Mississippi Folklife

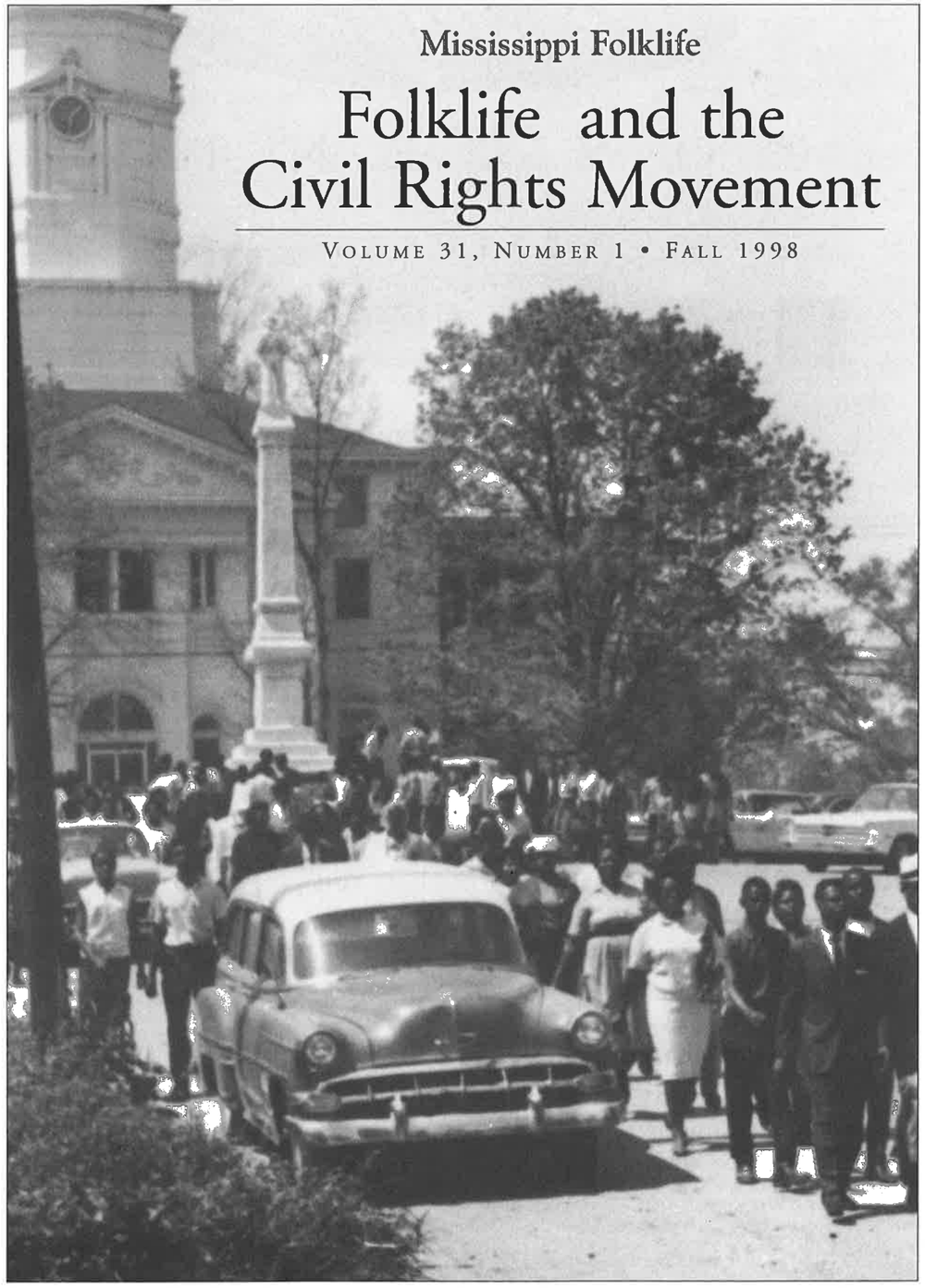
Volume 31, No. 1 Fall 1998, $5.00

Folklife and the Civil Rights Movement

Mississippi Folklife

Folklife and the Civil Rights Movement

Volume 31, Number 1 • Fall 1998



FOLK LIFE AND THE *Civil Rights* MOVEMENT

CONTENTS

FEATURES






REVIEWS

DEPARTMENTS

Cover Photo and page 1 from the "No Easy Journey" exhibit. Port Gibson, MS. Courtesy Mississippi Cultural Crossroads. Opposite, from left to right: detail, Summer Camp, Providence Farm, A. E. Cox Collection, Mississippi State University Library, Starkville, MS; detail, Worth Long, Copyright @ Smithsonian Institution; detail, from cover photo; detail, Mississippi State Extension Services; detail, The Citizen's Council, August 1957, page 2; detail, 1976 Ole Miss year book.

Editor's Note

Welcome. I am the new editor of *Mississippi Folklife*, having taken the position since Tom Rankin became the director of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. My conception of folklife is broad. I reject any ideas that some people, usually isolated rural people, are "the folk" and that the rest of us are not. Instead, I see folklife as a complex of the habits of everyday life, the nature of culture and creativity among groups, and how people learn, interpret, remember, and change those things. I see folklife as constantly changing, as people draw on traditions, reinterpreting some and discarding others.

This special issue studies the relationship between folklife and the Mississippi civil rights movement, or freedom struggle. This may seem an unusual combination, simply because folklife often concentrates on tradition while protest is all about demands for change. Articles examine what one might call "protestways," the music, demeanor, speech, and religion of civil rights protestors in Mississippi. Other articles investigate memories of protest, and how women and men involved in social change interpreted the shape and meaning of certain traditions. Still others study the manners and religion of the opponents of protest.

Two new features debut in this issue. One is a brief section called "Defining the Folk." In each issue, an author will explore how a particular source--film, exhibit, concert, book--addresses issues of folklife. A second feature will begin the Book Review section with "Re-reading a Classic," which will explore what an older book still has to teach us.

My thanks go to Charles Wilson and Ann Abadie here at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. Thanks as well to Managing Editor Angela Griffin, Caroline Herring, and Bea Jackson for their dedication. And our best wishes go to Tom Rankin, whose vision and energy have done so much for the study of Mississippi folklife.

Ted Ownby

Mississippi Folklife

EDITOR
Ted Ownby

MANAGING EDITOR
Angela Griffin

BUSINESS MANAGER
Mickey McLaurin

REVIEW EDITOR
Caroline Herring

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS
Peter Slade
Bert Way

CIRCULATION ASSISTANT
Braden Van Winkle

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Bea Jackson

Center for the Study *of* Southern Culture
THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI
Charles Reagan Wilson, Director

Mississippi Folklife is published under the auspices of the Mississippi Folklore Society and the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Subscriptions are $10.00 per year, which includes membership in the Mississippi Folklore Society. Individual issues, when available, may be purchased at $4.00 per issue, excepting "Special Issues," which are $5.00. Subscription correspondence, requests for back issues, and other business should be directed to *Mississippi Folklife*, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677. Manuscripts, books, tapes, films, and CDs for review, and other editorial communications should be sent to Ted Ownby, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677. Manuscripts should be submitted on computer disk, preferably either in Microsoft Word or WordPerfect formats. Submissions not on disk should be double-spaced.

US ISSN 0026-6248

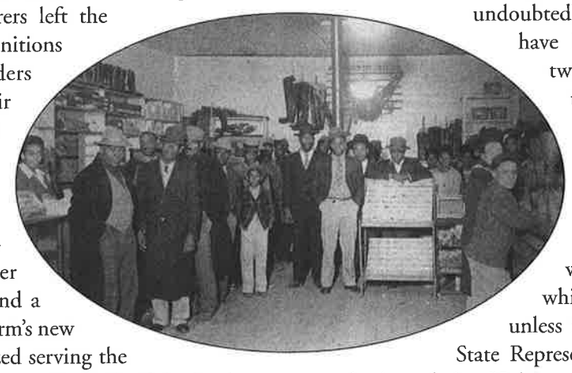
Dangerous Memories

The Legacy of the Providence Cooperative Farm

by Kerry Taylor

Providence Farm, though defunct by the time of the civil rights movement, served as an inspiration for protesters by raising the possibilities for new ideas about both race relations and economic life. Memories of Providence Farm and its ideals continue to inspire strength and community among African Americans in Holmes County.

An eclectic mix of Southern religious idealists, pacifists, and members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union organized the Providence Cooperative Farm in 1938. These visionaries hoped their biracial farm would serve as a model for the transformation of Southern race and class relations. During World War II, as laborers left the farm to enlist or take munitions work, Providence leaders largely abandoned their overt efforts to eliminate economic exploitation and race hatred. What remained of the venture after the war was a medical mission, a summer camp for local youth, and a cooperative store. The farm's new post-war focus emphasized serving the immediate health and economic needs of the local community, while quietly nurturing black farmers for leadership roles in a future democratic and integrated Mississippi. This work continued, largely unnoticed, for another ten years.[1]



On September 27, 1955, after uneasily tolerating their neighbors on the Providence Cooperative Farm for nearly 20 years, five hundred citizens of Holmes County assembled at Tchula high school and voted to demand that the farm's white leaders leave Mississippi. A white girl had been verbally accosted by a black boy at a bus stop near Providence and, in the minds of local whites, the farm's educational programs for poor black farmers and its practice of racial equality were undoubtedly to blame. "We who have lived here for the past twenty years know what they are doing. We know the minds of these Negroes are being poisoned down there. We just can't afford to have them up there teaching what they are teaching. . . which will lead to violence unless it is stopped," explained State Representative Edwin White, a leader of the Holmes County White Citizens' Council and an organizer of the mass meeting.[2] After allowing farm leaders to respond to accusations that they publicly supported school integration and allowed black and white children to swim together, the assembled mob voted almost unanimously to demand that Providence cease to operate. The more zealous members of the crowd called for a lynching.

Above: Providence Cooperative Store, Holmes County, MS. A. E. Cox Collection, Mississippi State University Library, Starkville, MS.

Physician David Minter, who ran the farm's medical clinic, and farm manager Eugene Cox, who organized the educational programs and operated a credit union, remained on Providence for almost a year after the meeting. But Minter's clinic never recovered; many of his patients were intimidated by a police guard that was placed at the farm entrance, and others were forbidden to visit by the plantation owners for whom they worked. Attendance at Cox's educational programs, and business at the farm's cooperative store similarly dropped off. Faced with regular telephone threats and social ostracism, Minter and Cox moved with their families out of state in the summer of 1956.

Long after its forced closing, Providence continued to have an impact on Holmes County. The unprecedented opportunities for leadership the farm afforded local people in the early 1950s bore fruit in the 1960s and 1970s. Members of Providence started successful businesses drawing upon skills they learned in the cooperative store and credit union; others participated in the burgeoning civil rights movement or became active in local politics. Most notable among the Providence-nurtured leaders was Fannye Booker, a school teacher and farm resident, who had supervised the summer youth camp. After 1956 Mrs. Booker remained at Providence and continued to operate the summer project until it became a year-round Head Start program in 1964. Until her death in February 1997, Mrs. Booker remained a pillar of Holmes County's black community: meeting human needs as a Head Start teacher and as founder of a senior care facility; working for the preservation of local history and culture through the establishment of a black history museum; and remaining active in her church and grassroots community groups.

Less tangible, but important, was the effect Providence–with its counter-cultural anti-capitalist and biracial ideology–had on local people's values, particularly the emerging civil rights consciousness of the black community. From December 1996 to April 1998, I conducted nearly three dozen interviews with people who remembered Providence, or who had heard first-hand accounts of the project, to explore the connection between local people's involvement with the farm and the development of their racial and political beliefs. I found that they remembered Providence in essentially three different ways and that each narrative suggests that the farm experience, to varying degrees, did help shape local people's ideologies.

A small number of people, usually those who had extended and direct contact with the farm, characterized Providence as an explicitly political effort. These interviewees frequently described the project's efforts as a continuation of the work of the abolitionists and a precursor to the civil rights movement. For Fannye Booker, the arrival of the white outsiders at Providence was reminiscent of the invasion of Union troops in the Civil War and the intervention of federal agents during Reconstruction:

> Well it's like when the Yankees came through. They was tired of people living in slavery and they was trying to let you come out on your own. And they was doing that to show you that you could make profits for yourself. You didn't have to be the underdog all the time. You could work for yourself and save for yourself. You were being taught, you see. Naturally so, we just been taught that get what you want. I heard the saying, they say to them, "You keep you out of the grave, I keep you out of jail." And that means cause he'd be looking for you to work for them next week to keep him going. And there was somebody coming along enlightening you — how you could make profit for yourself, how you could come up and do. How you could be somebody one day. You never would be as long as you stay under. There's some white people interested in people. They're not interested in who you are, nothing like that. But they just want everybody to have equal—equal share.[3]

Following the mass meeting in Tchula and the placement of the police guard at the road leading to the clinic, African Americans were forced to find other doctors for treatment. Booker remembered that most of Minter's former patients were reluctant to visit other local doctors, as it was widely understood that they had flaunted the wishes of the white community by seeing Minter in the first place: "Some went to Greenwood, some went to Jackson because they was afraid too much to come to the doctors around [here]. Because you see they had rebelled and kept going out there."[4] At least one patient however, possibly emboldened by his taste of freedom at Providence, felt entitled to continue seeing the doctor of his choosing. As David Minter remembered many years later:

> One man…who came with his wife…was carrying his shotgun with him. I asked him why he carried his gun and he stated that he had heard that they had resistance put up to keep people away, but that he wanted to bring his wife to the doctor, and that if anybody got in his way, he was going to shoot him.[5]

Jessie Banks draws upon potent images from Southern history, similar to those used by Booker, to describe Providence. Though there were doctors closer to her home, Banks, now mayor of Tchula, brought her daughter to Providence to see Minter as his racial views were widely-known among African Americans. The attempt by local whites to smear the white leaders of Providence as "Yankee" outsiders and "carpetbaggers" only backfired because local African Americans recognized them as friends:

> If you know our history they called those people from the North who wanted to help, called them carpetbaggers. They would say those people weren't our friends, and we knew they were. There were people during that time who knew what they did during the Civil War. They knew that these things were told. And those of us who knew our history, you know, didn't pay any attention to anything like that. Because you know they called them Yankees and things like that.[6]

Banks further suggests that Providence pre-figured the biracial organizing that took place during the civil rights movement in Holmes County. She proposes that the black community's interaction with whites at Providence may have readied them to cooperate with Susan and Henry Lorenzi, two white movement volunteers who lived and worked in Holmes County from 1964 through 1969: "That [Providence] was something of a turning point to let them know that all white Americans were not aligned – that there were some friends among the Caucasian race. That could have made somewhat of an imprint to let Afro-Americans know that there were some white Americans who were not against the races all the way through."[7]

Summer Camp, Providence Farm, A. E. Cox Collection, Mississippi State University Library, Starkville, MS.

