

VICKSBURG CITIZENS' APPEAL

Post Office Box 1112

Mrs. Aaron Shirley
Editor - In - Chief

Mrs. Dilla E. Irwin
Managing Editor

VICKSBURG, MISSISSIPPI

Robert Penn Warren
English Department
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

November 3, 1965

Dear Mr. Warren:

I am writing to tell you about a unique journalistic venture in Mississippi which should interest you.

Last summer a community newspaper, the Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal, was begun by civil rights workers and local Negroes. I need not impress upon you the importance of a paper which gives attentive and responsible coverage of civil rights news, which prints Negro community news, and which can be an impetus for better race relations in the state. The Citizens' Appeal shows great promise for surviving as a permanent institution, financially self-sufficient, with its own local staff. Unfortunately, the paper needs "pump-priming" funds.

I had hoped that as a writer, you would find the paper worthwhile enough to offer it a financial contribution. I might mention that I am a Yale graduate (1963) and a member of Elihu. While these ties hardly constitute compelling grounds for making a donation, I mention them by way of introduction. I shall be working for the paper for a year, along with my wife and hope to leave it a flourishing enterprise.

The enclosed copies and the fund-raising letter provide more detailed information about the nature and future direction of this paper.

Sincerely,



David Emmons



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Mrs. Aaron Shirley
Editor In Chief

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Dear

In a troubled state the VCA is a new and unique kind of paper. Founded by local Negroes and civil rights workers last October, the paper has been a forum for Negro opinion, a recorder of civil rights and community news, a catalyst for social change and improved race relations, and a medium for Negro self-criticism and self-improvement. If the paper has a philosophy, it is that the truth can make men free.

As a graduate student with journalistic experience (managing editor, Yale Daily News, reporter, Chicago Daily News) I am going to Vicksburg, for a year, to help the VCA in anyway I can. I am writing to tell you about the VCA and to ask you, on its behalf, for needed financial support.

Typically, Vicksburg Negroes call the VCA "our paper." That is a strong measure of its success. The VCA is largely owned and directed by local Negroes. They and others, who range from a school teacher to a retired railroad porter, do the writing and mechanics for publication. Newsboys make home deliveries; local Negro businesses sell the paper in their establishments and take advertising.

And the Negroes of Vicksburg read - or have read to them - the VCA with unmatched thoroughness. Civil rights workers have noticed editorials and front-page stories pasted to the mantel, the front door, the kitchen wall as a reminder and badge of honor. In a voter registration drive last fall, civil rights workers came upon many Negroes who had memorized sections of articles from the paper. One elderly and arthritic lady had, in fact, committed an entire editorial on the right to vote to memory. It meant that much to her.

Vicksburg is a town of 30,000, 48% of whom are Negroes, yet the only daily paper, the Evening Post, relegated news of the Negro community to a demeaning column, "Among Colored Folks." The VCA has changed that. It has given the Negro a new public identity - and thus a dignity - he was previously denied; it has covered the civil rights movement with an accuracy and attentiveness lacking in the Post and other Mississippi papers; it has offered an editorial view rarely aired in the state.

In all this, the VCA has helped to foster a new boldness and confidence in the Negro community. Vicksburg Negroes rarely read about themselves and their friends before. They never read a criticism of poor facilities in Negro schools, or an account of police brutality against Negroes in jail. Before the VCA, these indignities were suffered privately, unacknowledged by the municipal authorities. I like to think that the VCA's articles on the schools had something to do with letters of complaint sent to the superintendent. I like to think that its series on employment opportunities was one reason for increased job applications to local businesses.

The paper's first editorial said, "The hope is that the Citizens' Appeal might one day reach into the white community, that it might one day close this town's tragic information gap." Today, that goal is a little closer. One white lady called up recently to ask if she had won the paper's lucky name contest. Another gets every issue for herself and her co-workers. Two white men have asked for copies of back issues. Three white housewives have come to the paper's office and helped with make-up. And four white merchants have bought advertisements. These examples of interest in the paper hardly constitute broad acceptance by the white community, but they do reflect precious and growing support. Someday, this may mean that the VCA will not merely be "our paper," but, to both races, a "good paper."

Mississippi does not bear unwanted children easily. In the face of fear, the paper's local circulation and advertising have been slow to increase, but they are increasing. Advertising income is approaching \$40 an issue; local circulation, which


started at 800, has risen to 1500, bringing in about \$100 an issue; out-of-state subscriptions have grown to more than 250. The cost of a press run of 2,000 copies is \$250. The \$80 loss for each issue is covered by money donated for the founding of the paper, but these funds will soon be exhausted.

With a concerted effort this summer to expand circulation through Warren County and the 3rd congressional district, surrounding Vicksburg, the paper hopefully will reach its financial goal of breaking even. But to do even this, funds will be needed for the following purposes:

- \$1,500 contingency fund to cover losses through the summer if necessary
- \$3,500 for a used justewriter to replace the varityper now on its last legs
- \$ 600 for a "Headliner" to set heads now done completely by cutting and pasting
- \$ 400 for a summer apprenticeship program to train local reporters

The VCA must not starve, a poor child, unspent and full of promise. If \$6,000 can be raised with your help - and the help of others - the VCA could become a permanent fixture in the Vicksburg area. And if the VCA can survive, it means that similar papers elsewhere could survive too.

Sincerely,


David Emmons
for the VCA

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CLIP AND SEND TO: Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal
Box 1112
Vicksburg, Miss.

Please send me a year's subscription to the Citizens' Appeal; enclosed is my payment (made out to the Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal) of

_\$10 _\$20 _\$50 _\$100 _\$200 _\$more

name: _____

address: _____

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