Poverty

Garbage and Mosquitoes

Peter Osnos

Greenville is a city of some 50,000 people in the Delta region of Mississippi. It is traditionally considered a bastion of moderation in questions of civil rights. The tree-lined main streets typify the "all-American city," but behind them lies a poverty so complete as to defy belief.

Barely a two-minute walk from the main street we found the Negro neighborhood. Into an area surrounded by unpaved streets are packed several hundred colored families living in shacks of pasteboard with wax-paper and rag windows. As we walked farther into the district even the muddy streets stopped. Right in the middle we came upon a shack which seemed to be typical. All over was garbage and broken furniture. On all four sides were similar shacks so that there was no access to the road. Close by was a building which served as a latrine for six families. We called "hello" and suddenly three small children appeared at the "door." A moment later the mother appeared. From inside we could hear the cry of a fourth child.

Southern "Equality"

The children were filthy; they wore no shoes and their clothes barely covered their bodies. The mother was a small woman; her hair was cut as if just to keep it out of the way. She wore a torn grey sweatshirt and an old pair of pants. When she opened the door we noticed that her leg was scarred and swollen. Finally she smiled and said "hello." We introduced ourselves and explained why we were there.

The woman was twenty years old, the mother of four children ranging in age from six years to ten months. Her husband is in jail for ten years for manslaughter. She was evidently a common-law wife as she wore no wedding band. Aside from her injured leg she was missing four fingers from her right hand. As a result of these two accidents she is unable to work. She is not on relief, because the state has a law which prevents a woman who is the mother of an illegitimate child from receiving welfare aid. It is very difficult for her to prove that her husband is the father of all four children. She pays twenty-four dollars a month rent for the two room shack. Would she register to vote? No, she had only finished two grades in school.

We thanked her and walked through the debris to the street. Soon we were back on the main street and it seemed as if this woman and her family didn't exist.

Right to Decent Life

For this woman, the removal of bathroom signs and the integration of downtown restaurants is a remote issue. For the Negro man who earns $10 a week, the question of a bus trip, on any bus — integrated or segregated—is unreal. These people are concerned with the fundamental right to a decent life.

The situation in Greenville is unique only in that it is better than most. As we drove through the countryside, we saw clusters of these small shacks. Occasionally there was a television antenna or a car, but there was always an outhouse. There was never any problem in distinguishing the home of a white from a colored family. The Negro shacks are almost uniform in that they are all broken-down, lacking paint, adequate windows, and in many cases electricity. In front of several shacks, we noticed water pumps. Some of the more generous white farm owners built shacks for their colored employees right on the grounds, but even these houses look as if they were built with old timbers.

"Inferior Race"

In Vicksburg we passed an area which was the worst we had seen. It was on the banks of the Mississippi River. When the river overflows, the dampness seeps into the shacks. There are no streets, no lights, no room to grow anything. Everywhere there is garbage mixed in with mosquitoes and mud. The State Health Commission has proof that the Negroes are an inferior race, because they have more cases of tuberculosis than the white men.

The general indigency extends beyond the home. A walk along Lynch Street in Jackson will bear this out. There is a shining new bank in the Masonic Temple building, but inside the walls are chipping badly. This is the best building in the area. The remainder of the buildings on the street are almost as neglected as the home. The offices of CORE are in two tiny rooms of a structure which looks like the shacks with a garish coat of yellow paint. They are bare and cold. Although they represent the Negroes' greatest efforts, they cannot even be compared to their counterpart white churches. In toto the effect is at best shabby.

Economic Subjugation

The abject poverty directly represents the economic situation of the Mississippi Negro. The denial of the fundamental right to work and study has forced the colored people into these conditions. This, coupled with the obvious negligence of the State, belies the supposed affection which the segregationists profess for the Negro. The question of "separate but equal" thus becomes absurd.