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SCOPE in Charleston County, South Carolina by Bruce Miroff

by Brice Miroff

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Eleven SCOPE volunteers from the Bay Area of California were initially assigned to Charleston County, South Carolina, in the summer of 1965. Four of these volunteers soon moved to nearby Berkeley County, with a fifth subsequently joining them. The following account of SCOPE in Charleston County, I must say at the outset, is hindered by sketchy contemporaneous data and the pitfalls of relying on memory. Some individuals in the Charleston project may not get the full treatment they deserve. The latter part of the chapter is mostly rooted in my own experiences during the latter part of the summer. Throughout, I have tried to do the best I can in reconstructing events that occurred over fifty years ago. Most important, I have tried to capture some of the quintessential experiences that made the summer of 1965 such a remarkable moment in the lives of these SCOPE volunteers.

Bay Area volunteers traveled across the country to the SCOPE orientation in Atlanta in three cars, one a large rented Mercury. The largest contingent was from the University of California, Berkeley: Florence Jones, John Kimball, Sherie Holbrook Labedis, Pat Lang, Bruce Miroff, Ray Nelson, and Carol Sanders. John Allen came from Hastings Law School in San Francisco, Nellie Habegger from Stanford University in Palo Alto, Joan Kennedy from the University of San Francisco, and Julie TenBrink from Modesto Junior College. At the end of the Atlanta orientation, the Bay Area group was sent to Charleston County. Some volunteers drove in Ray Nelson's VW bug, and others in John Kimball's sports car, but the majority took an overnight Trailways Bus, arriving in Charleston on Sunday, June 20.

The SCOPE point person in Charleston County was Esau Jenkins. Then in his sixties, Esau was a prosperous motel and tavern owner. Only later did I learn that he was one of the unsung heroes of the "long civil rights movement" that began decades before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954. Esau was active in voter registration in his native Johns Island and throughout Charleston County beginning in the late 1940s. Working with Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, in partnership with the legendary Septima Clark, he created a Citizenship School on Johns Island in 1957 that became a model throughout the South.

Charleston SCOPE was quickly put to work canvassing for voter registration in African-American neighborhoods of the city. Our canvassing teams included local black youth affiliated with the NAACP, which had its own voter-registration project that summer. Coming right after the inspiration and idealism of the Atlanta orientation, SCOPE volunteers' first experiences were disheartening. Few if any of us were prepared for the overwhelming poverty we encountered in the city's poorer areas. Rundown and crumbling houses and shacks, children wearing old clothes and rags, babies in diapers playing in the dirt, the smell of rotting garbage in the heat of the day—these were the counterpoint to the "beautiful and historic Charleston" (the white areas) in the city's advertisements. Inside of the houses, the furnishings were almost as bleak, often with only a couple of beds for a woman, her mother, and her five or six children.

But it was not only the physical features of poverty that were so discouraging to the volunteers; it was equally their impact on peoples' spirits. Canvassing in these neighborhoods seemed to be an exercise in futility. Some of those who answered our knocks on their doors were hostile and some were scared. But the prevalent response was apathy. The misery of their situation

seemed to have sapped them of hope. The energy and courage so recently on display at SCLC's Selma to Montgomery March seemed like a world away from urban black Charleston. After a short time in Charleston, four of our group—Florence Jones, John Kimball, Nellie Habegger, and Sherie Holbrook Labedis—were dispatched to rural Berkeley County. Sherie has told their story in her memoir, *You Came Here to Die, Didn't You*. Joan Kennedy, Pat Lang, Ray Nelson, Carol Sanders, and Julie Ten Brink remained in Charleston, although Carol later moved full time to Berkeley County. The SCOPE volunteers who remained in Charleston concentrated on voter registration and voter education. They picketed a grocery store that was located in a mostly black area of the city yet only employed white workers. Joan, Pat, Ray, and Julie also made trips to Berkeley County to help out the SCOPE team there.

Several weeks after arriving in Charleston, John Allen and I shifted our work to James Island, one of the Sea Islands that lay closest to the city. Before this move to James Island, however, the strangest event of the summer took place on the Fourth of July: the arrest of the Edisto 13. After two solid weeks of canvassing in Charleston, July 4 was our first day off. A mixed group of civil rights workers—five from SCOPE (Joan Kennedy, Bruce Miroff, Ray Nelson, Carol Sanders, and Julie Ten Brink), four other summer volunteers from the North (NAACP law clerks Dennis Barrett and David Lawlor, Head Start teacher Marian Bennett, and Hazel Daniel) and four youth from the black community (Louis Bryant, Joseph Frasier, Geraldine Gallashaw, and Henry Williams)—wanted to have a picnic and escape the heat at the beach. The nearest location to Charleston, Folly Beach, was out of the question because whites had previously assaulted black swimmers there. Our group chose to travel to a beach on Edisto Island, about 45 miles south of the city, because it was supposed to be safer.

