

Must Do Something

English Aristocrat Is Civil Rights Worker

WASHINGTON (HTNS) — When Constance Romilly drove into Washington recently for a brief visit, the first thing she did was make a long-distant call to Atlanta to announce that she had arrived unharmed.

"Maybe we seem a little paranoid," she explained. "But since the disappearance of those three civil rights workers, we always check in with the SNCC office when we travel."

SNCC, pronounced Snick, is the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, guiding force behind the Mississippi Summer Project. Constance, pronounced Dinky for reasons "too boring to go into," has worked for almost a year with this Southern-based civil rights organization which conducts voter registration and direct-action programs below the Mason-Dixon line.

The pretty, blue-eyed 23-year old is the daughter of the

late Esmond Romilly, nephew of Sir Winston Churchill, and Jessica Mitford, author of the best-selling "American Way of Death." She is also niece to a colorful assortment of English aristocrats including the Duchess of Devonshire and the caustic novelist Nancy Mitford.

Before taking over last fall as northern co-ordinator of SNCC's national office in Atlanta, Miss Romilly flew to England to attend the wedding of her cousin Emma, daughter of the Duke and Duchess. She spent a luxurious week at Chatsworth Castle in Derbyshire, lunched and dined with Lady Dorothy Macmillan, wife of the former British Prime Minister, and mingled with wedding guests straight out of the pages of Debrett's Peerage.

Shares Apartment

Then she headed for Georgia, where home is an apartment shared with six other girls in one of the Negro sections of town, and work is walking distance away in a white stucco office above a tailor shop.

"I rarely see the white people of Atlanta," said Miss Romilly, "except during demonstrations. Then they can get quite vicious."

But since the passage of the 1964 civil rights bill, she said, "there are opening horizons in the city." So far the chief impact of desegregation on Miss Romilly has been culinary.

"Instead of eating fried chicken or hamburgers every day at one of the few unsegregated restaurants," she declared gleefully, "I can at last have Italian food, Chinese food, and pastrami sandwiches."

Miss Romilly went to work for the civil rights organization because, she said, "there is nothing else to do."

"I can't sit in a comfortable home and read all about it in the newspapers. I can't live in a country where this situation exists and not do something about it actively."

During the past year, her job as co-ordinator has chiefly entailed working with friends of SNCC, Northern groups that provide financial backing, conduct supportive demonstrations, and exercise political pressure.

Checks Jails

Lately she has been spending most of her 15-hour day on the phone, checking jails when people from the summer project are missing, keeping pressure on the jailers to make sure that prisoners remain safe, lining up bond money, and gathering and passing on reports of tinderbox situations in Mississippi.

Last month, Miss Romilly made her first frightened and fascinated visit to Greenwood, Miss., where a branch of the SNCC national office is now located.

While she thought she understood the harsh realities of the Deep South, she said,

"I didn't realize how the possibilities of danger affect even the tiniest details of your life."

Precautionary measures were instituted at the very start of the trip, when the two Negroes and three whites were travelling to Mississippi split up into segregated cars to avoid attracting unpleasant attention.

In Greenwood, the Negro family which housed Miss Romilly urged her to back her car into the driveway to conceal the provocative out-of-state license plate.

"Alabama or Louisiana plates might be safe," Dinky said, "but Georgia is considered too liberal."

Later, she was reprimanded for failing to unscrew her car light, which blazed brightly that night when she swung open the door.

"Are you crazy?" she was asked. "You're making yourself a perfect target!"

One of the most ominous sights in Mississippi, Miss Romilly said, were the unlicensed cars and pick-up trucks that cruise the town equipped with large antennas attached to their bumpers.

These antennas announce the presence of special radio equipment which permits three-way communication between cars and a central station. They have frequently been used to organize gang-ups on pedestrians or on lone cars containing civil rights workers.

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