A second group of interviewees emphasized Providence's role as a free space–a community within the county where the normal laws and customs of segregation seemed not to apply. The affect of Providence was implicitly political, triggering within participants a questioning of the larger society's values. The unique and surprising measure of racial cooperation and black autonomy also encouraged local people to expand their sense of what was possible, on a personal and a communal level.

Phillip Rushing, in his autobiography *Empty Sleeves,* describes his first visit to the farm–a trip that immediately provoked a reassessment of his beliefs about race. After losing both of his arms in an unsuccessful attempt to free a friend who had been struck by a fallen power line, Rushing fell into a deep depression. His fragile adolescent self-esteem was shattered as he became painfully aware of his physical difference, and he realized he could no longer do the farm work upon which his family depended. Rushing discovered Providence when his father asked him to accompany a family friend to the medical clinic to help her read a prescription. Sitting in the waiting room Rushing quickly sensed something unique about the Providence clinic when a white nurse addressed the Rushing family friend by a courtesy title. "I was startled. This was the first time I had heard a white person address a colored person as 'Mrs.' and I wondered if it was a slip of the tongue," Rushing remembered. Several minutes later, after the nurse directed him to speak with Dr. Minter, Rushing was "flattered that this obviously educated white man should be so confident of my ability to grasp his words."[8]

Before heading home, Rushing stopped at the cooperative store where he was again surprised when he saw Fannye Booker who, standing behind the counter, appeared to be in charge: "Never had I been in, or even heard of, a store that was run by a colored person–and a woman at that."[9] After a brief exchange Booker told Rushing that she had heard of him and his heroic attempt to save his friend's life. She invited him to participate in the summer camp, which was to begin

A plantation store, Marcella Plantation, Mileston, MS, 1939. Providence provided a different environment from stores run in the interests of plantation owners. Photo by Marion Post Walcott.

shortly. As he rode home from Providence, Rushing realized that "here in Providence I was in a different world from the one I knew seven miles down the road."[10]

Mrs. Booker quickly recognized Rushing's intellectual abilities and she pushed him to excel in academics. Under the guidance of an educational committee made up of Booker and other Providence leaders, Rushing completed his undergraduate and graduate studies. Before embarking on a successful career as a social worker and government official, Rushing worked with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and, in 1967, helped elect the first black state legislator since Reconstruction. In *Empty Sleeves,* Rushing reflects appreciatively on the efforts of Providence leaders to instill within him an expanded sense of his capabilities: "They sensed my burning desire to learn and took a personal interest in me. None of them personally knew anyone with my disability, but they all believed it was possible for me to finish school, take a job, get married, and have children. And because they believed, I believed."[11]

The "free space" at Providence also provided local African Americans a public setting where they might openly discuss community affairs and even race relations without fear of retaliation or harassment from whites. In this sense, it was unique in the county: whites tightly controlled most other public spaces — the plantations, the downtown shopping areas, the county courthouse, the saw mills and plantation stores. Though black churches frequently served this function in other Southern black communities, the Holmes County ministers were largely beholden to the planters and county officials.[12]

The following story concerning one of Minter's many house calls suggests that local people shared a high degree of comfort and openness with white members of Providence. In the middle of the night, Minter was called to a dilapidated home in the black section of Tchula. Inside a room lit by a single kerosene lamp lay a frail elderly woman surrounded by a dozen family members and friends. The woman remained silent through Minter's examination and injections until he turned to leave. As he was walking out the door the woman called to him and drew him near. In a clear voice the woman asked, "Doctor, do you think the Civil Rights law is going to pass Congress?"[13] While Minter and Cox may have never expressed their pro-integration sympathies publicly until the mass meeting in Tchula, their beliefs were apparently no secret to the African Americans among whom they lived and worked each day.

Providence Educational Institute, A. E. Cox Collection, Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS.

As telling as people's memories of Providence are, the ways in which the farm is mis-remembered by many local people may be even more revealing. Several of those with whom I spoke insisted incorrectly that the medical clinic had just one waiting room, and that this was the source of tension that led to the removal of the Minters and Coxes. Mattie Delaney, who lived near Providence, remembers only one waiting room and no preferential treatment for white patients:

> Well, he [Minter] was good you know. He had to leave here because he was . . . not a racist. And that's the first office since I had been grown that you sit with the white. He just had one office at his clinic. You know the [other bigoted doctors] then, they had colored on one side. But all his patients would sit together, and he serve as you come. He would take your name. He didn't wait on this one and then you had to sit back when you been there all day. First come, first serve. It was whoever got there first.[14]

Similarly, local people have embraced as factual some of the false accusations hurled at the Minters and Coxes during the 1955 mass meeting. Though no such event ever occurred, Delaney remembers proudly that Minter allowed integrated swimming: "I think that's the reason he left, because he had a swimming pool up there and he let all the blacks and the whites swim together." The pool was actually a ditch that filled up after heavy rains. At the mass meeting Minter and Cox strenuously denied ever allowing black and white children to swim together.

Perhaps some of the confusion can be attributed to the fact that the clinic's larger waiting room (which also had the only air conditioner) was reserved for African American patients. Because few white patients traveled to the rural clinic, the "white" waiting room was seldom used. Nor were either of these rooms labeled "colored" or "white," as was the custom.[15] But I also suspect that just as segregated bus seats came to symbolize a host of grievances for black Montgomery residents in December of 1955, integrated waiting rooms and interracial swimming have become referents for local people's positive memories of Providence. The notion that Providence had just one waiting room for Holmes County African Americans serves as a means of expressing deeper feel-

ings about the farm. Their memory of a single waiting room embodies their recollection that Providence transgressed the racial code; it also allows them to convey their feelings to succeeding generations by using symbols that are easily understood.

Finally, among many black Holmes Countians who had only heard of Providence second-hand, the story of the mass meeting in Tchula serves as a reminder of the depths of white racism in the 1950s. The specter of a white mob gathering at the Tchula high school to expel fellow white southerners from the county impresses upon young listeners, who may have come of age after the civil rights movement, the lengths to which whites would go to protect segregation.

These interviewees prefaced their recounting of the mass meeting with other anecdotes from the same period that demonstrate essentially the same theme. They told me of the legendary Eddie Noel, a black veteran who nearly triggered a riot in 1954 when he shot a white store owner during an argument and fled to the woods. Before turning himself in several days later, Noel survived two shootouts and eluded a massive manhunt during which he killed two more white men, including a deputy sheriff. African Americans, who colluded to mislead the white posse, secretly considered Noel a hero for cleverly escaping the mob.[16] Others told me of the effect that Emmett Till's murder had on local race relations and of the "mysterious" beatings and jailings of dozens of local black men.[17]

The comments of A.J. Archer regarding the closing of Providence are typical of this group of interviewees: "I just remember it was the racial turmoil of the times."[18] For Archer, who spent little time at the farm, but whose mother Mrs. Eva Archer assisted Fannye Booker with the summer program, the ouster of the Coxes and Minters typified the irrational behavior of white people at the time. As Archer remembers the incident, the Coxes and Minters were ejected for being "more or less civil" to the black community: "They didn't have to be overly biased toward blacks, working for blacks. All they had to do was be civil, and if they were civil that was enough for them to force them out. And any little incident like that would cause them to, at that time especially, force them out."

Archer and others who offered these second-hand accounts of Providence, de-emphasized the political goals of the farm to underscore the viciousness of the local white community and the groundlessness of their actions. For this group of Providence storytellers, the incident serves to remind the black community of how deeply entrenched segregation was in Holmes County, implicitly emphasizing the advances brought about by the civil rights movement. The closing of Providence and other similar stories form a body of local narratives about race relations, which instruct and shape young people's beliefs. Long subject to a white-controlled school system and lacking access to local newspapers that reflected their interests and values, these narratives have historically been a crucial means of transmitting values from one generation to the next in Holmes County.[19] As long as the farm, particularly the story of its closing, remains embedded within this group of tales it will continue to have an impact on race relations.

Due to the passing of time and the out migration of former residents, fewer Holmes Countians have direct recollections of Providence. But the farm's memory persists in spite of time and the limitations of the oral tradition. In 1980, Fannye Booker founded the Booker-Thomas museum to document African American life in Holmes County before the Great Migration. The museum, housed in back of her residence, holds a collection of clothes, quilts, dishes, silverware, buckets and farm equipment, some of which dates back to the early nineteenth century. Along with stories passed down to her about slavery and Reconstruction, Booker would frequently entertain and educate visitors, including the thousands of students who visited on field trips, with stories of Providence.[20]

In 1990 students from a minority studies class from Marshall High School created a local African American history video. The video has been widely viewed in Holmes County by schools and community groups. Included among the stories of slavery, sharecropping, and the civil rights movement, is a segment on Providence, which includes an interview with Fannye Booker, who explains to the students how the cooperative association operated and she speaks of the summer school activities. She also offers, to a new generation, her version of the closing of Providence.

In a similar effort, the 1989 summer project students at the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center in Lexington produced *Minds Stayed On Freedom,* a collection of oral history interviews with participants in the Holmes County civil rights movement. First distributed locally in a magazine format, the collection has been turned into a hardcover book published by Westview Press. While it contains only passing references to Providence, *Minds Stayed On Freedom* represents an invaluable contribution to the body of local narratives about race, preserving some commonly told stories, while introducing some new ones.

The importance of these efforts for the continued vitality of local black history cannot be overstated. Booker's museum, the book and the video are unique, in that all are efforts by a community to tell its own stories. These indigenous narratives are seldom included in official histories, although they are immediate and relevant to Holmes Countians.

While the Providence experiment essentially ended in the summer of 1956 with the closing of the clinic and the premature exit of Cox and Minter, the organizers' singular dedication to the development of future leadership guaranteed that the farm would continue to shape life in Holmes County through the next three decades.

It is more difficult to determine the extent to which local people embraced Providence's economic, religious and social values. But the farm's commitment to social justice and human service certainly resonated with Fannye Booker and a handful of others in the community. Others who came into contact with Providence or at least heard about the farm's closing have held on to memories of their experience and they share those memories as a means of passing on important lessons about race and the value of community organizing to the next generation. As long as this process continues, Providence will continue to shape race consciousness in Holmes County. MF

KERRY TAYLOR works for the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project at Stanford University.

NOTES

1. For a fuller treatment of the founding of Providence, its operation and its untimely closing, see Will D. Campbell, *Providence* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1992); Sam Franklin, Jr. *The Early Years of the Delta Farm Cooperative and the Providence Cooperative Farm* (Alcoa, Tennessee: 1980); and Jerry W. Dallas, "The Delta and Providence Farms: A Mississippi Experiment in Cooperative Farming and Racial Cooperation, 1936-1956," *Mississippi Quarterly,* (Summer 1987).
2. The Presbyterian Outlook, October 17, 1955, p. 1; W. F. Minor, "Cox, Minter 'Bewildered' at Requests by Citizens," *Times-Picayune,* October 2, 1955.
3. Fannye Booker, videotaped interview by Minority Studies Class at Marshall High School in Tchula, May 1990, in archives of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center, Lexington, MS.
4. Booker, videotaped interview.
5. David Minter, Notes on Special Meeting Held in the Tchula Consolidated Community School, 1974. Papers of A. E. Cox (1996 Accession) box 6, folder Tchula, MS, Mississippi State University Archives.
6. Author interview with Jessie Banks, Tchula, MS, March 28, 1997.
7. Banks interview.
8. Phillip Van Rushing, *Empty Sleeves* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 1984), 87-89.
9. Rushing, p. 89-90
10. Rushing, 89.
11. Rushing, 93.
12. In the Introduction to a collection of oral histories with Holmes County freedom movement participants, Jay Macleod describes the rural church as a "belated, reluctant convert" to the struggle (ROCC, *Minds Stayed on Freedom* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 15.
13. Franklin, 82.
14. Author interview with Mattie Delaney, Cruger, MS, March 28, 1997.
15. The custom died hard in Holmes County. The last "colored" sign in a doctor's office came down in 1979 (ROCC, p.17). I was told by several African Americans that one local doctor still schedules his white patients for morning appointments and his black patients for the afternoon.
16. Jimmy Ward, "Jittery Shiners, Trigger-Happy Men Messed Up Holmes Manhunt," *Jackson Daily News,* January 17, 1954; ROCC, pp. 11-12.
17. For example, Author interview with Henry Clark, Ebenezer, MS, April 3, 1997; Author interviews with James Walden, Lexington, MS, March 25 and March 27, 1997; Chalmers Archer, Jr., *Growing Up Black in Rural Mississippi,* (New York: Walker and Company, 1992), 32-37.
18. Author interview with A. J. Archer, Tchula, MS, March 22, 1998.
19. In his study of the civil rights struggle in Greenwood, Mississippi, [*I've Got the Light of Freedom,* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995)] Charles Payne found that local supporters of the movement often belonged to families with traditions of activism. In some cases parents modeled militant behavior for their children by publicly defying segregation; other families told stories about combative relatives, to sustain an "organizing tradition" among younger members. Payne argues that through the telling of stories, black parents self-consciously attempted "to shape the way in which children thought about race and in ways that go beyond the familiar custom of telling children that they were just as good as whites" (Payne, p. 234). He suggests these activist families over the years were "grooming its members" for the movement. When organizers entered Leflore County in 1962, they drew upon members of activist families to form their core of indigenous leaders (see Payne pp. 208, 234).
20. In light of Booker's recent death, the future of the museum is uncertain at the time of this writing.

