

# BIRTH OF A VOTER

*This is the story of a CORE voter registration drive and of the first Negro to register in a Louisiana Parish in 61 years. It's a story well worth reading.*

by **BOB ADELMAN**

Dawn broke with the cackle of chickens at Rev. Joseph Carter's farm, six miles out of St. Francisville, La. Outwardly, there was nothing unusual about the morning of October 17, 1963. Arising at 5:30 a.m., the 55-year-old minister had prayed for divine guidance on the day when he would become the first Negro in West Feliciana Parish to register for voting in 61 years. Then he fed his hogs and cattle. While eating a breakfast of grits, bacon and eggs, he argued with his wife, Wilmeda.

"I'm going down and register today," he told her.

The news did not sit well with Mrs. Carter. She remembered police had jailed her husband the previous August for seeking vote registration, had held him nearly 13 hours, then finally released him on a \$200 bond. Mrs. Carter feared a worse fate for her husband now. "What do you want to do that for?" she asked.

"I done started it now," he said. "Ain't no need in you trying to stop me. I'm going through with it."

The "it" had been tumbling inside him for sometime, tangling his thoughts and twisting his feelings. A vague thing at first, the "it" had ben nursed with news of Negro successes elsewhere, had finally crystallized into a theme which Rev. Carter, a simple man, could state eloquently: "A man is not a first class citizen, a number one citizen, unless he is a voter."

The thought was on the minister's mind the morning of October 17, recalling other thoughts, other experiences. There was, for instance, his first meeting with the

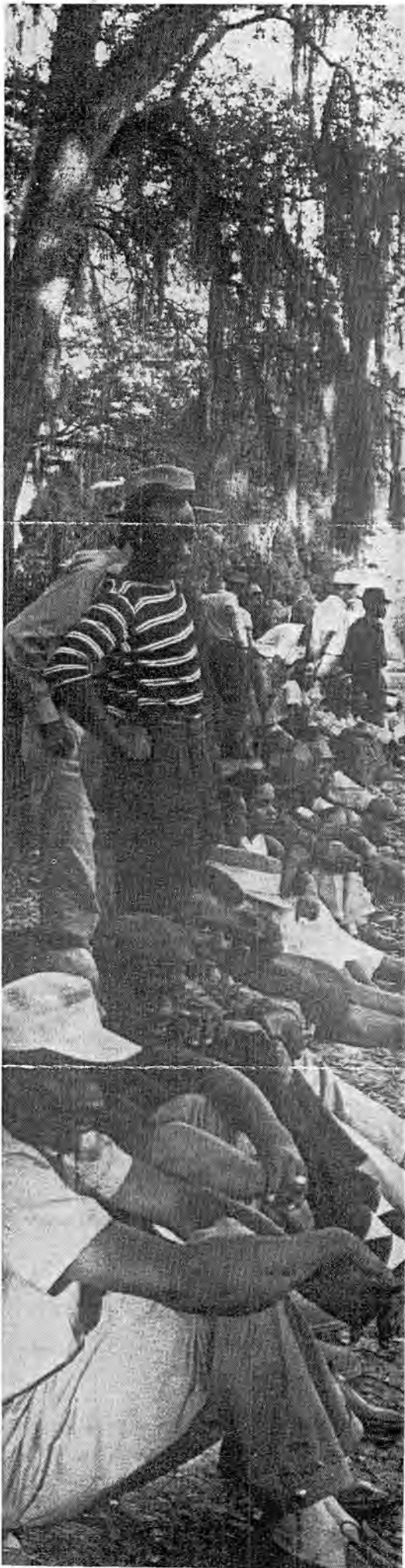


*"I'm going down and register today," Rev. Joseph Carter told his wife. He had once been jailed for trying to register.*

Congress of Racial Equality last summer. Rev. Carter had heard the group was conducting voter registration clinics in an adjacent parish and had sought out CORE field secretaries Rudy Lombard and Ronnie Moore. What could they do for the Negroes of West Feliciana Parish? Not much more than they could do for themselves. Teach them the importance of voting. Show them how to register. Help them to understand — not memorize — answers to questions they would be asked when they applied. Tell them frankly that they might have to go to jail, but promise legal assistance from the U.S. Justice Dept. Explain that someone would have to take the first gamble.

