

Picketing, Jailing, Beating, Bailing -- ~August 28, 1965

(composed from recollection almost 50 years later)

(Perhaps because the events described here were so near the end of my stay in Columbia, there is no letter documenting them in detail, but the available evidence (see note at end) indicates the date was Saturday, August 28. The following description is according to my memory of the event. It has been fixed in my mind for as long as I can remember, but the details should be taken in the context of limited primary evidence.)

Toward the end of August, a number of black community members and I were arrested and jailed for blocking the sidewalk during a picketing of the Columbia supermarket.



On this particularly day, there was a crowd of white people in the parking lot, some of whom carried on conversations with Chief Johnson (right), and one of whom seemed particularly angry. It isn't clear why we were arrested at that point, given that we had picketed there before, and had already been doing so for a while that day. Nevertheless, we were arrested and taken to the Marion County Jail, though it appeared Chief Johnson was in charge, rather than the sheriff.



I think there were five or six black guys who had been arrested. I was the only white. The jail



Marion County Jail today (*photo courtesy of Rev. Bill McAtee*)

had different sections for blacks and whites. I was put in a group cell in the white section, "for my own protection." It was obviously not a great situation. I was isolated from friends, and the man who had appeared so angry in the crowd had also been arrested (allegedly for disturbing the peace), and put into the same cell. He was drunk. It was an obvious setup.



Picture of jail drawn by my parents in response to a phone description (I have no memory of the layout, so can't confirm it or explain it)

He immediately told the others in the cell that I was one of those nigger-loving trouble-makers. He and several others started pushing me around. When they started to assault me more directly I got down into the "nonviolent shell" position we'd been trained to use for protection -- essentially a fetal position with hands clasped behind the neck and arms covering the ears. In this position, the only seriously vulnerable parts of the body are the spine and kidneys.

Fortunately for me, the angry drunk was apparently unaware of this advantage and switched to taking running starts, jumping in the air, and landing on me with both feet. I think some of the others joined in. Although I was "relatively" safe from this in my position, they could have crushed my ribs if they started stomping me at the moment they landed on me. I felt I was in serious jeopardy. (I also remember, with embarrassment and shame, that I felt that this couldn't be happening to me, that I had too many talents and too many good friends -- I was "too good" to die like this. As if hundreds of others hadn't, down through the years...) So I started yelling at the top of my voice.

I think the mayor had made clear to Chief Johnson that they couldn't afford a serious injury in Columbia, for in what seemed like only a few seconds, several policemen entered the cell and dragged the angry man off me. (I was told later that word had it they'd had to use blackjacks to do it, and he ended up in the hospital. I later naively proposed to visit him and express my regrets for what happened to him, but was dissuaded by more experienced minds.)

Whether I made a call to my parents at this point, or had done so earlier, I can't remember, but I needed \$50 for bail money. I was put in the cell with the black guys from the demonstration until the bail money arrived, and was released later that afternoon.

Despite the beating in the jail, I came off far better than scores of others that summer -- and an endless string of past summers -- who had been jailed and then beaten or molested in gruesome ways. When we got the black guys out of jail, it turned out that the police had also arrested a young guy on some presumably trumped up charge, given him a knife, and put him in the cell with my friends, telling him that my friends were trouble-makers and that things would go better for him and the community if he took care of them. Another setup. My friends apparently were aware of this possibility and engaged him in a conversation which eventually convinced him he was better off on their side.

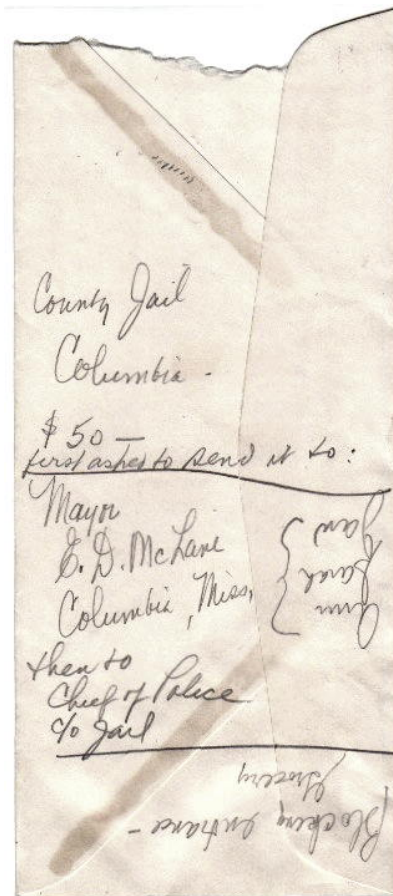
One final note -- This story wouldn't be complete without mention of Louis Ashley (I had no record of his last name until I encountered the mayor's notes referred to in Rev. McAtee's book *Transformed*), a seasoned activist from Bogalusa, who helped our project immensely both morale-wise and by putting his body on the line. In one of my few communications with the neighbor kids after I left, I learned that Louis had been beaten badly and was no longer in Columbia, but I don't know whether that happened in Columbia or Bogalusa, or what finally became of him, though according to the mayor's notes, he was in Columbia in November. (At right is Louis in the demonstration mentioned above.)



Note on time uncertainty -- I was originally uncertain about on what day all this occurred. The only description of actual picketing is in the latter half of the August 9 letter (mailed later), with specific reference to August 21. I have clear memories of only one picketing, but the absence of a mention of jail in that note clearly implies there was at least one more. I was initially convinced the date was Saturday, August 28 by the following evidence:

- the notes on sending my bail money, written on the back of an envelope postmarked August 27 which was sent from Pittsburgh PA to Monroeville PA (a 1-day transit) -- see illustration below;
- the handwritten notes by my father for a specific bail phone call on August 28;
- the presence of people in the parking lot who seemed clearly from out in the country, which suggests a Saturday;
- the higher quality of signs than could have been done in the ad hoc 8/21 demonstration
- my comment in the August 24 letter: "I will be leaving as early Sunday as possible, or maybe late Saturday (there is a chance we will have pickets from Bogalooosa Sat. and I don't want to miss it.)."

<p>County Jail Columbia \$50 -- first asked to send it to:</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Mayor E.D. McLane Columbia, Miss. then to Chief of Police c/o Jail</p>



However, all this theorizing proved unnecessary when I encountered the confirmation in Rev. McAtee's September 2 letter.

(PDF version: 1 September 2013)

[For the complete set of my Mississippi 1964-65 letters,
see <http://dickatlee.com/issues/mississippi>]