"You Do Not Own What You Cannot Control"

An Interview with Activist and Folklorist

Worth Long

by Molly McGehee

Only rarely has Worth Long granted interviews.[1] As a folklorist, film director and producer, researcher, consultant to and presenter for the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife, former Staff Coordinator for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the Civil Rights Movement, winner of the 1964 Harvard University summer poetry contest, co-founder of the Delta Blues Festival in Greenville, Mississippi, and, in general, a philosopher, Worth Long has a story to tell.

In his personal narrative, Worth reveals more than the episodes that made him an activist and promoter of free expression. He unravels the complex warp and woof of solidarity and decisiveness around which workers united in the freedom struggle of the 1950s and 60s. He parallels that effort with the struggle to remove the blues and bluesmen from the category of "second-class citizen." Perhaps most importantly, he blurs the lines between subject-object and interviewer-interviewee, by both documenting and analyzing the folklore he experienced, disseminated and created in a coming-of-age dominated by segregation and an adulthood dominated by preservation of civil liberties.

Movie King and Preacher's Kid

"I was expected to be 'successful,' and, where that success did not necessarily mean academics, it meant defining, having a consistent world view, defining what you want to do in life, and being assured that you were gonna do it." At age twelve in 1948, Worth Long already knew what he wanted to be. Each morning in his hometown of Durham, North Carolina, Long delivered papers. One day he noticed a plaque above a customer's door that read, "C.K. Watkins, Movie King." "The concept of 'Movie King' captured me immediately," states Long, "And so then I tried to figure out what kinds of things I was going to do." He decided on "Media King" as a more apt title and goal, but his coronation would not come for several years.

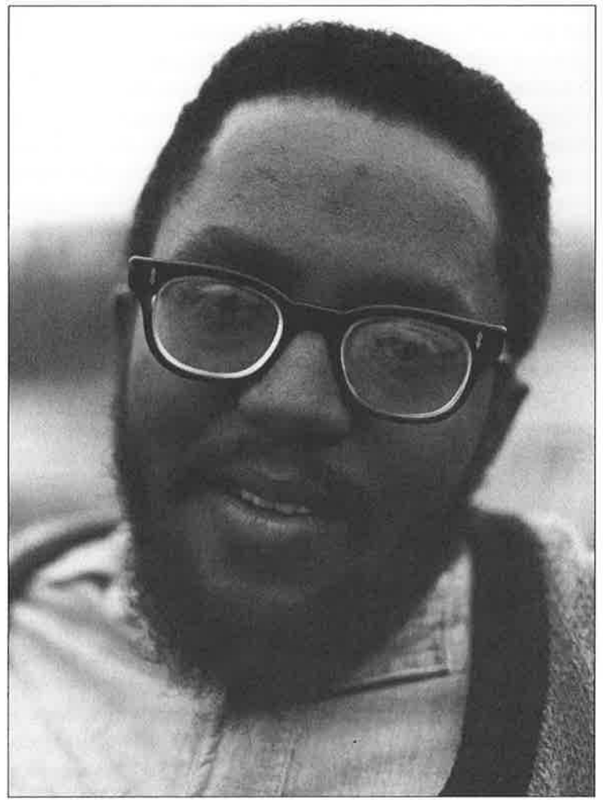
Born to upper-middle class parents on January 15, 1936, in Durham, Long grew up in a predominantly black community near the campus of North Carolina Central and thus did not experience segregation in his daily existence. Says Long:

"I had no distinction of race early on because my community in Durham that I referred to was self-sufficient. Everything was there—two movies, a drugstore, a hotel, a place to shop, a grocery store. Everything.

"The first time I heard a tale that had to do with race, a guy was saying there was this man, a black man who killed a white man. Shot him. Although he did it in self-defense, he immediately started running. I mean, you know, he did what was correct for that time, and he was running, and he was getting tired. So figured he needed some help. And he saw a turtle. Said, 'I just killed a white man, and I'm gettin' tired. Can I get a ride?' So the turtle said, 'Sho'. Jump on.' So he got on the turtle's back, and he rode...slowly.

"He advanced slowly to a place where he saw a cow. And he said, 'Mr. Cow, I just killed a white man, I'm tired, and this turtle is too slow. Can I get a ride?' The cow says, 'Sho'.' He jumped on the cow's back, and the cow was going pretty good. But then he saw a deer.

"He waved at the deer. Said, 'Deer, I just killed a white man, and I am trying to get outta here. And the cow is doing well, but it's gettin' tired, and it is probably still much too slow. Can I get a ride?' The deer says, 'Sho'.' So he jumped on the deer's back, and the deer was runnin' through the forest. And the tree limbs was hittin' the guy and almost knocking him off the deer's back and he was taking shortcuts through the water and jumping over streams. And finally the man patted the deer on the shoulder and said, 'Damn, Mister Deer, did you kill a white man too?'



"So the first time I realized there was something going on, I got on the bus going to town to shop during Christmas. It was basically a black bus line. Kids had to buy gifts and exchange gifts, and you couldn't pay over a dollar so I went to the Five-n-Dime. And, at the Five-n-Dime, I realized that there was some kind of difference, there was a way you spoke to persons who were not from your community. You place an emphasis on 'sir' and 'ma'am.' 'Yes, suh' and 'Yes, ma'am.' I was taught that anyway, that you respected your elders. But then I would see people that were younger that I was, and then I noticed that you were expected also to say 'yes, sir' and 'yes, ma'am' to them. But that didn't go too well with me. I hadn't been trained to understand that. So I spoke the way I spoke to kids. And I did that consistently until now. Peership. You respect everybody, but you are an equal to everybody."

Such ideas naturally flowed from his father's teaching. His father accumulated land during the Depression and became an independent cotton farmer in North Carolina. His income, however, came from his position as a presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church where he had a circuit of twenty churches. Says Long, "My father was a race man. He believed in Africa, self-reliance, self-sufficiency. That was his concept of doing for yourself, and he felt that everybody in his congregation should acquire land, at least twenty acres, and should try to be independent, work for themselves, but then cooperate among themselves."

As a "P. K.," or "Preacher's Kid," Long often had to hear his father preach the same sermon twenty times. Therefore, he would often sneak outside during service, and it was there he first witnessed what he would later learn to term as "folklore." Long states: "The men who went out got corn liquor, and they put it down in the spring, down from the church, and drank during

Above: Worth Long. Copyright © 1965 Diana Davies. Courtesy Smithsonian Institution.

church. They would tell these magnificent stories, and they would be singing and doing toasts. Can you imagine? Church is going on. This is not saints and sinners. But this is a secular element in a sacred site."

Movement Culture

After graduating in 1953 from the all-black Hillside High School where he ran track and played football, Long entered the service and spent the next two years on a Japanese island working as an independent medic. Using a combination of knowledge gleaned from a six-week training course and the aid of *Merk's Manual of Diagnosis and Treatment,* Long doctored 18 to 30-year-olds as best he could. More important to him during this time, however, was his growing awareness and understanding of folklore. "In Japan, I learned that there was such a thing as folklore. The festivals, the children's festivals, kite festivals, and stories. The things that I wanted to see in Japan, the things that had to do with what I call traditional ways, were the most interesting to me."

Returning home in 1955, Long began studies at Philander Smith College in Arkansas. Working as a night clerk in the Charmaine Hotel in Little Rock during the time of the "Little Rock Nine" and the integration of Central High School, Long daily witnessed the beginnings and early repercussions of the civil rights movement. During the summer of 1959, while working at Bell Laboratory at Duke University, Long participated in sit-ins and picket lines. From these experiences, he learned tactics that later helped him as leader in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. "So I learned how you picket, how you organize people in a mass movement, and I had learned some of that in the church. This is how you consolidate your forces in whatever you do, how you organize them in an efficient manner. You see, a mass movement is not built just on a cadre of people, it's built on mass participation, with participation across the strata, across class lines, across race lines."

And so his involvement in the freedom struggle began. In 1962, after returning to Little Rock, Long led a local sit-in movement to integrate the city's downtown area:

"We mobilized six hundred students, and closed down the downtown area by having people strategically sit at the lunch counters. 1962, going into '63. I had never met with power, but I was a part of the negotiating team. So what happened was that I saw the banker who was head of the negotiating team, and then I noticed it was not doctors and lawyers that were there but businessmen and some who didn't have a business per se.

"So the people who negotiated a settlement or who tried to talk w/us students would say, 'Look, you hurt my business,' or 'Can we negotiate this thing?' What they asked for was a moratorium. 'Why don't you stop this? We gonna do right. Stop this thing, and we'll sit down and solve it.' I said, 'Hell, you had a chance to do that. You could have done it. Isn't this something that you could have done earlier? And you mean this is something that you can do tomorrow if you want to do it?' And they said, 'Well, given the situation, we could probably do it tomorrow.' I said, 'I go for that plan.' 'That's the plan I like, the tomorrow one, since we can't do it this evening. Why don't we integrate everything on one day, just flat out?'

"Oh God. He couldn't deal with that. Mr. Ozell Sutton, who was with the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, said, 'Worth, now that's not gonna work. We cannot, one day we're living in a segregated society in Little Rock, the next day everything integrates. That's not gonna work. So let's do it next week.' Which was ok. I said, 'What is your timetable? What is your plan? Ok, let's have it completed by the end of the week, but what is your plan?' So he said, 'Ok, the restaurants and the lunch counters on Monday, the movie theaters…' and whatever. He did a timetable, and actually it happened with no problem, no resistance from people in the community."

Because Long "cracked Little Rock in seven days," as he states, he attracted the attention of SNCC's leaders. Drafted as Staff Coordinator, Long dropped out of college and officially joined the movement. Based in Atlanta, where he continues to live today, Long organized workers in five states, including Mississippi, and helped them "develop strategies of confrontation and change." As Staff Coordinator, Long formed part of the SNCC hierarchy which at various times included John Lewis, Marion Barry ("Marion was a firebrand, I mean just a revolutionary dude who went bad I guess"), Julian Bond, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

On September 16, 1963, the day after the 16th Street Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, Long led a movement of five hundred students in Selma, Alabama, which involved sending many to sit-in at lunch counters, to the courthouse to register to vote, and just to jail. Identified almost immediately as a leader, Long himself was arrested and beaten in jail. In his discussion of these events, Long analyzes how SNCC organized and united the movement's core--the youth. In this analysis, protest strategies and tactics, especially of song and oratory, become folklore, or "movement culture," as Long so appropriately defines it:

"The biggest thing you wanted to have was a singing movement. So we learned and taught the songs of the movement everywhere we went. Selma, there's certain songs out of Selma, Alabama, which identify that movement. The song in Mississippi was Fannie Lou Hamer's 'Go Tell It on the Mountain.' The song in Selma was 'Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around.' The song in Albany, GA, 'Oh, Pritchett, Oh Kelly.' Every movement was identified by the topical songs that were developed that did two things, maybe more.

"First of all, it brought solidarity and strength to the group. The second thing was that it articulated the feelings of the group. For instance, I would know what song you were going to sing as you marched downtown, as you tried to get people mobilized to go out the door. 'Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around,' or whatever it was.

"What I am talking about now is movement culture. There were elements of movement culture that helped you fight a battle during that particular time, by reinforcing people's group solidarity, so that they felt that they could be strong even though they were afraid.

"You generally encoded song into the movement culture, songs that were from the church, from the traditional church. So you didn't sing opera. You sang spirituals, labor songs that had been converted and transformed into movement song. And these songs generally conveyed the message that you needed to convey to strengthen people and also, in a topical way, to tell the story. "O Pritchett, O Kelly": that's the police chief and the mayor of Albany, Ga. And you can look at the song and what the song says, and it tells you in a real sense some of the things that you need to know for that occasion.

"For instance, what song do you sing for the Eucharist? Black folks sing 'I Know It Was the Blood Saved Me.' So there are appropriate songs that first of all articulate what it is you are trying to say, and, secondly, that are appropriate to the occasion. The other part was the sermon style. When you are up in a church, trying to get a crowd to do something, to go out, and there are four hundred policemen, you better call on more than the Lord. You had better call on some very good, traditional, what I call, traditional oratorical skills.

"You are talking about something more when I say traditional. There are certain sermons that my father preached that are in the community. They tell a story, and they are encoded. One good sermon is 'The Eagle Stirreth the Nest.' C. L. Franklin, Aretha Franklin's dad, sold a million copies of that thing. It tells a story. *In The Land Where the Blues Began* (a documentary film by Alan Lomax, John Bishop, and Worth Long), you hear a man preach the sermon, 'The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest': And the little eagle is in the nest. And the mama eagle comes in and brings the food to the eagle. It's a feather nest. It is a soft, wonderful nest until a certain point. At a certain point, the mama starts putting thorns in the nest, less food. It becomes uncomfortable for the bird because it is time for the bird to fly. It is time for the bird to fly so she is stirring the nest.

"So sometimes in the Freedom Movement people would use that as an analogy to stress that it is time for change, it is time for you to go out there on your own with your own wings, to spread your wings and to fly. I heard that sermon preached, and people would fall out. But during that particular time that was one of the sermons that would stir people. So you don't have to preach the sermon as a speaker, but you can refer to it because people know it and they believe it, they believe there is a time, there is a correct time, you need to fly, you need to soar.

"Because people who were afraid would say 'I would go out with you and march with you, I would go out that door, except that I'm violent. I might hit somebody.' Basically they're saying they're afraid. So I would say things like, 'Well, I'm scared too.' Get to the heart of the matter. 'I know you would, I know you'd go out there and you'd hit four hundred policemen in the face.' I said, 'I'm scared too, but then we're a group, we're solid, we're together, and we're right. That is not to say that God is on our side, but we're right in this matter. And why don't you just go on and join the line? I'm scared, but come with me. We'll be two scared people out there confronting these police.'

