

Wednesdays in Mississippi: Civil Rights as Women's Work. Virginia Center for Digital History,

Reviewed by Peter Murray

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This website is dedicated to a small project in 1964 and 1965, that attempted to build relationships between African American and white women who were influenced by the events taking place in Mississippi. It is a well-constructed site that will appeal to those teaching women's history, postwar American history, the Civil Rights Movement, and the second half of the U.S. survey. <p> The National Council of Negro Women working with white liberal women, particularly Polly Cowan (a close friend of the NCNW's director Dolly Height), organized a series interracial visitations to Mississippi. On the most basic level, Wednesdays in Mississippi attempted to bring northern women (African American and white) to Mississippi in order to provide moral support for those women working to bring an end to Jim Crow and to improve interracial communications in the Magnolia state. The teams arrived on Tuesday and left on Thursday, spending Wednesdays in all-day activities, (hence the name, <cite>Wednesdays in Mississippi</cite>). One of the major goals of the project was to bring to northern women reliable, first-hand information about what was happening in Mississippi. Another goal was for the visitations to act as a conduit for increased communication between African American and white Mississippians. This goal was harder to measure, but those involved believed that they made modest progress in this goal. <p> A central theme is the power of relationships among women that bridged race, class, and locale.

Although Polly Cowan referred to women recruited to go to Mississippi as the "Cadillac Crowd", they were not idle socialites. Instead these women were well-educated, professional, and comfortable with interracial activities, albeit in northern cities. To maximize the impact of the trips, Wednesdays in Mississippi recruited women who were also from a wide variety of religious backgrounds and organizations. Some of the women had children who were part of the Freedom Summer project and their interests were more directly related to seeing the freedom schools and voter registration efforts for themselves as well as seeing their son or daughter. Like pebbles in a pond, these women would return to their communities to share their observations of an area of the South where violence and local government intimidation was most fierce. For most of these women, it was not just a time to build relationships across racial lines, but also a time to be transformed by the experience of seeing evil in a close and personal manner. They saw some of the worst conditions that Jim Crow had created in America. <p> The website provides an appreciation for the time and the place through many artifacts such as the directory of phone numbers to call if there was trouble, which included the phone number for Assistant Attorney General John Doar. There are letters from white Mississippi women who were realigning themselves against segregation and contrary examples of some white hostesses who steadfastly defended the status quo in Mississippi.

The time of the visits also reflects some of the qualities of the larger Freedom Summer. Many parts of Wednesdays in Mississippi such as the prior training, the attempt to stay inconspicuous, and the concern for safety mirrored the activities of Freedom Summer participants. <p> Some of the documents are challenging to read and it might be useful to provide a transcribed PDF. file to make reading easier. However, the press clippings and letters provide a wealth of information about how the trips were planned, what challenges the teams met, and how the trips influenced individuals in and outside of Mississippi. Students will also gain an appreciation for how historians must cull out materials from mountains of raw data to achieve a narrative of power and insight. <p> Holly C. Shulman, fellow at the Virginia Center for Digital History, did some of the oral history interviews for the website and presumably did much of the organization of the material. As a daughter of Polly Cowan, she has obviously and justifiably taken pride in her mother's role in Wednesdays in Mississippi. However, the website has emphasized that the project accomplishments occurred because of the commitment of a number of women and that the sisterhood created was an enduring bond that lasted beyond the relatively short trips to Mississippi. By avoiding hagiography the website shows many women sacrificing ease and privilege and still others struggling to understand a changing world. <p> Although this website offers much and is well designed, there are a few improvements to recommend. While there are links to the National Council of Negro Women, the University of Virginia Library, and the Virginia Center for Digital History, there could be a bibliography page for works on the Civil Rights Movement or especially on Mississippi at that time. There could be more information about the women's liberation movement of the 1960s. Also, there could be links to other websites that cover the Civil Rights Movement. <p> These additions would project interested students beyond this relatively limited project of women to the broader battle-

grounds over civil rights and women's liberation that were transpiring. Just as many of these women were transformed and continued to stay politically active, so this website could promote the understanding of the broader historical period. However, for specific examples of the power of sisterhood this is an excellent website that students and scholars should visit and explore for years to come.

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