Rev. Carter accepted the challenge, promising to seek vote registration only if he was not part

*Waiting to register is a long, frustrating process.*



of a demonstration. The effort, he felt, should be quite matter of fact as if it were not out of the ordinary. Later, August 10th to be exact, he and Rev. Rudolph Davis entered the St. Francisville courthouse and found it "quiet like in the woods where no humans are." He recalled: "When we got into the hall, the registrar came out of his office, closed the door and said: 'Good morning, boys. What can I do for you?'"

"We came to see if we can vote," Rev. Carter spoke up.

"I can't say no," the registrar answered, "but you have to bring me something, have something, show me something."

"If you would tell me what you mean," the minister answered cautiously, "We probably could produce whatever it takes."

Registrar Fletcher Harvey explained they would have to bring two registered voters from their ward to identify them. "I can't swear that I know you," he added, even though they had lived together in the community for years.

"The sheriff, all of you in this town know me," Rev. Davis pointed out.

As the three stood talking in the hall, Sheriff W. C. Percy came up behind them. "Hey boy!" he shouted. No one answered. "Hey boy!" came a second, then a third time. Rev. Carter walked toward the sheriff, who is much taller but several years his junior, and asked: "Are you speaking to me?"

The sheriff steered him out of sight of Rev. Davis, penciled his name on a card, then ran a heavy black line through it. "What's the matter with you boys? Ain't you satisfied?"

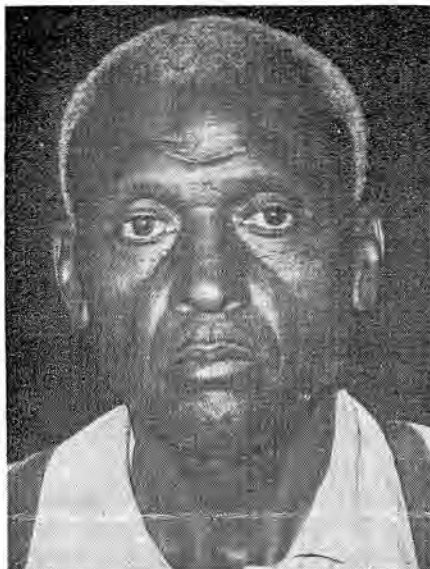
"Not exactly satisfied," Carter replied.

If you ain't satisfied," the sheriff told him, "from here on in you will be satisfied. You hear! You hear! I ought to lock you up." The minister remained silent and the sheriff turned to another white man, ordering: Grab him, you heard him raise his voice to me." Rev. Carter was arrested, handcuffed and carted off to jail for the first time in his life. He had disturbed the peace, the sheriff charged. Later, the minister filed a \$100,000, false arrest suit against Percy.

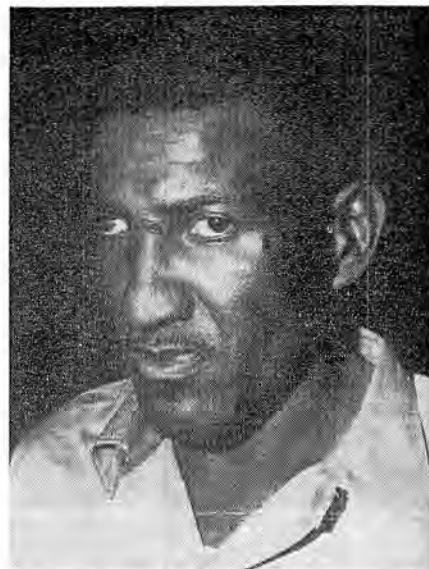
That was last August. Events moved swiftly from then until the morning of October 17th when Rev. Carter drove from his home to the nearby Negro Masonic Lodge Hall to rendezvous with 42 other prospective voters. They had been attending CORE's weekly vote registration clinics in that same hall built by their own hands, had learned how to take the eligibility tests reportedly given only to Negroes, had, in short banded together, gaining strength to overcome fear based on a history of terror in West Feliciana. The parish name, when translated, from the Spanish, means "happy land," but only recently a Negro youth who argued with a white man was found floating down a river, his skull cracked open. The Ku



Rev. Carter goes over registration forms with others preparing to defy Klan hostility. The right to vote, for a Negro in the South, is very hard to come by.