"Sometimes somebody would say, 'You're gonna take those kids out there in that street?' You've got to be ready. If I tried to add logic to the situation, that wasn't really going to work. So the ministers in SNCC--it was full of ministers--they would basically move to one thing or the other, to traditional oratory or to song. And song would knock out your argument. It sounds irrational, but you can answer a question of fear with song. You hear your strength when you sing loud in a group of three hundred people. There is a certain kind of feeling of strength that you have that is unlike anything else that I know.

"So the songs that were traditional songs were the major songs. 'Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn us Around.' If you're gonna move out, you're not gonna sing the song, 'This May Be the Last Time,' which is a beautiful song:

This may be the last time
This may be the last time children
This may be the last time
May be the last time, I don't know.

"No, no. It may be the last time we have to sing together. It's the wrong message. So you learn appropriate and inappropriate behavior as it relates to mass movement. Now there's another thing. There are toasts and poems that people know. 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' was at one time called the Negro National Anthem.

Lift every voice and sing
Till Earth and Heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies and liberty
Let our rejoices rise
High as the listening skies
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

"That is something that can shield? Anyone with any kind of sense would not march ten people through four hundred policemen, but ten people followed by about three-hundred-and-ninety more can do it if they have a common sense of purpose and they buttress that by song. So song was very important in the movement, and the further we went into the movement the more they pulled up these songs that were traditional and were folklore in a real sense within the ethnic community.

"Everywhere I went there was music and songs and lullabies. I had a five state area, so my recreation was going up to people and talking to them about their wisdom, their folk wisdom. I didn't collect anything because I couldn't do that and do what I was doing. So I gave my tape recorder that I had away to someone who did, who recorded songs of mass meeting. Even the mass meeting was structured in a traditional way, almost like a church service but there was freedom, the word 'freedom,' instead of a religious reference. See we changed the songs, we secularized the songs and made them liberation songs. So that worked."

By adapting traditional religious song and oratory to their needs, participants in the freedom struggle inspired group solidarity, assuaged fears, motivated action, and made the irrational rational. Song became important in a new way in 1963, when Long helped organize the Freedom Festival. Inspired by his visit to the Newport (Rhode Island) Folk Festival that year, where he met Ralph Rinzler, eventual founder of the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife, and where he saw Mississippi-born bluesmen recognized and glorified as musical geniuses, Long and fellow SNCC members put together a music festival in Ms. McGhee's cow pasture in Greenwood, Mississippi.

"It was just billed as a freedom festival, it was on the back of a truck, on a truckbed, and the outside people were Bob Dylan, Theodore Bikel who was an actor but who also played guitar and sang, and Pete Seeger. When we tried to have this gathering, the police first of all put road signs out which said 'No Parking' which we took down. I remember Casey Hayden and I were security for the festival. Casey: blond-haired, blue-eyed, slender frame, beautiful woman. She would be a good person to do security because she has a good mind and would understand strategies and tactics in case there was some confrontation with police. I realized when I got out there on the highway next to Casey that there was a little bit of a contradiction of us directing traffic. And one was that the people who went by in the trucks with the guns on the racks sometimes stopped in disbelief not just because of the festival but because of our security team. And I realized it was kind of dangerous. We hadn't thought about that in that way.

"I remember Bob Dylan was playing 'Blowin' in the Wind' on the back of this truck, and three dudes in the back of a red convertible came by playing 'Dixie' on trumpets. But they heard this guy, and they said, 'Damn, that's Bob Dylan.' They pulled over, they did not come out, they did not join the festival, but they stopped to listen to the rest of his set and drove off. Of the things that I remember other than the guns on the back of the trucks, it was that thing. He was singing their song, he was singing an anthem for youth, not just for freedom but for youth. So they recognized themselves in his music. It just was a very important thing."

The following summer, Long temporarily left SNCC to pursue poetry at Harvard University's summer school and because he had taken issue with the idea of non-violence. He returned to SNCC, however, in 1965 and led a group of students in a march from Selma to the steps of George Wallace's courthouse in Montgomery. Arrested, as most were, Long spent two weeks in "jail"--one week in Kilby Prison, sleeping in a common room with all other black male marchers, one week in solitary after Long and other prisoners refused to leave the integrated prison church service one Sunday. Long poignantly describes the Selma March:

"And that time I did not get a beating. [Reverend] C.T. Vivien got the stick and lost his teeth up front, loosened his teeth at least, trying to protect me. I was looking for my glasses, and someone was going to tear me up, was just about to hit me with a billy-club. C. T. protected me, and, of course, he left himself open when he protected me. I always think about that. When his wife kisses him, does he have loose teeth? She might blame that on me.

"As we confronted Wallace in the State House with these 500 people, the state troopers and policemen circled us, and, if you left the circle, you could not come back. So they figured they would create a siege situation and we would drop out one by one and that was the end of it.

"You'd get hungry, and you had to go to the bathroom. So we had the ladies get together first and had what we call a 'pee-in.' This big stream of urine heading from the State Capitol down Dexter Avenue toward the merchants infuriated the people to no end. The men went next. I was arrested, and I went 'limp,' was thrown into a paddywagon. They didn't have to beat you--once they pick you up and throw your body into a paddywagon against the wall. I was feeling pretty bad. I felt that I had been in a hatchet fight and everybody had a hatchet but me.

"They took us NOT to the jail. Sent us to Kilby Prison. That's where the Scottsboro boys had been. They sent us to the penitentiary and put the whites on one side, put the blacks on the other side, mostly Tuskegee students on my side. In this jail, it was cold for some reason, especially in that big holding cell, big as a gym. They brought five blankets. We were sleeping on the floor, and they brought five blankets. There was a little scramble for the blankets at first, but I suggested that we fold up the five blankets, pass them through the bars, and neatly place them outside of the cell. We informed them that they could go ahead and take those blankets because we had on my side three hundred people at least. And it was cold. The only reason we got one blanket was because there was one guy who became sick. We were out in the rain for the 'pee-in' so people were chilled and cold. I was wet myself. We balled up together, and we made it through the night. We told the people too that we would hold them responsible for our health. We made it through the night, and the next day was Sunday.

"They told us that the chaplain was there and that we could go to chapel. What we realized was that they were going to let the people on the other side go too. They let anybody who signed up go to church. There were fifty people, about half and half. So we went to church and we prayed and we sang and we shouted hallelujah. We enjoyed it so much, we decided we'd stay. At my urging.

"So we just sat there and we said we're not through yet. We just feel the spirit. This fellowship that you're allowing us which is illegal in the state. It gives us hope of rebirth, righteousness. We decided that this was a holy spot, that this is a sacred moment spot, and we're just gonna stay right here in this chapel, all fifty of us, until freedom comes, until we have been redeemed. We knew they were gonna take us out.

"So they took me to the county jail to solitary. I got a vitamin a day, and I got at least one meal and water. A doctor came in to see you once a day. When I got out, the Selma March had just ended, and the rally had happened. The people were singing 'We Shall Overcome.' I was way across the city from where the march was, and you could hear people singing 'We Shall Overcome.' It was a great day for me."

After this march, however, Long continued to have problems with non-violence.

"I was carrying a weapon. We were organized for self-defense, but it was still a dangerous time to have a public stance of even self-defense when others were doing non-violence because it would put them in a predicament, so we organized a defense of justice. SNCC was not a non-violent organization, and we organized the Black Panther Party in Lowndes County, Alabama, which is the next county over from where I was. By '65, we had started the elements of that after the Voting Rights Act. Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal minister, had been killed, and there was no reason to be suicidal.

"As Staff Coordinator, I had encouraged people to do what I call self-defense. Everybody should have a shotgun over their door. To defend their home. And also the incidents were time after time coming forward of people firebombing your home, you run out of your home and

DEALER

SIGN in a
mississippi
junkyard

we
buy
burnt bodies

WORTH LONG

"Dealer," by Worth Long, from Langston Hughes, ed., *La Poésie Negro-Americaine* (Paris: Segher, 1966), 290.

they assassinate you or your family. It happened with Vernon Dahmer in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, NAACP. You had to defend your life and family.

"The concept of armed self-defense is what you talk about before revolutionary violence if it becomes necessary. And I had studied some of this because it was my orientation to understand, not military strategy but survival strategy in the community. There were people who were better schooled than I was but, as Staff Coordinator, I thought it was very important to have an alternative to non-violence, especially if you had not been given your citizenship rights. You had not just a legal basis and a constitutional basis but a basis out here in the world to enforce. To not let someone negate your human rights. If you let that happen, then you are always in danger, it seems to me. Now you can pray with them or pray for 'em, but if they kill you in the meantime you are not going to be an effective organizer post-humously.

Worth Long at the 1997 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Copyright © 1997 Smithsonian Institution.

"We [SNCC] had a concept of forming a political party. We were more looking at 'One Man, One Vote' from the standpoint of consolidating and confronting people who had power. We also had the concept to seize your power. You may ask yourself, when you study civics and citizenship and so forth, may ask yourself what is the purpose of political power, of political parties? To consolidate and seize power. That's their primary purpose, and we had no party. So we organized what is called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization after this confrontation because we needed a party, a political institution that would represent us and through which we could speak. So the Black Panther Party was developed on that basis."

Civil and Creative Rights

In the next few years, Long's career as folklorist, researcher, and cultural scholar took off. He studied with legendary folklorist Alan Lomax and helped him record the stories of former levee workers in the 1970s. Lomax, in his book *The Land Where the Blues Began,* describes Long as, "my sensitive and sapient guide in these adventures."[2] After receiving a Ford Foundation grant in 1977, Long traveled with photographer Roland Freeman throughout Mississippi collecting oral histories and images for the Mississippi Folklife Project. During this period as well, Long continued his research into the blues. At Fannie Lou Hamer's funeral in 1977, Charles Bannerman, head of the Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE), approached Long and asked for his help on a festival that he had been producing but which was not working. Although working at the time for the Mississippi Museum of Art, Long took the project on and transformed it into what today is known as the Delta Blues Festival in Greenville, Mississippi.

Long's efforts to promote and preserve the blues community's heritage and to raise the bluesman to a level equal to that of rock-n-rollers paralleled his and other activists' efforts in the 1960s. And again the idea of song and singer–this time the blues and bluesmen–played an important role for Long in the struggle for liberation and equality. "My efforts," states Long, "were to legitimize and to make the blues song and blues person more respected and understood in his own community." Long was concerned that the blues was considered a "second-class citizen," despite the fact that it was the foundation for most forms of American music in the twentieth century.


Worth Long, with Patty Crosby of Mississippi Cultural Crossroads. Photo courtesy the Southern Regional Council.

"The problem with a lot of people, even the scholars, is that they separate the person from the genre, and, as a result, we objectify people in a real sense. It means that very often a bluesman is seen as an object of the past. I thought bluesmen were victims in a real sense. Number One, their music is underrated and misunderstood. The bluesperson is objectified as a relic of the past. The blues lyric is very important to me because it expresses a particular philosophy that I support, the philosophy of the outcast, of people who are down or down-n-out, excluded. Again, the freedom struggle is important for me because it is about inclusion/exclusion, it's about who's in and who's out. People in the 1960s accused us of some 'isms.' My answer was 'Is I'm in or is I'm out?'"

In 1978, Long helped to organize and stage the first annual Delta Blues Festival. Composed of a main stage and a small hut, or juke joint-like, stage, the Festival featured artists such as Big Joe Williams, Sam Chatmon, James "Son" Thomas, Eugene Powell, George Fuller, Houston Stackhouse, Lizzie Butler, Stonewall Mays, and Furry Lewis. According to *Living Blues,* "the ages of the artists ranged from 15 to over 90, and more than 5000 people of all ages, 80% black, stayed with the festival from 2 p.m. until dark; from these facts you can conclude how much blues, especially country blues, is alive in its home, the Delta."[3] With such a festival, Long states, "we had hoped that it would revive an understanding of folk blues, would help to flush out what remained of the purveyors of that music, and would also set up an opportunity to showcase that music so that musicians would have a chance to play in their community still but to have the opportunity to play wherever they wanted to in the world."

Furthermore, Long wanted to prevent commercial exploitation of the blues. Regarding the civil rights movement, he often argues that "you do not own what you cannot control." This philosophy he applies to blues music:

"We don't have any ownership or control of our culture. Now that's a kind of slavery. So you free yourself as a citizen. See civil rights, all that was was citizenship rights. Civil rights is just basic rights of the citizen, but then there are other rights. The first right is human rights. But then there are what I call creative rights, and that, within the realm of individual and collective responsibility, should belong to the community that nurtured it. And that's what Delta Blues was set up for, more than anything else. It was set up to honor, to showcase and to liberate--civil rights. To liberate the musician and his or her rights within the culture. Why is that important? It's important because many of the messages of music are messages that are timeless and should be a legacy for the children."

One of the oral historian's greatest challenges is overcoming the subject/object barrier that is instantly formed between the folklorist and his focus, whether it

is a person, group, or a set of traditions. Because of Worth Long's presence in the civil rights movement and his later analysis of that movement through his anthropological eye, he has been able to mend the rift between insider and outsider. In his career as a folklorist, Worth Long had strived to promote traditional artists while simultaneously preserving their integrity. Using this perception, he has further been able to enter the world of the blues and to serve as an ideal conveyor of the meaning of the civil rights struggle:

Advertisement for a blues program Worth Long co-produced. Courtesy Worth Long.

