippi Burning," starring Gene Hackman and William Dafoe, which was based on the 1964 murders.

As you watch the film, imagine that the film has just opened and that you are a film critic for a newspaper. Take notes for the review you will write. Draft your review. Then read the excerpts from other critics' reviews on trial web site <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/price&bowers/movie.html>. As you will see, the movie created considerable controversy, and the critics differed widely in their comments. Will you stand by your original review—or revise it in light of what others have said?

Turn in your written papers to your teacher, and be prepared to share them with your class.