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A Visit to Hyannis

'Reverse Freedom Riders' Stir Anger, Worry on Cape Cod

By CAL BRUMLEY

HYANNIS, Mass.—Major national or world problems sometimes come into sharper focus when they are suddenly thrust upon an ordinarily placid small town.

Racial relations which have come front and center in this little summer resort town on Cape Cod are an example. The Negro problem and the Negroes' problem have been lively topics here since the so-called Reverse Freedom Rides began.

If nothing else the arrival of more than 60 penniless Southern Negroes points up that social attitudes such as racial prejudice and discrimination are difficult to legislate out of existence on either the Federal or local level. Massachusetts has had anti-discrimination laws on the books since the mid-1800s. Yet Cape Codders are bothered and bewildered by the influx of Southern Negroes.

The situation here in this village of 7,000 permanent residents is packed with dramatic elements: Hunger, unemployment, foreign visitors in a strange place, pathos, righteous indignation, self-embarrassing realization of personal prejudices, hypocrisy, national and local politics, and a threat to public and private purses. And not to be overlooked: President Kennedy and others of the Kennedy family spend their summers in adjacent Hyannis Port.

Worry About Costs

Local people would like to counter the ploy of the Citizens Councils, ardent Southern segregation groups which financed the trips north for the Negroes, with a gesture of wholehearted welcome to the new arrivals. But it doesn't quite come off because of worries that the publicity will keep summer visitors away and that the new Negroes will be a more or less permanent welfare expense which may raise the local property tax.

"The Southerners are trying to get our goat and we are trying not to let them," says a town official.

Amis Guthridge, president of the Capital Citizens Council in Little Rock, Ark., says the councils are financing bus trips to Hyannis for these reasons: "We began the program" for unemployed Southern Negroes as a "beneficent and humanitarian" gesture so they can find work and "to help our Negro citizens who are dissatisfied in Arkansas." Also, "we want to see if Northern politicians really love the Negro or whether they love his vote. And we want to acquaint the North, which has been making the South a whipping boy with some Southern problems."

An awareness here of the Southerners' motives fails to take the edge off local resentments. "It's being done to embarrass the Kennedys but the load of caring for these people shouldn't fall upon us," asserts Victor F. Adams, chairman of the board of selectmen, the governing body of the town of Barnstable in which the village of Hyannis is located.

Outsiders tend to view the arrivals here much more philosophically than the local residents. "The movement to Hyannis is insignificant compared to the mass movements

to the North of Negroes from the South which is probably the largest movement of peoples anywhere in the world," says Father James Breeden, a Boston Episcopal minister who participated in last year's Freedom Rides in the South.

Hyannis businessmen, with an admittedly narrow perspective, however, are worried about the monetary aspects of the influx.

"I just hope all this publicity about the influx of Negroes doesn't kill our summer business," says the owner of the two motels on Main Street. Adds Abraham Penn, president of Puritan Clothing Co., a men's and boy's furnishing store, "The publicity will hurt business because everyone thinks we are flooded with these people."

The possible impact on town finances has more immediate substance. Mr. Adams says that if the new Negro families, with a total of 37 children at last count, stay in Hyannis it will cost the town about \$400 per child a year to send them to school. Welfare costs may also mount although the town will be reimbursed by the state and Federal governments. "If enough of these people come in we will have to hire an additional social worker," Mr. Adams says.

The added costs would require a raise in the property tax rate, now \$51.50 per \$1,000 evaluation on assessments that amount to about a third of actual value.

The newly arrived Southern Negroes are housed temporarily in unused National Guard barracks at nearby Camp Edwards. "There just isn't much low-cost housing here for either whites or colored," says selectman Adams. Another city official, however, says there is another factor that makes it difficult for Negroes to obtain housing on Cape Cod. "There's a real, although invisible, color line here," he says.

Some store owners say Negro shoppers are a problem. "When Negroes come into the shop and you don't give them attention they'll report you to the Anti-Discrimination Bureau," says Mrs. L. H. Mitron, who adds that some of her old customers have written "they hear we are overrun with Negroes."

Impact on Wages

There is even some sympathy and admiration for the Southern strategy. A Main Street store owner, who describes himself as a deep thinker, says, "The Southerners have as much right to send Negroes up here as Northerners had to go down there last year on Freedom Rides."

An often-voiced fear is that the new comers will undercut prevailing wage rates. Says a Negro truck driver, "Lots of people are worried that these people will cut wages."

In any event, it will be difficult for the migrants to obtain permanent employment since the unemployment rate during the 10 cool months of the year here is about 17%, according to town officials.

The unemployment rate among the 112,000 non-white people in Massachusetts is considerably higher than among the white population. While the local law prohibits keeping routine statistics by race, the 1960 Federal census showed that non-white employment in the Bay State was 7.4% while the white unemployment rate was 4.1%.

"The difficulties of finding work for these so-called Reverse Freedom Riders points up the fact that our services to find work for colored people are pretty primitive," says Father Breeden. "The Citizens Councils are attempting to make propaganda to show that the North is no bed of roses for Negroes. Unfortunately, this is true."