"The whole freedom movement for me was to have people determine and define their lives. We asked the question, 'Who makes the decisions that affect your life?' And what's the first answer? You! You're the first person, and we preached that. I mean the movement was important, it seems to me, first and foremost, because every succeeding movement was grounded in the question of self-determination, self-reliance, and self-respect. We did not necessarily do that out of a vacuum. We learned that you have to do some of these things in order to move forward. And then we learned that you have to do a cultural movement before you can do a political movement. People in politics say that cultural movement precedes political movement, the cultural revolution precedes the revolution. So then culture to me was very important. I look at culture from the standpoint of power, how it will and can empower people. Song can give you the strength to go out and fight for your liberation. Culture is that for me." MF

MOLLY MCGEHEE is a Southern Studies M.A. student a the University of Mississippi.

NOTES

1. One exception is an article in the words of Worth Long but based on an interview conducted and edited by Bernice Johnson Reagon. Worth Long, "Cultural Organizing and Participatory Research," in *The Arts of Black Folk,* a compilation of papers presented at The Arts of Black Folk Conference for Community Organizations: Presenting African American Folk Arts, April 22-23, 1988, New York, New York (New York: Shomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1991), 28-35. The second exception is an interview conducted by Tom Dent, author of *Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1997).
2. Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993), 235.
3. Hans Pehl, short column in "Blues News," *Living Blues* 41 (Nov.-Dec. 1978): page 9.

SELECTED READINGS, DISCOGRAPHY, AND FILMS

Jim Brown, *We Shall Overcome,* PBS special on the history of song, 1988.

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1981).

Guy and Candie Carawan, *Sing for Freedom, The Story of the Civil Rights Movement told through Music* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Sing Out Publications, 1990).

Tom Dent, *Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1997).

Reverend C. L. Franklin, "The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest" (New Jersey: Chess Records, 1984).

Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993).

Alan Lomax, John Bishop, and Worth Long, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (PBS Video, 1990).

Worth Long, "Cultural Organizing and Participatory Research," in *The Arts of Black Folk,* a compilation of papers presented at The Arts of Black Folk Conference for Community Organizations: Presenting African American Folk Arts, April 22-23, 1988, New York, New York (New York: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1991), 28-35.

_____, *Mississippi Delta Blues,* 1979 (sponsored by Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE) and Mississippi Authority for Educational Television).

Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Sing for Freedom: The story of the Civil Rights Movement through its songs (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways, 1990).

Voices of the Civil Rights Movement, Black American Freedom Songs, 1955-1965 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1980).

Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

"COMING BACK AT YOU"

Challenging White Supremacy in Port Gibson, Mississippi

by Emilye Crosby

While demanding access to the political and legal systems, African American protestors in 1960s Port Gibson also challenged white supremacy in public spaces like the streets and the courthouse and developed a newly aggressive, confrontational demeanor.

In March 1966, Matthew Burks, Jr., a 23-year-old black man, began working at Allied Chemical in Claiborne County, Mississippi, running a molding machine which made plastic cups. In response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and recent local civil rights activity, Allied Chemical had taken down its signs indicating which sinks, doors, and toilets were for white employees and which were for "colored." The conventions which demanded and enforced segregation had not disappeared with the signs, however, and Burks quickly got into trouble with white co-workers for deliberately violating the code maintaining segregation. Within a week of using the former white-only facilities, he was warned by an older white man that he belonged "over there" and pulled aside by his white foreman who instructed him that the bathrooms were still segregated. Burks ignored them both, telling the foreman that he did not need to hear "that kind of thing."[1] Less than two weeks after he began work, Burks got into a fight with two of his co-workers for attempting to use what they considered the "white sink." As a result, Burks was arrested and charged with assault, fined twenty-five dollars, and fired from his job.[2]

Above: From the "No Easy Journey" exhibit. Port Gibson, MS. Courtesy Mississippi Cultural Crossroads.

The Civil Rights Act, which became law in July 1964, outlawed segregation and workplace discrimination. Yet, almost two years later when Matthew Burks challenged traditional patterns of black/white interaction, this federal law remained unenforced and largely invisible in Port Gibson, Claiborne County. Locally, segregation was well-supported by the system of white supremacy, including economic dominance, political power, control over the legal system, and the tradition of extra-legal violence against African Americans.

Burks faced all of it; he was fired by white employers, tried and convicted by white elected officials, and attacked with impunity by two white men. It is crucial, however, that although the overall system of segregation persisted, Burks refused to be segregated.

Federal law, court decisions, and activism by civil rights workers around the country were critical in providing motivation, tools, precedent and sometimes recourse, but alone did not overhaul or change reality and customs across the South. It took civil rights movements and the corresponding activism of black women and men to challenge and change the day-to-day interactions of blacks and whites and shift, even slightly, the traditional imbalance of power. In Claiborne County, Mississippi, a rural, predominantly African American community in southwestern Mississippi, this shift began in 1965 when, shortly after the Voting Rights Act was signed into law, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its state field secretary, Charles Evers, accelerated a voter registration campaign in Mississippi.[3]

By April 1, 1966, in just over three months of concentrated work in Claiborne County, 1500 blacks were registered to vote. By the end of May the total had reached 2600 and blacks were a clear majority of registered voters in the county.[4] This black electoral majority eventually led to considerable political power, including the votes to elect the sheriff and county governing board. Despite this rapid move by blacks into the political process, in 1966 whites still retained control of all decision-making positions and effectively controlled the community. Juries and political officials were still all-white and acted on behalf of an all-white electorate. Port Gibson's mayor acted as judge in the case against Matthew Burks when he was charged with assault. White politicians refused to hire or appoint blacks to civic boards or public jobs, arguing that changes needed to come explicitly through the ballot box. Blacks were still excluded from law enforcement jobs and opportunities for influencing public policy. Thus, this new reality of a black majority of registered voters was slow to influence the daily living conditions and political realities of Claiborne County. White elected officials and their white appointees and employees still established policies, policed the community, controlled the legal system–from judges to juries to prosecutors–and dictated every aspect of the community's political life. Moreover, whites rigidly controlled public space and demanded deference from African Americans.

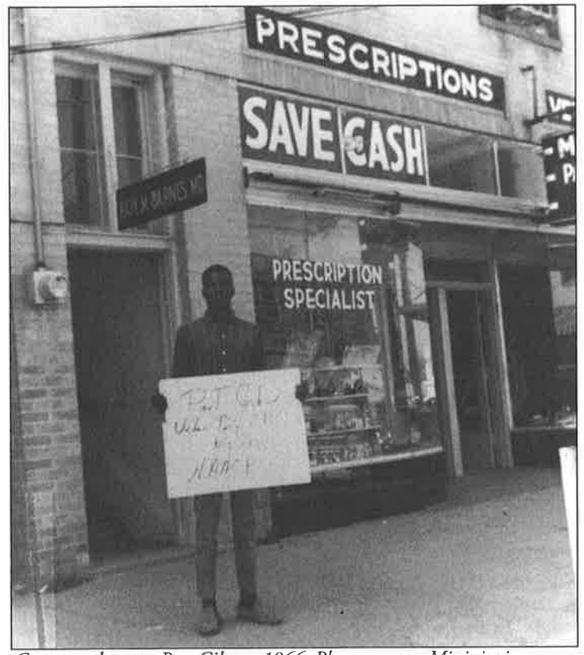
Pursuing change through seeking enforcement of federal laws and the related work of entering into traditional avenues of power were important in eventually altering this system of white control. Much more crucial in shifting the immediate relationship between blacks and whites and undermining the climate of white supremacy were the contests over and changes in informal power. In Port Gibson, Matthew Burks' refusal to follow traditional custom and acquiesce to white authority was a more dramatic, direct challenge to white supremacy than the Civil Rights Act that did not, in this case, protect his right to desegregated facilitates. Part of the success of the local movement came from questioning the long-standing assumptions that politics was "white folks business" and that whites controlled public space and civic life. Along with equal participation in the political process and equitable treatment before the law, the full citizenship African Americans such as Matthew Burks were demanding included courteous treatment in, as well as full access to, public spaces.[5]

One of the most visible and consistent expressions of the system of white supremacy was embodied in white domination of nominally public spaces like the streets, stores, and public buildings, including the Courthouse. Before the movement Port Gibson's Main Street was almost like a private drive for the merchants and planters of the white community who dominated the community's economic and political power structure. Like temporary guests, blacks were welcomed to spend their money, but Main Street remained the "white folks street." A minister and civil rights leader recalls that "[when] we would walk down the street [and] a white person would come along, they would occupy the whole street. And, you had to get off to the side, wait and let them pass."[6] An African-American woman remembers, "We would go uptown and purchase items from the 10-cent store and stuff, but everybody black would hang on "Nigger Street" which is Fair Street now."[7]

As these examples make clear, in downtown Port Gibson before the civil rights movement, African Americans were passive visitors, forced to defer to the surrounding white community. They were subject to insults and expected to step aside, wait passively, and above all stay in their place. They were allowed onto Main Street to spend their money, but were not permitted to stay and enjoy the soda fountain or linger for conversation on building stoops. White assumptions of control and efforts to maintain it are illustrated in a June 1966 encounter on Main Street between two groups of men, one white and the other black.

Civil rights leader Calvin Williams, walking down Main Street with several people, encountered the police chief standing with a handful of men on one of the corners. Although Williams and those accompanying him were simply walking down the street, Williams was arrested and charged with "disturbing the peace" and "blocking the sidewalk and entrances to stores."[8] The white men who testified against him described Williams and his companion as walking in a group down the street and stopping on a corner. They never reported Williams physically blocking the sidewalk or any store entrance and, more importantly, saw no irony in the fact that they too were standing in a group on a sidewalk corner.[9] Race and power were the only real differences between the two groups of men on Main Street that day.[10]

After more than a year of legal maneuvering, Williams agreed to pay a small fine in exchange for a plea of *nolo contendere* rather than continue to spend time in court fighting the charges. The formal system of power was able to wear down Williams and punish him for what they viewed as his unacceptable presence or behavior. Based on the court testimony, one of the things that bothered the police chief most was his belief that Williams had violated an understanding not to conduct any marches without explicit white permission.[11] White people even thought they had the right to grant or refuse blacks permission to demonstrate and protest. The chief was to become increasingly bothered because, despite this persecution of Williams, African Americans continually challenged explicit white power and such implicit understandings. White control of public streets was ending as blacks increasingly asserted their rights to congregate where they wished and have a say in the use of public spaces.



Consumer boycott, Port Gibson, 1966. Photo courtesy Mississippi Cultural Crossroads.

One of the most visible black challenges to white jurisdiction over the streets came through movement-sponsored mass marches. Once or twice weekly, hundreds of blacks walked several blocks from First Baptist Church to the Courthouse. In pairs they moved through a gauntlet of hostile and sometimes gun-carrying whites. These marches provided a public declaration of support for the movement and illustrated black demands to be included in the public life of the community. For whites, they were a reminder of impending changes and as one man remembered, "an irritation…for the fact that they were there."[12]

In a smaller but steady stream, blacks visited the Courthouse and a storefront on Main Street to register to vote. They also took up positions as store-watchers and picketers to enforce an NAACP-initiated boycott of most white merchants.[13] Voter applicants and store watchers often faced hostility and harassment from white merchants and their associates assembled in doorways and on corners. Whites resented the presence of blacks who were in town not to spend money in white stores, but to do their own business and further their own independent power (through an economic boycott, political organizing, and challenges to white control of the streets).

In at least one instance, white harassment escalated into open conflict. In April 1966, James Jones, whose furniture store was a front for Klan organizing, threatened several voter registration applicants and argued with activist Rudy Shields who was accompanying them. Stories about Shields' refusal to back down, even when Jones threatened him with a gun, were widely told and retold in the black community.[14] By standing up to an

armed white Klansman, Shields asserted his right to be on Main Street, added to his growing reputation for fearlessness, and emboldened other members of the black community to stand up for themselves in defiance of custom.

Charles Evans, a primary spokesman for the movement and a charismatic speaker at the Courthouse rallies which followed weekly marches, articulated the black demands for inclusion in public life and access to public spaces that these encounters reflected. In one speech, he explicitly disputed white usurpation and occupation of public venues when he challenged the right of Alderman and car dealer Jimmy Allen to park cars from his dealership in the sidewalk, forcing pedestrians and marchers to walk in the street. "This street doesn't belong to Allen. It belongs to the city of Port Gibson. That is all of us."[15] The laws, facilities, and resources which were ostensibly designed to benefit the entire community, frequently served only whites. For example, African Americans held meetings and conducted movement business in black churches and business establishments, while whites planned their resistance and held mass meetings in the Courthouse. Commenting on this, Evers announced:

> From now on, we are going to be in on everything that is done in this county. There ain't going to be no rest. We ain't going to let you sit behind the desk and make decisions no more. This is our Courthouse. You can have meetings in it. We are going to have them too. If there is going to be one more meeting held in here, we are coming in.[16]

Another important change that blacks insisted on was that whites end their practice of addressing blacks with demeaning and familiar language, and instead use the courtesy titles that they demanded for themselves. Persistent disrespect of blacks was a crude and constant reminder of white dominance, one that whites were reluctant to part with, and one which attracted considerable attention among the black community. In his speeches, Charles Evers broke this pattern by pointedly calling white merchants and officials by their first names.[17] When white merchants persistently refused to address blacks using courtesy titles and to comply with other demands, the NAACP initiated a boycott. Blacks could not force whites to address them with courtesy, but they could and did punish them economically for their failure to do so.[18]

Blacks also demanded courtesy in their personal interactions with individual whites. Rudy Shields was prosecuted for his reaction to a merchant who called him "boy."[19] The merchant later told a jury, "he told me then that, 'He was…no damn boy, he was a God damn man.'[20] A white man who witnessed this exchange reiterates how reluctant whites were to change their practices or to acknowledge the depths of African American distress over white disrespect and use of derogatory terms. "She called him a boy. He told her he wasn't no damn boy; he was a God damn man. He used that expression for no more than calling him a boy."[21]