Arriving at Edisto beach, which was packed with a holiday crowd, we were met by the proprietor of a pavilion/restaurant, who informed our racially mixed group (seven whites and six blacks) that we could not picnic on private beachfront. Asked where we could hold our picnic, he pointed to a state park down the way. When we reached the boundary that divided the state beach from the private beach, a sign said that the park was closed (to avoid desegregation). However, a metal cable to keep trespassers out had been pressed down into the sand, and we could see about a dozen people, all of them white, using the state beach. Stepping over the barrier, we proceeded about 25 feet onto state park land and laid down our picnic gear. Within minutes, and before we could begin the picnic, a Charleston County patrolman came up to us and announced that we were all under arrest for trespassing. We protested that the arrest was discriminatory, since the whites already enjoying themselves on the beach were not subject to arrest. In retrospect, we were probably fortunate that we were arrested and taken to jail, since a large and somewhat rowdy group of young whites who had been on the private beach were gathering and might have harmed us in the absence of law enforcement.

Several other law enforcement officers soon arrived and the Edisto 13 were driven in two police cars back to Charleston and its county jail. We were packed like sardines into the two cars—six of us in the back of one police car, six in the back and one in the passenger seat of the other, with the women sitting on the laps of the men. It was hard enough for the drivers that they were transporting a racially integrated group; even more annoying to them was that we sang freedom songs the whole way back. The Charleston County jail was segregated by both race and sex; white and black males were placed in separate drunk tanks, filled with holiday tipplers. Fortunately, our incarceration was brief: lawyer Russell Brown, then chairman of the Charleston branch of the NAACP, carried a stack of bail bonds as a routine matter and arranged for our release after a few hours.

Even stranger than our arrest was our trial two days later. We had to return to Edisto Island to be tried by the local magistrate, W. E. Seabrook, in the living room of his house in the woods. The trial was rich in comedy, starting with the mismatch between the magistrate and a deputy county attorney on one side and our defense team on the other. From all appearances, Magistrate Seabrook had never been trained in the law, and he was unconcerned about revealing the extent of his racial biases in his comments. Before the proceedings even got under way, he announced that the 13 defendants were communists and that he did not even see the need for a trial because all of the facts were already printed in the newspapers. By contrast, our three-man defense team was headed by Matthew Perry, the lead NAACP attorney for the state of South Carolina.

Perry repeatedly presented motions to the magistrate that he dismiss the charges or disqualify himself because of his biased comments. Magistrate Seabrook plunged ahead, oblivious to matters of law. In response to Perry's legal motions, Seabrook remarked that "you are talking Greek to me sometimes." Hearing another legal motion from Perry, he replied: "I am not much on these little small points. I jump over them." Seabrook banished our supporters from the local black community from his "courtroom," and when Perry reminded him of the right to a public trial, he replied that the public "haven't got any business here no way." Midway through the proceedings, before the defense could present its case, he announced from the "bench" (his easy chair): "It's a simple case of trespassing. These people came down here with the purpose of entering on this State Park. They came from California, New England, Charleston, and I don't know where else, and they had the specific idea of going down there to enter on this State Park, although they knew that the law is plainly on the books that they couldn't get in."

At times the testimony from the arresting officers was nearly as bizarre. Officer Harmon, the first patrolman to arrive, insisted that he had counted fifteen of us on the beach: "There was fifteen in the crowd, but two of them walked off while I was talking with them, while I was writing the tickets...I couldn't leave thirteen people and walk a quarter of a mile down the beach or less to try to catch them because thirteen people would have been gone when I got back." Throughout the trial, Magistrate Seabrook, having judged the case beforehand, was impatient to conclude the testimony. To no one's surprise, once the lawyers finished, Seabrook swiftly pronounced us guilty, with a sentence for each defendant of a \$50 fine or 30 days in jail. The trial transcript, from which the above quotes have been drawn, was so full of embarrassing errors by the presiding magistrate that the convictions were reversed a few months later by the Charleston County Court.