Tenant farmer John Hamilton, 65, was called out at night by Klan and threatened with death if he tried to become a voter. Such threats are all too common.



James Payne was smashed across the nose with a rifle butt. "Do you know you're supposed to die tonight?" he was asked menacingly. It wasn't pleasant.

Klux Klan had burned crosses and made night visits to Negroes getting out of their places. White landowners had warned Negro sharecroppers they would be evicted and forced to pay their debts immediately if they sought to register.

There was a quiet tenseness in the morning air as Rev. Carter pulled up at the lodge hall. Meeting time had been set for 8 a.m. and he was 15 minutes early. Up to now everything had been planned with precision. The October 17th date had deliberately been picked because it came after the group, most of whom were sweet potato farmers, had sold their crop to the local canner. This way, they felt, there could be no eco-

nomie reprisals from the whites. Now the little band boarded a school bus driven by John Brannon. As they made the 20-minute drive, uncertain of their coming fate, some made last minute checks of the printed questions they expected to answer to qualify for voting. Others choose to talk about everything but the coming events. "We're going down here," a man said solemnly. "We ain't gonna fight and we ain't gonna run. Rev. Carter went down to register and he wasn't killed and we ain't gonna get killed either."

The bus pulled up in front of the St. Francisville courthouse. About 100 whites milled around in front of the



building. Rev. Carter and the other Negroes were forced to wait outside while the registrar processed eight white prospective voters. The Negroes piled out of the bus and sat on the ground across the street in front of an iron fence surrounding a cemetery. The last Negro who had tried to register was hanged in that cemetery, according to rumor. "Look at 'em over there like a bunch of buzzards," shouted one white. "Look like coons," taunted another. "Are those your good niggers?" shouted still another white man. Curses and racial epithets disturbed the morning air.

Rev. Carter and his group merely talked among themselves, eating a noon hour lunch of salami sandwiches and waiting until two o'clock before the registrar agreed to take them in one's and two's. The minister walked to the courthouse front door with CORE's Ronnie Moore. Six whites sat together on the stairs. "You couldn't get through them without squeezing sideways," Rev. Carter recalled. "We stopped four or five feet back and Ronnie said: 'Let's turn around Rev. They've blocked the way.'"

"You black s.o.b., come on in here!" shouted a white man. "Come on in!" The minister and his companion turned away and headed toward a side door. About that time three U. S. Justice Dept. officials hurried from across the street. One stationed himself outside the side door. Another stepped just inside the door and the third walked down the hall to the sheriff's office. Rev. Carter and Moore reached the registrar's closed office door. "I wouldn't open it," the minister recalled. "I let Ronnie do it. Then I walked in and the secretary met me and said, 'Come on in Joe.'" He had been Rev. Carter's boyhood playmate.

They had him produce a driver's license for identification then asked him to read a wall sign which said he had 40 minutes to finish the test. When Registrar Harvey handed him the test forms, he looked at his watch and Rev. Carter consulted his as the noise of the mob filtered through windows opened because of the 90-degree temperature. The time was 2:01 p.m. Nineteen minutes later he returned the cards to the registrar who examined them with his secretary for about 16 minutes, turning them over and over. Finally the secretary said: "I don't see a damn thing wrong with this." Registrar Harvey objected that only four questions had been answered correctly. "It only requires four," answered the secretary. "He has done passed."

Rev. Carter signed a vote registration book and received a receipt. As he left the courthouse, a photographer snapped him. "Take his picture," shouted a member of the white mob. "It may be the last one he takes."