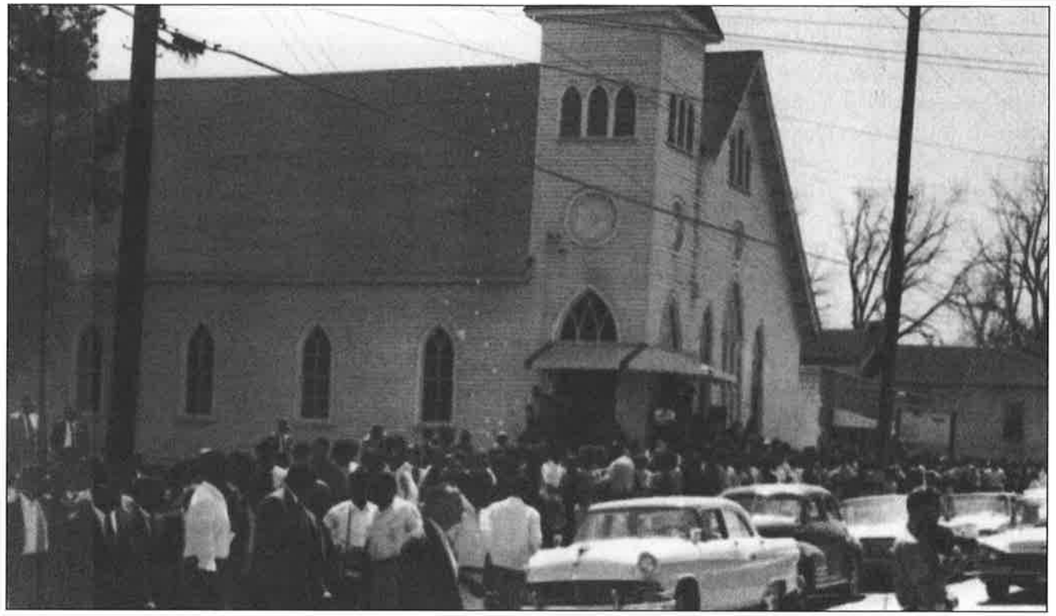
African Americans also refused to give unquestioned respect to white authority and power. Acting individually and collectively, they refused to be intimidated and demanded action and accountability from whites in positions of power. A black woman warning others not to patronize a white store got into an altercation with a white merchant who threatened to call the sheriff. Collins' response, "call your God Dam sheriff, I am not scared of him," reflects a decided break from the past when white law enforcement officials held absolute and capricious power over blacks.[22]

One of the first collective challenges came in May 1966 when thirty-four high school students were arrested for protesting at the commencement ceremony of Alcorn A & M, the local black college whose president vocally opposed the civil rights movement.[23] At an earlier Alcorn protest, almost 200 people were arrested and jailed for more than twenty-four hours in crowded conditions without food. Unwilling to see these young people treated in a similar manner, parents and activists headed to the Courthouse where the students were being taken. One movement organizer remembers,

> In a matter of minutes the Courthouse was just like black birds out there, covered before they could bring [the arrested students] down from Alcorn. It was covered, just waiting on them to get here. Time they got here, they released them to the parents and they gone [on] home. And once that was over, everybody went back home.[24]

The crowd of angry blacks surrounding the Courthouse convinced the white sheriff to release the students to their parents, immediately and without bond, rather than risk disturbance. In this instance, blacks were able to hold the formal systems of power accountable, not through electoral politics or appeals to higher authorities like the federal government, but through their own collective action.

The Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed, self-defense group modeled on an earlier group formed in Bogalusa, Louisiana, provided the most consistent check on the local sheriff and police.[25] The Deacons were a selective, well-respected, "elite organization of



People gathering for a march in front of First Baptist Church, Port Gibson, 1966. Photo courtesy Mississippi Cultural Crossroads.

black men.'[26] They included some of the community's most respected people, including church deacons. "Hotheads" were turned down in favor of men with "nerves of steel."[27] As one person recalls,

> They were looking for guys with character, with manhood. They were looking for warriors. They were looking for folk that were gonna stand there in the event of something violent. Some type of violence broke out, they were willing to stand there and kind of sacrifice themselves for the majority of the folk that were inside the church…All of your better known black males at the time…just wound up Deacons.[28]

Deacons guarded mass meetings, checked churches and cars for bombs, protected movement leaders and their families, and patrolled black neighborhoods with guns and walkie-talkies. In addition to taking over some of the responsibilities of the traditional law enforcement officials, the Deacons pressured them to do their job in a more equitable fashion. On at least two occasions, in a manner reminiscent of the crowd gathering and forcing the release of the high school students, the Deacons and other bystanders pressured police to make an arrest.

In May 1966, William Foster, a white Klan supporter yelled, "You black bitches, I'll kill you," out of his pickup window at Clara and Earl Truitt, who were 15 and 11 at the time. When a white police officer refused to make an immediate arrest, African American bystanders and members of the Deacons surrounded the officer and threatened, "'If you don't get him [Foster] and arrest him, yourselves, we'll find him on our own.'" An officer subsequently did arrest Foster, although he was quickly released without bond and ultimately acquitted of all charges. Two civil rights activists were prosecuted for their role in demanding his arrest.[29]

The second incident came two months later when Emerson Davis, a black man who was closely allied with local whites, threatened Rudy Shields with a gun. Shields and his companions went directly to the police and tried to convince several officers to disarm Davis and charge him with attempted murder. When the policemen refused, Shields warned, "If you let him kill me, my people will retaliate." Davis was arrested due to the crowd's insistence and Shield's implied threat, but he was quickly released and eventually acquitted, while Shields was arrested and convicted of threatening Davis.[30]

Both of these instances suggest that the Deacons' policing could force some measure of responsiveness from the white-controlled legal establishment. However, the formal system of power was still not responsive or

accountable to the black community. In each case, the perpetrator was quickly released and subsequently acquitted in Mayor's Court. Similarly, in each case, civil rights activists were prosecuted and convicted for their role in forcing the law enforcement system to respond to black needs. These convictions were subsequently appealed through several levels of Mississippi court and eventually overturned.[31]

In the short term, whites were able to resist challenges, but African Americans were taking steps to insist that aspects of the legal system at least begin to work more equitably. As in Burks' refusal to comply with segregation, the sharp break here was blacks' insistence that the system be accountable in some measure and their willingness to take action. Despite a strong presence in much of the surrounding area, the Ku Klux Klan never developed more than a token presence in Claiborne County. Many of the community's most powerful white men, including the sheriff, opposed the Klan, but the Deacons took their own steps to keep the organization away. By monitoring short wave radio broadcasts of a local Klan supporter, the Deacons found out about a Klan organizational meeting. In an action reminiscent of white intimidation when blacks began meeting for literacy and voter registration classes, they gathered outside and took note of those who attended the meeting, making it clear through their presence that they would not passively accept the Klan.[32] Sociologist Charles Payne argues that white violence declined as African Americans began to retaliate.[33] It is likely that the willingness of Claiborne County blacks to form a chapter of the Deacons, monitor white actions, and pick up arms worked against the formation of an active Klan.

When blacks stood up to the Klan, demanded access to public space, and resisted white authority, they were defying decades-old traditions, customs, and power hierarchies. They also transposed the ever present climate of fear which had actively reinforced white supremacy. Since these practices had provided a pervasive, daily, oppressive and in-your-face reminder that whites possessed absolute authority, their negation suggested a toppling or reversal of this power. Blacks exploited white fears of retaliation or violent revolution to keep whites off-balance and restrict the white community's use of violence to control or limit the movement of the larger black community.

The Deacons' stand against the Klan is one example of this, but there are others which also illustrate this inversion. One member of the Deacons, Julius Warner, whose commitment to the movement was solidified when he saw his father beaten by highway patrolmen at a protest gathering, was unmoved by the Mayor's attempt to intimidate movement workers with threats of the Klan. Warner told him, "'okay. Bring them on in, but if you get one of us, we gon' get one of you all.'"[34] Charles Evers echoed that refrain in a Courthouse speech following a mass march in June 1966, warning the white community, "We will remain nonviolent as long as you let us remain nonviolent. But when you put your hand on us, we are coming back at you."[35] He drew applause from the assembled blacks as he continued. "We are going to turn our other cheek no more. If you slap one of us, we will knock [the] hell out of you. We are not going to bother you, and you don't bother us.'[36] He specifically warned that the black community would no longer tolerate harassment by a Klan supporter, Ronnie Hulbert. He said,

> There ain't nobody scared of Ronnie. Tell Ronnie he ain't nothing but a coward. He needs to become a man. Tell Ronnie don't be picking up no Negroes. If he picks us up, we are going to pick him up. We aren't going to take any more, white folks.[37]

Within this charged context, African Americans were able to manipulate and capitalize on white fears. In one instance, Deacons planted a fake minutes book which the sheriff, according to plan, confiscated during an arrest. The minutes book exaggerated the numbers of men involved in the organization and referred to stockpiled weapons and contacts with the Black Panther Party in California.[38] These claims, all of which were false, heightened white fears. On another occasion, someone spread false rumors that blacks were going to burn the downtown area of Port Gibson, leading many merchants to set up armed guards to protect their businesses.[39] Nothing ever came of the threat and several Deacons say it was simply an attempt to keep whites off-balance. At the time, one civil rights activist told an investigator, "'One thing about these people down here, we can put out anything, and with all that is going on all over the state, they will believe it.'"[40]

This growing black assertiveness fueled white fears. In response to visibly armed blacks, white officials passed an ordinance making it illegal to carry weapons in the town limits of Port Gibson. Whites had long used the Mississippi law which allowed anyone to carry weapons as long as they were openly displayed to intimidate blacks. Obviously, this was not working in Port Gibson, where African Americans refused to back down and the most aggressive whites, like Klansman James Jones, never carried out their threats.[41] This change in the local gun laws marks the first example of blacks influencing public policy. They did it, not through the large numbers of newly registered voters, but through dramatically and persistently standing up to white authority.

African Americans in Claiborne County used any strategy for gaining access to full community life. They worked through the standard mechanisms of power, particularly voter registration and the political process, to "become part of this democratic society." Where they could and when they had to, they looked to the federal government, including the Supreme Court, to substantiate and enforce their demands. Above all, though, they defied long-standing conventions (including white stores), and insisted on courteous treatment and respect. They resisted white authority and privilege, and developed parallel institutions serving the black community. These actions helped reverse decades of fear and violence and force the formal systems of power to begin to incorporate, in appearance if nothing else, equitable treatment for African Americans. In the short term this insistence on "coming back at you" was probably as important in bringing African Americans into the larger "democratic society" as registering and voting or federal policy changes. MF

EMILYE CROSBY teaches History at SUNY-Geneseo.

FOOTNOTES

1. Matthew Burks file, reel 109, Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records (SCRLR).
2. Matthew Burks file, reel 109, SCRLR.
3. "NAACP - Mississippi Voter Education Program, Voter Registration Record," [November 17, 1965 - Dec. 2, 1965], Folder: Register and Vote, Miss., 1966-67, Box 62, Series A, Group 4, NAACP papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
4. Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins and John Morsell, April 20, 1966, Folder: Charles Evers, 1966-68, Box 58, Series C, Group 4, NAACP Papers; Thomas Watts transcript, Thomas Watts file, reel 109, SCRLR. *Thomas Watts v. State of Mississippi,* no. 44,236, Justice Tom Brady decision, 6.
5. Charles Evers speech, June 21, 1966, *Claiborne Hardware v. NAACP.*
6. James Dorsey interview, May 1992, 4. All of the interviews in this paper are in the author's possession.
7. Faye Davis, interview by Emilye Crosby and Kenzia Tisdale, Port Gibson, MS, June 25, 1992, 1.
8. Arrest form, April 26, 1966, *Williams, Calvin, Port Gibson v.* file, reel 109, SCRLR.
9. Arrest form, April 26, 1966, *Williams, Calvin, Port Gibson v.* file, reel 109, SCRLR.
10. Quoted in "White Only On Main Street," *Southern Exposure,* vol. 24 (Winter 1996), 37-41.
11. Affidavit of L. L. Doyle, June 27, 1966, Williams, Calvin, Port Gibson v. file, reel; 109, SCRLR.
12. Allen interview, 9.
13. Charles E. Snodgrass to T.B. Birdsong and A.D. Morgan, April 1, 1966, Folder 2, Box 147, Paul B. Johnson Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS. Trial and notes by John W. Biasucci, April 11, 1966. *Shields, Rudy, Port Gibson, v.* file, reel 109, SCRLR.
14. James Miller interview, 11; Robert Butler interview; Albert Butler interview; William v. PG file, reel 109, SCRLR.
15. Sayles interview, 5; Allen interview; Charles Evers speech, June 21, 1966, *Claiborne Hardware v. NAACP.*
16. Evers speech, June 21, 1966, *Claiborne Hardware v. NAACP.*
17. Sayles interview, 5; Allen interview; Charles Evers speech, June 21, 1966, *Claiborne Hardware v. NAACP.*
18. M. M. McFatter interview, 6; Melvin McFatter, "No Easy Journey" exhibit opening forum, Dec. 3, 1994; Scott interview, 5.
19. *Shields v. Mississippi,* Sept. 20, 1966, p. 27. reel 110. SCRLR.
20. *Shields v. Mississippi,* Sept. 20, 1966, p. 27. reel 110. SCRLR.
21. Testimony of John Thomas Clark, 60, *Shields v. Mississippi,* Sept. 20, 1966, reel 110, SCRLR.
22. Anne Marie Collins file, reel 109, SCRLR.
23. Alcorn Commencement Arrests, reel 109, SCRLR.
24. Walker interview, June 1992, 13.
25. Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 357-58.
26. Denoual interview, 5.
27. Charles Evers, interview with Emilye Crosby, Fayette, MS, Aug. 5, 1992, 6.
28. Denoual interview, 6.
29. John Doyle to files, June 7, 1966, *Shields and Williams v. MS* file, reel 110, SCRLR.
30. *Shields, Rudy, MS v.* file, reel 112, SCRLR.
31. *Thomas Watts v. State of Mississippi,* no. 44, 236, 6, 8.
32. Walker interview, June 1992, 14; George Henry Walker, interview by Emilye Crosby, Port Gibson, MS, Feb, 16, 1994, 7.
33. Charles Payne, *I've got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 204-6.
34. Warner interview, 21.
35. Charles Evers speech, June 21, 1966, *Claiborne Hardware v. NAACP.*
36. Evers speech, June 21, 1966, *Claiborne Hardware v. NAACP.*
37. Evers speech, June 21, 1966, *Claiborne Hardware v. NAACP.*
38. Report by A. L. Hopkins, July 7, 8, 1966, Folder 2, Box 139, PBJP.
39. Bill Lum, interview by Emilye Crosby, Port Gibson, MS, July 29, 1992, 3.
40. Report by A. L. Hopkins, July 7, 8, 1966, Folder 2, Box 139, PBJP.
41. Charles E. Snodgrass to T. B. Birdsong and A. D. Morgan, July 20, 1966, Folder 5, Box 147.