Shortly after the Edisto trial on July 6, Esau Jenkins sent John Allen and me to James Island (one of the Sea Islands), a dozen miles south of Charleston and adjacent to Johns Island. A minister from one of the four black churches on James Island had requested the assistance of civil-rights workers. John and I, aided by Joe Frasier, a nineteen-year-old African American from Charleston, caught a ride to the island and back on weekdays to canvass for voter registration. Around July 25, John and I moved out to the island, sleeping in an unfinished house that a tavern owner was building and taking our meals with a family next door (we reimbursed the family from the small weekly stipend that we were receiving from SCOPE). After the frustration of canvassing in the city of Charleston, our experience on rural James Island was a vast improvement. At that time, James Island was predominantly black. Many of the African-American families living there could trace their roots back to slaves laboring on the island's plantations. Since Emancipation, there had been considerable intermarriage between these families. Compared to the isolated and apathetic residents in the poorer neighborhoods

of Charleston, the people of James Island comprised a vibrant historic community. When we canvassed down the dirt roads, the people on whose doors we knocked were less suspicious and much warmer than in Charleston. Rather than interlopers, over time we were increasingly treated as friends.

Black poverty was probably as common on James Island as in the city. Many of the homes we visited were little more than rickety shacks. Yet even poverty felt different on the island. When people emerged from their homes, they saw green fields and trees rather than urban squalor. When they went to public places, whether these were churches or bars, it was often to meet with kin rather than to mingle with strangers. Moreover, the community was not entirely marked by poverty. James Island's black community included a solid core of skilled workers, making good wages, who commuted to jobs in Charleston thanks to one of the ironic side-effects of segregation. At that time, the segregationist congressman from Charleston, Mendel Rivers, was the powerful chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Under his influence, federal dollars lavishly flowed to Charleston for its navy base, naval shipyard, and air force base. Since the federal government was the one equal opportunity employer in the area, the dollars Rivers brought to his district benefited black workers as well as white ones. There were some white residents on James Island at that time. Most appeared to be commuters to the city, residing in newly-constructed subdivisions on the section of the island closest to Charleston. They seemed to have little interest in island affairs, which was certainly a good thing for civil rights volunteers trying to increase black voter registration. In the roughly seven weeks John and I worked on James Island, we only encountered a handful of white people. Save for one minor incident, we never felt threatened by whites, unlike our colleagues coping with the Klan in Berkeley County.

The minister on James Island who had requested our presence soon backed away, apparently worried about white reactions to a civil rights project. But we found another sponsor and mentor in Christopher Bright, who owned a small grocery store. A native of James Island, Bright had moved up to New York, where he had been politically active, then retired back to the island and purchased the store. He was politically savvy and tough, and his advice and fearlessness were invaluable to us.

With Bright's guidance, John and I developed a three-part strategy for voter registration on James Island: canvassing door to door on weekdays, citizenship schools two evenings a week, and brief speaking appearances at the island's four black churches on Sundays. Charleston County only permitted voter registration the first Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of each month (August 2-4 in 1965), and rural residents had to travel to downtown Charleston in order to register. The application form functioned as a literacy test, administered in such a way as to reject a significant number of African Americans while making it easy for whites to register. When we first began working on James Island, the August registration dates were only three weeks away.

Canvassing occupied the bulk of our time and was a major drain on our energies. Yet it was more rewarding on James Island than it had been in Charleston. Each weekday we would head out early to a different neighborhood, walking or catching a ride if possible. Trudging down dirt roads, we would stop at every house. Usually it was women and children who were at home, with the men out working in the fields or in the city. Everyone opened their doors to us. Over time, with our citizenship schools and talks in the churches, more and more people recognized us and greeted us warmly. We spoke to each person we met about the importance of voting for personal dignity and collective power, and we emphasized

the possibility of registering in early August. Almost all of those to whom we spoke seemed receptive to our message.

Two evenings a week, we held citizenship schools, whose focus was on preparing people for the registration days. In part, the schools were designed to excite the “students” about becoming a voter. But there was also a pressing need to teach very basic literacy so that the application form could be successfully completed. Particularly among older island residents, there was a high rate of illiteracy; many could not write their names or addresses. It could be painful to watch elderly people struggle to learn what they had never been taught as a child. Yet it also could produce an impressive exhibition of determination. One man particularly stood out in my experience. A hardworking, successful farmer in his sixties or seventies, he was a pillar of the black community. Yet he had to place himself in the position of a child when learning how to write his name. He did so willingly because he badly wanted to register to vote as an expression of personal dignity and commitment to the welfare of his people.