It was a highly possible prophecy, the minister knew, as he told a reporter: "They probably won't bother me now, but one day I'll drive down the road. Some white man will jump

out of his car saying I tried to run him into a ditch, take out his pistol and shoot me."

Yet the threat of death had not blotted out the minister's reasons for wanting to register and vote. All of his life he and fellow Negroes had been told they were not to register because they outnumber whites in the parish



CORE field worker Mini Finegold, a '63 Swarthmore graduate, conducts voter registration clinic in West Feliciana. Feliciana means "Happy Land."

by more than three to one. Thus, until October 17, no Negroes, technically, had qualified to vote although state records show four white illiterates are registered. Rev. Carter had been trying to register ever since 1955 when he was nearly run out of town. He was determined to vote. "No Negroes are given state or Parish jobs, like road repair," he explained. "You could go to Parish officials and they'd listen to you if you had a justified complaint and if you were a voter. Right now, the whites have all of the public offices even though they're a minority. As a voter I could serve on juries."

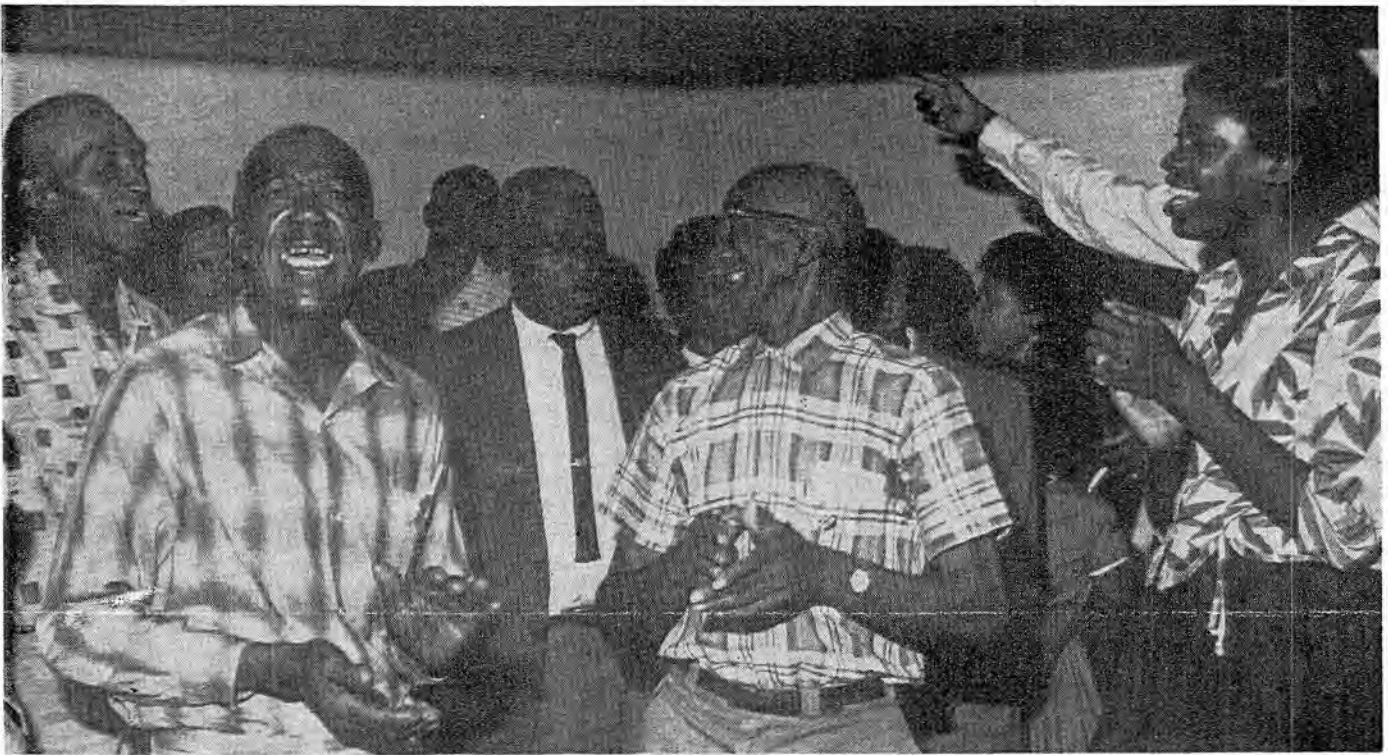
The bill of particulars continued.