"Cooking, Tending the Garden, and Being Good Hostesses"

A DOMESTIC HISTORY OF

White Women's Opposition TO THE Freedom Movement in Mississippi

by Lauren F. Winner

Responding to the challenges of the civil rights movement, many white women in Mississippi made new efforts to take charge of relations with their African American employees. Kitchens and gardens became settings for new tensions, confrontations, and debates about manners and the definition of white supremacy.

"My husband was involved in the [Citizens'] Council–whose wasn't?" Glynda Harris Jackson, a recent transplant from Mississippi to New York, begins. It is January, and we are seated in Jackson's Manhattan apartment, tape recorder running. Jackson is one of several Southern women, relocated to the North, who have agreed to talk to me about their experiences in the South during the civil rights era. She is flattered, but she doesn't think her experiences are noteworthy enough to merit a historian's attention. "All my friends and I, we shared our husbands' views–it was just what you believed back then, it was as natural as thinking the sun was going to come up every morning. But we never did much, not organized stuff like the Citizens' Council. We were too busy…cooking…tending the garden, and being good hostesses to get much involved in politics."[1]

Jackson is not alone in dismissing her activities during the civil rights era as unimportant and apolitical. At first blush it appears that men were the primary movers behind white resistance to the Freedom Movement: men made up the Citizens' Councils, and comprised the vast majority of the Klan. Lynch mobs seem to be disproportionately male. Women, the historiography tells us, got involved in the fray only if their children were involved–only when the public schools were integrated. Elite white women had other concerns: "cooking …tending the garden, and being good hostesses." Upon closer investigation, however, it appears that Jackson and women like her were integral figures in white opposition to the Freedom Movement: not through public, organized protest, but rather through what another Southern white woman has called her "domestic pursuits." Jackson, and hundreds of women like her not only across the state of Mississippi, but the South more broadly, protested the black Freedom Movement in the realm and with the weapons with which they were most familiar.[2] Taking Jackson's description of her daily activities as my template, I have organized the following snapshots of white elite women's opposition to the civil rights movement.

It is, of course, difficult to trace these unorganized, "domestic," but nonetheless political actions, which may be one reason that historians' treatment of white resistance to the civil rights movement has focused primarily on white men's activities in what is usually referred to as the public sphere. Women acting alone, or in consort with one or two others, in their libraries, kitchens, or bedrooms, have not deposited club minutes or organizational newsletters in archives. Thus, it is drawing primarily on over thirty oral histories conducted between 1996 and 1998, that I offer this initial foray into the domestic politics of white women's opposition to the freedom movement in Mississippi.[3] White women–even when protected by promises of anonymity–are sometimes loathe to admit to past behavior that now embarrasses them. Consequently, while much evidence comes directly from white women themselves, this story would have to remain untold if it were not for the trenchant recollections of the black women who were the recipients–sometimes the victims–of conservative white women's actions.

There were, to be sure, women whose opposition to the freedom movement took public forms more easily identified as being in the realm of traditional politics. Familiar from photographs of Little Rock and other southern locales are women engaged in organized, public protest, taunting black southerners, holding black children still so that their own white children could smack them across the face. One observer noted that these "angry white women" resembled nothing so much as "their mama's mamas rioting in Richmond for bread" during the Civil War.[4] Women marched, clad in white, with the Klan, joined lynch mobs, and helped their husbands draft threatening and coercive missives on Citizens' Council letterhead.

Deep South women also voted–some reports suggest in record numbers–during the 1948 election in which Strom Thurmond ran for president on the Dixiecrat ticket. "I had never voted before the election of '48," a seventy-nine-year-old woman told me. "It was Strom Thurmond on the ticket that got everyone rearing to vote." Ad hoc groups of women to "get out the vote for Strom" formed across the Deep South. One woman in Louisiana reported that she "ran into just about everybody from my bridge club and my sewing circle on Election Day…I even saw women from the beauty salon down at the polls." Newspaper reporters in Georgia and Alabama declared that they had never seen so many females at the polls.[5]

1948 marked a peak for support of the Dixiecrat ticket, and it also may have been a peak for women's involvement in voting, campaigning, and fundraising. If black Southerners during the 1950s and 1960s were risking life and limb to reclaim the right to vote, many white Southerners–at least white Southern women–were giving up on voting as a strategy to accomplish, as one octogenarian told me in a hushed voice, "jack shit." The loss of the Dixiecrats in 1948 was profoundly disturbing to many women who had not only voted for the start-up segregation party, but also invested an inordinate amount of time and money in the Dixiecrat campaign. "After the loss," a native of Oxford told me, flipping through photo albums with crumbling newspaper clippings pasted inside,

> there was a flurry of analysis, from the newspaper writers to the political scientists over at the university, all trying to determine why Strom lost some states and won others. There were all sorts of theories, about where he'd managed to get on the [Democratic] Party ticket and get Truman off, and about where he'd done enough race-baiting, or too much…I'll tell you, though, none of that had anything to do with it. Strom won where women got out the vote for him, and he lost where we didn't. I know–my sister lived up in Virginia, and she *voted* for Strom, sure, but did she and her friends devote an hour of their time to campaigning? No. And look what happened: Strom lost.

That this activist's own analysis of the 1948 election may be overly facile is hardly the point; what matters is that she was not alone in believing that she had contributed time and energy to a political campaign and, because of the failings of others, it had gotten her nowhere. Another Mississippi woman expressed similar views: "I knocked my socks out campaigning [for the Dixiecrats] in that election, I tell you all the women in our neighborhood did, and in our precinct, he [Thurmond] won. Well, I said, I'll be if I am going to do anything like *that* again, for all the good it did us. No ma'am. No more electioneering for me."[6]

A number of women articulated similar sentiments. After what one woman referred to as "the Dixiecrat debacle," white Southern women not only withdrew from active campaigning and fund-raising, many even stopped voting. "I just about gave up on elections and voting getting us anywhere," Sandra Knox Jorden said. "I didn't vote for another fifteen years, and I was not alone. I doubt that half my book club was voting, we were so put off by the '48 campaign and what was happening in Washington. My cousin in Alabama kept voting for local and state positions but I don't think she voted for another presidential candidate until the day she died."[7] Even erstwhile advocates of women's suffrage noted a drop in women's voting, and bemoaned it: as one pamphleteer put it, "We struggled and struggled to gain for ourselves the right to vote, and now, because of one lost election here, and one vote that didn't go the way they wanted to there, suddenly women don't seem to be voting at all, at least in this part of the country."[8]

But white women, in turning away from voting and "the promise of the legislative process," did not abandon the fight; they merely changed their tactics.

Cooking

If the literature on black activism in the civil rights movement has been slow to pick up on it, oral wisdom in southern African American communities has always been aware of the myriad ways black Southerners found to resist their employers, and other white Southerners. Anne Moody's recollection of botching her employer's shirts while ironing them represents the archetypal example.[9] Equally familiar are the instances of black domestics' stealing food–although they would have hardly considered it stealing, but, rather, following up on examples from slavery times, reclaiming what was due them–from their employers.[10] Black Southerners' quotidian acts of resistance have so pervaded our understandings of the freedom movement that even white writers and other "cultural workers" have turned the images on their heads to white Southerners' advantage. Witness, for example, a scene in Albert Uhry's award-winning *Driving Miss Daisy.* Miss Daisy, having finally given in to her middle-aged son's wishes, agrees willy-nilly to hire a chauffeur, Hoke. Nonetheless, Daisy is constantly suspicious of Hoke, and one morning she calls her son and insists that he must come over to her house because a terrible tragedy has occurred. When her son arrives, Daisy declares that a can of food is missing from her pantry–Hoke, whom she always suspected of being a dishonest no-good, must have stolen it. Just after Daisy's son arrives on the scene, Hoke turns up, a can of food in hand: he had been hungry the previous day, so he had eaten Daisy's food, but he stopped by the Piggly-Wiggly on the way to work to pick up a replacement.[11] If, in white southerners' eyes, the uppity, untrustworthy black folks are those who steal food from their employers, the loyal, long-suffering retainers, symbolized by Hoke, are those who replace any food they borrow.

That black Southerners located some of their resistance to Jim Crow in kitchens, in front of open pantries and wielding hot irons is now commonplace knowledge. Why, then, should it come as a surprise that the kitchen should also serve as a locus of political action for the conservative white Southerners (although elite white women were rarely doing the cooking themselves)? Some examples of white women employing "domestic" tactics against African Americans–employees in particular –are familiar to us. Perhaps more frequently than any other tool of retaliation, white female employers often tried to frame their employees for theft. Miss Daisy, if steeped in racism, appears to be an honest soul: she eagerly jumped to assumptions about her chauffeur, but she never tried to set up her domestics. Mrs. Burke, Anne Moody's employer, on the other hand, did; after Moody–in reply to a direct question from Burke–suggested that the integration of schools might have some beneficial results, Burke claimed her change purse was missing. The threat–that Burke could set up Moody and fire her at any time–was unmistakable. Moody quit that day.[12]

Moving beyond the rather ordinary tactic of framing one's servants for theft, some employers would intentionally sabotage something they knew their employees were counting on. Myra Cuningham recounts how her employer had promised to let her use an hour of her afternoon in the kitchen to bake a birthday cake for her son. "I was providing my own ingredients, now–she was just giving me the time." When Cunningham's employer observed her to be "dawdling," the employer suddenly reneged on her promise, demanding instead that Cunningham fix deviled eggs for a bridge club meeting. Cunningham prepared the eggs, but decided that afternoon to leave the South. Two weeks later she moved to New York.[13] Another Mississippi employer, after hinting that her maid could take some of her children's out-grown clothing home as Christmas presents for her own children, changed her mind on December 23, boxing up all the clothes and sending them to cousins.[14] If the relationship between black domestics and conservative female employers was a battle zone, white women may have learned the particular strategy of destroying something their enemy held dear from their servants, who employed similar tactics. Anne Moody writes of dropping cornbread she was meant to serve her employers for dinner, and examples abound of black women "accidentally" ruining a dish that was supposed to be served at an important dinner, or quitting just before their employer was to host a grand fete.[15] When white women employed similar strategies, one retired black domestic in North Carolina trenchantly observed, they gave the lie to the myth that "our employers thought of us as family. You don't treat your family *cruel.*"[16]

Black domestics often supplemented their meager incomes with cast-off clothing and leftover food that their employers gave them.[17] In many homes, "pan-toting" was a long-standing custom: not a few employers even instructed their black cooks to cook a serving or two extra of dinner for their own consumption. Some black domestics came to regard these leftovers not as a magnanimous gift, but as part of their salary. In households where the passing on of such leftovers was an established practice, many black employees, in a situation recalling slaves' de facto rights to garden produce on antebellum plantations, felt they had a right to these leftovers. In the 1950s and 60s, however, the leftovers in Southern kitchens became contested. White women who had once given their employees leftovers as a matter of course now began to withhold the "privilege" from servants whom they found "uppity." One black woman, who had worked for–and been fed by–the same family for over five years, was asked by her employer to work late on all the Saturdays in April, 1961. When the maid declined, the leftovers ceased. The employer "instructed her sons at dinner that night to make sure to eat a second helping, she didn't want any leftovers lying around." Another Mississippi employer had always included her maid when she made out the grocery lists: if five people were coming for dinner, and she was serving chicken breasts, she would purchase six. One morning, she chastised her maid for being late to work. When her maid ventured to suggest that ten minutes could hardly matter at six in the morning when her employer wasn't even out of bed yet herself, the employer took out a pen and rewrote her grocery list: only five chicken breasts from now on. "It may have been a little unreasonable," the employer later conceded, "but there was an air of change about–this was the early 60s–and I figured, if you don't draw the line at the first sign of disrespect, who knows where you'll end up?"[18]

Historians of the antebellum era have shown that plantation mistresses were often more vigorous in their defense of slavery than their husbands, fathers, and brothers.[18] One can make a similar argument of elite white women of the civil rights era. Given that civil rights-era Mississippi lacked a sizable cadre of white progressives, white men in Mississippi are generally thought to fall into two categories: the violent, and the moderate. To oversimplify the situation, let us say that violent men were in the Klan, and moderate men, who preferred "subtler forms of intimidation," were in the Citizens' Council.[20] Scholars have done little to characterize the perspective of women, but the wives of moderate men have long been assumed to be themselves moderate–non-violent. However, some evidence suggests that while men in the Citizens' Councils were using "polite" methods of opposing civil rights, their wives, in their kitchens, were sometimes employing more threatening tactics to the same end.