Our citizenship schools were a great success. Six people showed up at our first class, twenty-four at the second, and forty-five at the third. John and I were soon over our heads, but we were able to get help. Some younger black residents of the island who were fully literate showed up to volunteer as instructors. We also had a few white helpers from Charleston. Two young men, home for the summer from their colleges in the North, taught in the schools (and also did some canvassing with us). Later, two sisters from an old Charleston family came out to help us; they too went to school in the North. Their involvement was a hopeful sign of a new generation of educated white southerners who would hold progressive views about racial justice.

Each Sunday, John and I would attend services at the one of the island's four churches. Having never been at an African-American Sunday service before, the experience was thrilling to me. The emotion and fervor in the singing and in the call-and-response between minister and congregation vividly expressed both the trials and the visionary hopes of the island's black community. Rotating between the churches, we were allowed to speak for a few minutes about the voter registration drive. Once when I was speaking, a bevy of gnats flew into my mouth. Not knowing what to do, I swallowed them and continued my talk.

Our talks at the island's churches were a critical component of mobilization, helping draw larger crowds to the citizenship schools and implanting the August registration dates firmly in people's minds. These Sunday visits to the churches also served another purpose: fundraising for the registration campaign. A collection plate was passed around to provide us with money for two critical components of our strategy for August registration. First, we planned a rally/party to generate excitement, to be held a few days before the August dates. Second, since many island residents did not own cars, we needed to rent a bus to take potential registrants into the city of Charleston on August 2, 3, and 4.

In conjunction with a newly-formed James Island Voters League, we held a mass meeting on the evening of July 30, the Friday before registration days. This event took place in the Sol Legare area of the island, in a long-standing black community of its own adjoining the marshy Stono River, which led out to the Atlantic Ocean. A big draw was the food: this was a “crab-cracking party,” with crabs and shrimp supplied by the Backman Seafood Company, a black business that exists to this day. Speakers and freedom songs were the business of the evening; seafood and beer were the fun. We drew a large crowd and whipped up enthusiasm for registering to vote.

In order to transport people into Charleston and back on the three weekdays at the beginning of August, John and I needed not only to rent a bus but to create a bus route and schedule. Since James Island was spread out, and we could not expect potential registrants lacking cars to walk long distances in the heat to catch a bus, we publicized the times for our "bus stops" at well-known locations. Our plan was effective: each of the three days, the bus was relatively full.

Eager to see how our plan was working, John and I waited at one of the bus stops for people to return from the city. Most people were pleased and proud, having succeeded in registering. Yet my most vivid memory was of a woman whose application had been rejected by the registrar on the first day. This woman suffered from a nervous condition, and when we spoke with her after her bus returned she was extremely agitated. The registrar, she said, had intimidated her, and she had broken down in his office. She was in tears as she told her story. At the end of her story, however, she pulled herself together and said, "I'm going back tomorrow to try again." It took a while before we received information on the results of our efforts for the August dates. Charleston County data showed 115 new registrants from James Island. Unsure of how well we had done, we looked to Esau Jenkins for his reaction. When Esau showed that he was pleased, we were deeply gratified.

Two days after Charleston County closed its registration book for August, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. The new law, John and I knew, would fundamentally change the process of voter registration throughout the South. Since the SCOPE project was coming to an end in late August, we would not be around for the early September registration days. Our remaining three weeks on James Island, therefore, would be geared to preparing people for a new system designed to facilitate, rather than to frustrate, their exercise of their constitutional rights. We continued to canvass throughout the island, trying to locate and encourage people who were still unregistered. We also began to turn our attention to what voter registration efforts might continue on James Island after we departed for home and school in the fall. We had met a number of young people on the island, generally better educated and politically aware than the older folk, and we hoped that some of those who had helped us in our registration campaign would take over the effort.

Our time on James Island was brief, and our work was often exhausting, but the experience was unforgettable. One of its most satisfying elements was our increasingly warm immersion in the black community. Toward the end of our stay, we were even invited to a wedding. By the end of our work, almost everyone seemed to know who we were and that we were on their side. The first week we canvassed on James Island, a little girl answered our knock and yelled back to her mother that it was the "insurance men" (the only white people who ever came to their door). The last week we canvassed, another little girl answered our knock and yelled back to her mother that it was the "voting men."

As the moment for our departure neared, I was struck by two thoughts about my time living in the black community on James Island. The first was a reversal of the conventional feelings of white people about race in America. Put simply, I felt safe living in the black community and unsafe when I ventured out into white areas of Charleston. The second involved some guilt toward the black community because of the transient nature of my involvement. Soon I would return to a comfortable life in California and all of the advantages of an education at Berkeley. The people among whom I had briefly lived would have to carry on their struggle for equality with fewer resources and for the long haul. I was proud of my participation in SCOPE, but I recognized how small was my contribution compared to those individuals whose whole

lives were devoted to the cause of civil rights.

