

Town Meeting: Mississippi 200 1978-1979



It was a time of resurgence in Mississippi in 1978, a time of increased input in local control, a sharp change from the previous decade of violence before the passage of the Voting and Civil Rights Acts. Long-time ICA colleague Ruth Wilson had returned to her birthplace outside of Jackson, Mississippi to lead the Governor's Office of Volunteer Services (later renamed Office of Citizen Participation) at the invitation of Governor Cliff Finch. The Delta Pace Human Development Project had been launched in 1977 and the ICA staff learned to hold effective town meetings in rural communities in the delta. The seeming openness for creating local solutions made town meetings across the State of Mississippi a logical next phase.

ICA staff members Frank Powell, Jeff Roper, and others met with Ruth Wilson to build an ambitious plan to hold 200 town meetings in 9 months across Mississippi under the sponsorship of the Governor's office of Volunteer Services. The effort, christened Town Meeting: Mississippi 200, promised to hold twenty town meetings in each of the ten Planning and Development Districts covering the state. Partial State funding kicked off the town meetings in September 1978 with plans for additional fundraising and a state assembly in June of 1979. To fulfill this goal, multiple teams of two drove throughout the state for nine months, sometimes a thousand miles a week learning the lay of the land as they set up town meetings.

And the staff learned to appreciate the diversity of people who had lived their lives in rural often unincorporated communities. Upon arrival in the community, map in hand, we looked for a store or post office or other gathering place to ask for someone who was known for caring about the community. Having the Governor's office sponsorship made these conversations natural, and a name or two was always given. And once we found the caring person(s)—at their home or place of work—we visited with them about their community and concerns before asking them to set up a town meeting planning meeting. Most importantly, we asked that they pull together a cross-section of the community—someone representing the economic, cultural, and political areas in the community. We didn't use the word, diversity, but that concept was implied. This town meeting planning meeting, ideally scheduled within a week, usually had some 5-20 people in attendance.

At the planning meeting we demonstrated the town meeting process taping butcher paper to a wall, magic marker in hand. To break the ice, we introduced ourselves as having sponsorship of the Governor's office and told brief tales about our travels across the state—where we had last been—where we were headed next—and asked about their community. We asked them about their hopes and dreams for the town, their responses to what was blocking or standing in the way of those hopes and dreams, and finally, we asked them to brainstorm proposals to remove the blocks or contradictions. Recording their responses on the butcher paper for everyone gathered to see gave them about a twenty minute taste of a town meeting. Then we had them reflect on the activity and asked whether or not this exercise would be good for others in the town to experience.

Practically every time we held this kind of meeting, a kind of light went off in the imaginations of those gathered. They seemed to have found in this brief process an authentic way of talking together that did not involve griping or blaming others. And the answers to the questions they gave excited them with new possibilities. They seemed to grasp that the solution to the problems in the community began not outside the community but inside with the residents working together, and they almost always decided to hold a town meeting.

Considering how to publicize the coming town meeting led them to ask who should be invited—and often if the planning

committee was white, they asked if they should invite the black community. We automatically responded, *Whatever you think is best for your town.* And they always looked meaningfully at each other and always said, *Okay, we will invite them.*

The town meetings were held in churches and schools and community centers, often with homemade cakes, often breaking the taboo of bringing blacks and whites together under the same roof to talk without malice about their town, and to eat together and sing.

Some of the Town Meeting: Mississippi 200 town meetings had 10 participants; some had 200. (Once driving a station wagon borrowed from Alabama colleagues, Frances Roper and I hit a deer on the way to a southeast Mississippi town. The car lights damaged from the now dead deer and the coming darkness had us worried—how would we drive to the town meeting in the dark? Standing by the damaged front end of the big borrowed station wagon, we asked a couple who stopped to check on us if they minded removing the deer carcass from the road. Strangely (to us), they asked, *You mean we can have it?* And we drove on then without headlights to a nearby house to ask to use the phone because we were now late for the town meeting. Although no one would open the door, a voice inside asked what we wanted. When we told them we had hit a deer and needed to use their phone, before telling us they had no phone, they asked, *What did you do with it?* Finally as total darkness fell, we came to a home that did have a phone but our town meeting contact did not answer—obviously she was at

the town meeting. But the homeowner, after asking what we did with the deer, drove us to the school where the town meeting was to be held, and when we arrived, some 200 people were waiting for us. When we apologized for being late, having hit a deer, they asked in unison, *What did you do with it?* That turned out to be one of the most energetic town meetings we held.)

At the close of the three hour town meetings, we presented everyone a handwritten or typed document containing the hopes and dreams, contradictions or blocks, and proposals generated during the meeting. Printed on a portable ditto machine, the document also included the song, story, and symbol created by some of the participants in a workshop separate from the group.

The document came to the participants as a little miracle—written content they could take home and not have to wait to receive—and was presented as the story was read, the symbol displayed, and the song sung. We then held a reflection to provide a chance for everyone to respond to the town meeting experience. We asked—*what do you remember doing tonight? What were some of the phrases or ideas you heard? What surprised you about this process? What would you say we did together? What was significant about this meeting? How are you or this community different now? What do you see as next steps?*

And it was in waiting for and receiving the answers to these questions that the participants' experiences deepened as they felt a common purpose and began, on the spot, to articulate what could happen next--such as planning to hold a watermelon festival in Mize or considering how to address the stalled bridge to be built over the Mississippi River in Natchez, or simply planning to get together again in the near future. Participants left these town meetings awakened with a light in their eyes and a lift in their steps. Often the local organizers of the town meeting mentioned noticing how certain citizens—women and African-Americans in particular, had helpful ideas and contributions they had never expected.

The Town Meeting: Mississippi 200 campaign held 203 town meetings in 1978-1979 with 8526 participants. A Global Women's Forum was a part of the campaign, held in the governor's mansion in Jackson and facilitated by Lynn Mathews from Chicago with 120 women gathered in the stately room. A State Assembly was held in June in Jackson with Congressman John Lewis giving the keynote address mentioning Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phrase, "beloved communities," to describe the stories he had heard of the town meetings.

For more information see Ruth Wilson's April 7, 1979 talk in Chicago, "Citizen Involvement—The Answer," and Mississippi is Leading the Way, a report on the Town Meeting: Mississippi 200 campaign.



Governor Cliff Finch accepting a gift from visitors with Ruth Wilson looking on.



A local resident reporting on the proposals



ICA staff, Suzanne Heilman (left) at the closing reflection



Crosby, MS town meeting reporting



Sharing the symbol created during the town meeting



ICA staff, Molly Clements, leading a town meeting



Town meeting participant presenting the symbol



ICA staff, Jesse Clements, leading the Lumberton town meeting



Lumberton, Mississippi town meeting



Lumberton, MS town meeting



The Lumberton town meeting reflection