"We have poor suffering people who don't have enough to eat," Rev. Carter said, "but the Police Jury Officials (the Parish governing body) have decided against accepting Government surplus food. They say we don't need it. They're mostly storekeepers and think if Negroes get free food they won't work and the storekeepers will lose business. As voters we could correct this situation and get Government food."

Furthermore: "By voting I could buy land for my own home," said Rev. Carter. "Negroes who want to buy land have to go outside the Parish. Land sales here only go on amongst whites. As a voter I might find out about some public land sales. When I think about it, I don't know anything about how things are run around here and what's going on. With voting I might be able to get a better road." The latter possibility appealed to him because he lives three miles off a paved highway and roads to his farm are gravel and dirt.

The day after Rev. Carter registered, three or four trucks drove up with dimmed lights about midnight behind the farmhouse of his neighbor, bus driver John Brannon. Men said to be klansmen fired rifles into the air, frightening Brannon's wife who was home alone. The shots awakened Rev. Carter, who lives at the end of a road. He readied himself to climb a hill near his house. Intruders coming up the road would be caught in a crossfire between himself and his son-in-law. "If they want a fight, we'll fight," he explained. "If I have to die, I'd rather die for right. I value my life even more since I became a registered voter."

That same night, whites visited the homes of James Payne, 44, and John Hamilton, 65, both tenants on the farm of white Daniel Lee. "At about 11:30 that night a car drove up to my house," Payne told a Justice Dept. official. "A white man called out my name. I dressed and put a pistol in my pocket. When I recognized Mr. Dan, I went out. He was with several other white men who I didn't know. He asked me where I had been that day. I told him to St. Francisville, to register." Mr. Dan told me the house was surrounded and these men had come to kill me. He said he had pleaded with them not to do it. While he was talking to me, one of the men hit me across the nose with the butt of a rifle and knocked me down. They searched me and took my gun. All this time I pleaded with them for my life and my family's lives. I told them some of my children were little bitty. Counting me and my wife, we're 12 head. The man who took my gun asked me if I believed that me and Hamilton were supposed to die that night. I told him I believed it. He made me say it. I begged for our lives. He sat me on a block of wood. He said he didn't know whether my gun worked then he shot it between my legs on the ground and shot it once toward the house. Then he ordered me to leave town and told me: 'If you come back, you won't have to come out. We'll have



*A CORE voter registration clinic ends with singing of "This Little Light of Mine."*

you surrounded and burn your house down with you and your family in it. We'll be sure you're dead and stay 'til the last plank burns!' When they left, he told me to sit on the block of wood and be sure not to move 'til they were out of sight."

John Hamilton related a similar

story. Klansmen had also threatened him that night and he had begged for his life. Landlord Daniel Lee had forced a promise from him that he would not attempt to register again. But Rev. Carter and 12 other Negroes have registered and many others are only awaiting the settlement of a government suit

against discriminatory registration procedures in the Parish. On Dec. 7 he voted for the first time in his life, even though he has heard rumors that he is going to be "burned out of the parish." He says simply: "I thanked the Lord that He let me live long enough to vote."

The struggle for equality in America will not be won in the law courts and legislatures alone. Certainly, we need effective civil rights legislation and the fair interpretation by the courts of constitutional guarantees and rights. But we also require a willingness to assert those rights in the face of bigotry and threats of violence. This article, reprinted from *Ebony* magazine, relates how a group of Negroes in a remote Louisiana parish asserted their rights. May their number increase.

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