Postscript: The Return of the Edisto 13

In 2005, the Edisto 13 held a reunion. Marian Bennett, one of the northern volunteers in 1965, came up with the plan for a reunion, reaching out to those whom she could track down with the charming idea of finally enjoying the Fourth of July picnic on Edisto Beach that our arrest had cut short forty years earlier. Six of the Edisto 13 could not be located or were unable to come, but seven showed up in Charleston on July 3—two from SCOPE (Julie Ten Brink and me), Marian and the two law clerks for the NAACP, and two from Charleston's black community. On the evening of July 3, we had a group dinner at the Francis Marion Hotel in downtown Charleston. One of the special pleasures of the event was the presence of all three of our lawyers in 1965: Matthew Perry, Bernard Fielding, and Russell Brown. Matthew Perry, then 84, drove all the way from Columbia for the dinner. He told us that when he first practiced law in South Carolina, he was not permitted under segregation rules to be present in the courtroom until his client's case was called. Fourteen years after he represented us on Edisto Island, he was appointed by President Jimmy Carter as the first African-American Federal District Court judge in the history of South Carolina. Today, the federal courthouse for the state bears his name.

The morning of the 4th, hot and humid just like forty years before, the seven arrestees, along with a few others, drove down to Edisto Island, our baskets stocked with a far more ample picnic lunch this time. The scene we encountered was very different than in 1965. Where the pavilion/restaurant had stood and the white beachgoers had laid out their towels and frolicked in the surf, expensive private homes now occupied the oceanfront. Edisto Island has become a vacation destination for people from all over the country. We headed for the state park where our arrest had taken place. We had learned the night before from our lawyers that thanks to our case, along with a few others, legal appeals by the NAACP had successfully forced the opening of the park to all visitors in 1966.

Edisto Beach State Park is beautiful, with wooded groves for picnics and a lovely beach leading to the warm southern waters of the Atlantic Ocean. It was a day for nostalgia—and also for marveling at the changes that forty years had brought. The picnickers at the state park came in all hues and ages, but it appeared that the majority were African American. Whereas the private oceanfront was now available mostly to people who could afford high house prices or weekly rental costs, the state park offered even more lovely surroundings for those with modest incomes. Eating our picnic lunches, and playing on the beach, we drank in the simple pleasures we had been denied forty years before. And we felt some pride that our arrest, and ludicrous trial, in 1965 had helped to make these pleasures available to people regardless of race or class. Looking out at the families enjoying the holiday at the state beach, Geraldine Gallashaw expressed the sentiment of our group: "These people out here will never know. But that's all right. They're having a good time and they don't even have to think about half of the things that we had to think about. It's a different world now."

Before catching my plane the next afternoon, my son Nick (who had flown in from California to report on the reunion for the Oakland Tribune) and I drove out to James Island. I was in for a shock. The handful of white subdivisions that we had avoided while canvassing in 1965 turned out to be harbingers of the island's future. As we drove up and down the island, very little was recognizable. In the center of the island, strip malls occupied both sides of the main highway, and looming over the main shopping area was the inevitable Walmart. Off of the main highway, the dirt roads were now almost all paved, and they led to one middle-class

(and occasional luxury) housing development after another. Subsequently I learned that part of James Island had been annexed by the city of Charleston, apparently to increase the white voting population.

As mile after mile of white suburbia confronted us, I began to get the depressing feeling that the historic black community on James Island, which had been such a welcoming place in 1965, had largely vanished. Finally, we took a side road to the Sol Legare area on the Stono River, where we had held our rally and "crab-cracking" party days before the registration books opened. We could see that this area was little changed and that the residents were still African Americans. I stopped at a store and explained to the man working there that I had been a civil rights worker on the island forty years ago. I asked him what had happened to its black population. He told me that white developers had come to the island, offering sums of money for property that low-income black residents could not resist, and that much of black James Island had moved away and was widely scattered.

The return to James Island was bittersweet. For a moment, I felt that much of SCOPE's success on the island had been reversed by the shrinking of the community that we had hoped to empower. Further, annexation by the city was one more sign of how white South Carolinians perpetuated their political domination long after Jim Crow had been overthrown. But I was relieved by the subsequent thought that the SCOPE voter registration campaign on James Island, like so many other SCOPE campaigns throughout the South, had left a positive residue of hope and struggle. The people for whose enfranchisement we had worked in 1965 remained an indelible example of human spirit, courage, and commitment. Whatever we had done for them, they had done more for us.