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During Mississippi's Jim-Crow era, African-American children, whose families were poor tenant farmers in the Mississippi Delta, attended school sporadically. This image depicts a photo by Marion Post Wolcott, taken in November of 1939, entitled: "Interior of school on Mileston Plantation. School begins very late in the year and the attendance is poor until December because the children pick cotton. Mileston, Mississippi Delta, Mississippi." Original photo maintained at the Library of Congress; Reproduction Number: LC-USF34-052285-D. In the Jim-Crow South, black people were denied services in many businesses. Beyond separate rest rooms, African-Americans were not allowed to sit with whites at various restaurants.

Weary of such discrimination, black students tried to eat at Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson, Mississippi (as the "Greensboro Four" had previously done, in North Carolina, during 1960). Denied service, they (and their white supporters) staged a "sit in" at Woolworth's on May 23, 1963.

Supported by white professors, from Tougaloo College, the Woolworth sit-in demonstrators were heckled by people who had gathered in the store. They left, under police protection, wearing the evidence of white scorn (including ketchup and mustard in their hair and on their clothes).

Responding to Woolworth's refusal to serve African-Americans in Jackson, activists decided to picket in front of the store. On the 1st of June, 1963 - less than two weeks before his death - Medgar Evers was among those arrested for their attempted efforts.

Discriminatory laws, permitting such actions, would continue indefinitely until new lawmakers were chosen. But ... with very few blacks registered to vote, African-Americans had no say in state, local or national elections. To put the problem in perspective, consider this fact: About 45% of Mississippi's residents - at the time - were black.

The only way to change the law was to elect legislators, and judges, who were willing to end discrimination. But ... how would that work, if most blacks were prevented from registering to vote - and - most whites liked things the way they were?

Meaningful change in Mississippi had to occur via the ballot box. To expand the voting population, proponents of civil rights - both black and white, inside and outside the "Magnolia State" - decided to band together during "Freedom Summer." They would canvas the state, helping to register African-Americans as new voters.

A series of events had prompted such action. In November of 1962, for example, authorities in Greenwood (north of Jackson) decided to cut-off the water supply to black sharecroppers during the winter of 1962-63. Leflore County's Board of Supervisors voted to omit distributing federal food supplies during the same time frame while Sunflower County restricted eligibility to receive such goods.

When civil-rights investigators reported such facts to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, people running the federal bureaucracy responded slowly. Meanwhile, thousands of African-Americans who lived in the Delta were unsure how they would feed their children during the winter months.

One family - the Meeks - was typical of many others. Investigators found the following situation at the Meeks' home:

...seven youngsters staying home from school "because they have no money, no food, no clothes, and no wood to keep warm by."

Other black families were also living without basic necessities:

... some of them will make you cry to see the way they have been trying to live. (Quotes - here and above - included by John Dittmer in *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, at page 145.)

Although aid workers sent out a national appeal, it was becoming very clear that donated commodities would not fix the problem. Black people needed to elect representatives who would never support such initiatives.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/-FREEDOM-SUMMER-The-Help>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/-FREEDOM-SUMMER-The-Help>

Questions 2 Ponder

What Obligations Do We Have to Help Our Fellow Human Beings?

What would families like the Meeks - who had "no money, no food, no clothes, and no wood to keep warm by" - have done if "Freedom Summer" participants had not reported the deplorable conditions in the Meeks' home?

What is the best way to help families like the Meeks who are harmed by the political system under which they live?

Media Stream



Restrooms - For Whites and Coloreds - in the South

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Restrooms-For-Whites-and-Coloreds-in-the-South>



Woolworth Lunch Counter Sit-in - Jackson, Mississippi

Photo by Fred Blackwell. Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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Students at the Woolworth Sit-In

Photo by Fred Blackwell, online courtesy Library of Congress.

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Medgar Evers - Arrested for Woolworth Picketing

Photo online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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"FREEDOM SUMMER"

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Freedom Summer

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Greensboro Four - Woolworth Lunch Counter

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