One woman from Hinds County snagged her husband's Citizens' Council list and, prefiguring the 1980s Halloween scare tactics, anonymously sent pies with "razor blades baked in" to the wives of everyone her husband deemed "suspect." (Her maid, Ella, was asked to forgo cleaning the bathrooms and bedrooms for two days so that she could do the necessary baking.) A North Carolina woman, after she learned that her cook's son participated in the 1963 Greensboro sit-ins, calmly informed her maid that if her son's behavior was not curbed, there might be "an accident in the kitchen one morning." The dramatic testimony of a former maid from Jackson, Mississippi, who believes one of her employers tried to poison her after she "burned one too many shirts," is particularly illustrative. Although she has no concrete evidence of an attempt on her life, this former domestic was convinced by her employer's discourse on Cleopatra. "First, I started noticing rat poison lying around, even though before, she was very careful to keep all that stuff outside of the house because of the children. Then she started making remarks about how, back in ancient times, kings and queens had people they employed just to taste their food to make sure it wasn't poisoned: if the taster died, then Cleopatra or whoever knew not to eat the meal.... I took her warning loud and clear. I never ate another bite in that house, and I found a new position somewhere else as soon as possible."[21]

Tending the Garden

During the freedom movement, women's activities in the garden, another seemingly apolitical realm, took on a decidedly political cast. Gardens had been sites of conflict between black and white southerners even before the Civil War, but at the height of the freedom movement, politics in the garden went beyond the old question of rights to food. White southerners, it seemed, had even grown tired of the habitual accusations that local blacks had been stealing from their gardens at night, and moved on to more creative–or less credible–uses of the garden in their attempts to keep blacks "in their place". (This is not to say that poor African Americans gave up plundering this food source; again Anne Moody is instructive. She writes that her mother frequently pilfered corn from her employer's cornfield. "She had a special way of stealing the corn that made it look just like the crows had taken it." Mrs. Cook's only response was to put up more scarecrows.)[22]

Jessica Louise Reed Mitchell, a white woman from Mississippi, began hosting a Bible study entitled "Scripture and the Garden." Although advertised primarily through her church, "Scripture and the Garden" was open to women from all churches; not surprisingly, only white women turned out. "Scripture and the Garden"–which did sometimes meet in a garden–became Reed Mitchell's (the name is double-barreled, but not hyphenated) pulpit for preaching to her neighbors about the evils of social equality between black people and white people. As one might predict, the first Bible study meeting considered the second and third chapters of Genesis. Rather than looking ahead to the sixth and seventh chapters of Genesis (which take place not in a garden but on an ark) and falling back on the popular association of black people with the descendants of Ham, Reed Mitchell instead likened the white people in her audience to Adam and the black people in their community to Eve. Her reading, from that point, was fairly straightforward. When God tells Eve in Genesis 3:16 that her husband is to rule over her, God is really communicating that white people should rule African Americans. Not blind to the gendered implications of her analogy, Reed Mitchell informed her audience that although men had for centuries used the third chapter of Genesis as a tool to justify the subordination of women to men, the true meaning had been revealed to her in prayer.[23]

Other biblical passages Reed Mitchell addressed in her Bible study included the end of Ezekiel and Revelation 22:1-2.[24] A particularly intriguing session was devoted to the parables of the mustard seed and yeast, Luke 13:18-21: "He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.' And he said again, 'To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'"[25] Jesus' parables are, of course, intentionally inscrutable, and could reasonably be interpreted any number of ways. A standard interpretation of these parables, however, is that the kingdom of God (read: the church) starts off small but grows to be very large.

Reed Mitchell's interpretation of the mustard seed and yeast parables was somewhat different. In her reading, the Kingdom of God was not the church, but moral society generally. Reed Mitchell herself, and the women who attended her Bible study, were the gardener and the baker: it was their job to ensure that the mustard seed grew and the flour was leavened. Moving away from the mustard seed parable, Reed Mitchell noted that any number of disturbances could prevent bread from rising. A soufflé, she reminded her audience, would fall if the slightest noise or movement occurred nearby. "If merely banging a pot down too loud on the counter can crush a soufflé," Reed Mitchell, beginning to confuse actual soufflés with her metaphorical one, wrote, "just imagine what those rioters, with all their noise and disruption"–referring to the black civil rights demonstrators during the Freedom Summer–"could do to the soufflé you slaved over for hours."[26] (Reed Mitchell apparently missed the irony of her verb choice.) If her reading of these parables seems perhaps a rather bold departure from the text itself, her audience did not see it that way –or perhaps they did not care. Most of them turned up the next week to listen to Reed Mitchell's explication of Gethsemane.

While southern gardens are not the usual venue for Bible studies, they are often reputed to be the site of buried treasure. Many is the white family that claims to have silver buried in the backyard, where it was once hidden from the Yankees. Whether or not many Daughters of the Confederacy actually had silver buried in the backyard, southern Jews often did, although not for safekeeping. It is a custom in some Jewish families to stick silverware in the backyard for a day if something has come into contact with the knife or spoon to render it no longer kosher–if, for example, a utensil reserved for meat products came into contact with a steaming bowl of dairy-based soup. Although a strict Jewish legalist would not recognize sticking a spoon in the backyard as an effective way of koshering it, the custom has nonetheless persisted among some southern Jews.

One such family lived in Meridian. Every few weeks, one of the children would accidentally stir a beef consommé with a dairy-spoon, and out the spoon would go, to spend twenty-four hours buried in the yard. The next day, Grace, the family's maid would retrieve the spoon, clean it, and stick it back in the silver chest. One day after school, the youngest daughter, Nancy, had a friend over to play, and the two girls wandered into the kitchen for a snack. While they were eating, Grace was preparing dinner–two dinners actually, one for the family to have that night, and another to keep cold in the refrigerator so the family would have some dinner the next night, her one night every two weeks off. One meal was dairy, the other meat, and somewhere in the measuring, stirring, and tasting, Grace accidentally plunged a dairy spoon into a meat pot, and, after tasting the soup from the dairy spoon, she realized her error. She handed the spoon to Nancy, saying "I got it dirty again, you know what to do." Nancy and her friend ran out to the yard to bury the spoon.[27]

A week or so later, Nancy was playing at her friend's house after school. When they went out to the backyard to play, Nancy noticed that a fork and knife were stuck in the ground. "You're not Jewish!" Nancy declared. "Why're you doing that to your silverware?" "Well, I saw you doing it, you know, after your help took a bite and made the spoon dirty. I told my mom how you made the spoon clean again, and she said we'd try it, too. Mom says she's always telling our help not to use our silver and they always are." The knife and fork had been the utensils her maid had used to eat her lunch. "I didn't know you had to be Jewish to get it to work." The mother of Nancy's friend had not only decided to "try" Nancy's trick for getting a utensil "clean again," she had passed along the secret to a neighbor. Nancy's family had, unwittingly, sparked a block-wide trend. The women of Meridian stopped burying their silver when Nancy's mother explained it was a matter of *kashrut,* not Jim Crow, and Nancy's family gave up the practice, too, just to avoid any further confusion in the future.[28]

Being Good Hostesses

Ask Americans under forty for a synonym for "Jim Crow," and most will tell you "segregation." Segregation, of course, was a public thing: black and white southerners were to drink out of different water fountains, ride in separate train cars, live in separate neighborhoods, flush different toilets. In 1956, Mississippi state law required owners of hair salons, hotels, restaurants, theaters, bars and other "places of public amusement and accommodation" to "choose or select" their clientele–though, as Neil McMillen argues, segregation in those public arenas had been de facto, if not de jure, long before the state legislature codified those habits into law.[29] Historians recognize, however, that for black southerners, Jim Crow's meaning went beyond water fountains and beauty parlors. Despite black efforts to curtail the influence of Jim Crow on their lives, the culture of segregation affected black southerners' economic lives, religiosity, and posed a constant physical threat to African Americans' safety and well-being.[30]

Historians have been less quick to observe that the same can be said for white southerners: although the historiography on white resistance to the freedom movement focuses largely on what white southerners did outside of their homes–in the streets, in Citizens' Council meetings, and so forth–both Jim Crow, and, subsequently, the freedom movement followed white southerners home at night just as it did black southerners. For those wealthy white women who did not leave the home each morning, Jim Crow was as much, if not more, a matter of what went on inside the domicile as out. For white southerners of the 1950s and 60s, Jim Crow did not mean merely physical, public segregation from black southerners. It meant, as one woman put it, "doing differently."[31]

Elite white etiquette in the South provides a case in point. When pestered with questions of "Why do I have to do it this way, Mommy?" any southern mother raised in the old school of etiquette (those who don't need Emily Post, because the rituals and rhythms of right living are engrained in them) will reply, "Good manners and acting properly helps to make the other people around you comfortable." But that is, at best, a half-truth, at worst a total inversion of the real reason behind etiquette. Etiquette is not primarily about making people comfortable, but about making people uncomfortable. It is about drawing lines between those who are in and those who are out, and about communicating to the outsiders just where they stand. When etiquette is breached, or those lines crossed, the social order begins to crumble.

For some black southerners, freedom and equality meant, in part, claiming those habits and manners of the white Southern elite for their own. Black women in Mississippi, and throughout the South, began adopting white etiquette for their own. The most widely recognized example of this is black Southerners' refusal to be called "uncle" or "aunt," the labels white Southerners affixed to respected and esteemed African Americans, and their insistence that they be addressed by the same honorifics accorded white people, "Mr." and "Mrs."[32] This example is one located primarily in the public sphere, but there are myriad examples of African Americans' adopting "white" etiquette in the private sphere.

Two examples suffice. In Mississippi, black and white women seemed particularly concerned with the etiquette of weddings. "This was," one black woman told me, "the olden days before people started sending out those automatic reply cards in wedding invitations." At her church, wedding invitations were usually passed along word-of-mouth. But on the occasion that some-

one having a smaller wedding chose to send out handwritten notes, folks–and then only usually those who were not coming–went by the hosts' home to tell them whether or not they could attend. In 1962, with one woman's wedding, that began to change. "We sent out invitations with the words 'Please send a note of reply' printed on the bottom, and then we went around the neighborhood showing people how to write out formal replies to a wedding invitation." (A formal reply to a wedding invitation mirrors the invitation line for line, so if the invitation reads "Mr. And Mrs. John Doe/request the honor of your attendance/at the marriage of their daughter/Mary Jane/to Mr. Richard Roe/on the seventeenth of March," then a formal reply begins "Mr. Tom Brown/regrets that due to illness he will be unable to attend/the wedding of your daughter/Mary Jane".) Like so many black domestics, "I learned that where I worked." When white women got wind of the black community's adoption of formal wedding replies, they were incensed. "They gave up on it themselves, because they couldn't stand that we were doing the same thing as them. That's when they went to those reply cards, because they knew we could never afford the additional expense of sending those out with our invitations."[33]

A final instance also involves Mississippi weddings. "In our family," one white woman told me, "it has always been an honor to be asked to serve the cake and punch at weddings. Of course, we had help to serve the meal itself, but serving the punch or cake was just like being a bridesmaid–a very big honor," usually bestowed upon the first cousins of the bride's parents. "For years, we had the same girl and her daughter helping us at the house, and they always came out to help at weddings, too–they appreciated it, we paid them extra, and I think they needed the money." When the daughter of that "girl" came to get married, her wedding barely resembled the extravagant celebrations her employers' daughters had enjoyed. It was smaller, the food simpler, her dress was not trimmed with handmade lace. But there was one similarity. From all her years working at white weddings, she had learned that serving punch and cake was a task not dumped onto "the help," but reserved for special guests. Mandy had too many cousins and sisters for them all to be bridesmaids, so she asked four of them to serve cake and punch instead. (One might wonder what Mandy would have done otherwise: she would not have had hired servants. Rather, no one would have served the cake and punch per se. Guests would have simply taken it for themselves, and, if someone had gotten stuck behind the punchbowl, it would have been an accident, not an honor.) When her employer was informed that her maid had "stolen" her family's tradition, she was livid. "At the time it seemed just as bad as if she had stolen my jewelry." Jewelry, however, this woman would have made sure to get back. Unable to reclaim her "now tainted" family tradition, she stopped it: when her youngest daughter got married, she had her "help" pour the punch and distribute dessert.[34]

Other examples of similar strategies on the part of conservative white women abound, but these are sufficient to illustrate that for these southern white women, the black freedom movement was not only about voting and integrating the schools. It was about seemingly trivial pieces of daily life–wedding invitations and punch bowls–that were threatened by black people whom they perceived to be stepping out of their place. For the black women in these communities, freedom meant, in part, claiming habits and behavior that were previously considered off-limits to them. For conservative white women, opposing the freedom movement meant preventing African Americans from adopting etiquette they viewed as reserved for "whites only" no less than the bathrooms that bore signs with those words. In each of these instances, black women succeeded in appropriating white southern manners to such an extent that the conservative white women were forced to alter the etiquette itself in order to preserve its whiteness.

In these cases, then, as in so many, "conservative" is something of a misnomer. White Southerners who opposed the freedom fovement were, in their words, fighting to preserve "a way of life." Their actions were conservative in the most basic sense: they opposed social change and sought to preserve unchanging what they had convinced themselves was a pre-ordained, eternal configuration of social relations. But in conserving Jim Crow, white Southerners had to trade any number of other rituals, symbols, and habits they also held dear. MF

LAUREN F. WINNER is Kellett Scholar at Clare College, University of Cambridge.

NOTES

1. Glynda Harris Jackson, interview with author, New York, New York, January 7, 1997.
2. Percy L. Smith, interview with author, Richmond, Virginia, October 3, 1998.
3. All interviews, which will ultimately be deposited at a university archive, are currently in the author's possession. A few of the interviews cited were conducted on the grounds of anonymity, and are identified by number.
4. John Wade Trumbull, interview with author, Richmond, Virginia, April 2, 1998.
5. Anonymous female Dixiecrat interview #20, interview with author, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, June 10, 1998. Mary Margaret (Mrs. George W.) Kimball, interview with author, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, June 12, 1998.
6. Lynn, anonymous female Dixiecrat interview #23, interview with author, Alexandria, Virginia, July 8, 1998. Ann, anonymous female Dixiecrat interview #14, interview with author, Oxford, Mississippi, September 19, 1997.
7. Sandra Knox Jorden, interview with author, Atlanta, Georgia, November 14, 1997.
8. "Women's Votes–Still A Question?" (unsigned pamphlet), (Atlanta, 1953), 3. Susan, anonymous female Dixiecrat interview #21, interview with author, Washington, D.C., July 5, 1998.
9. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York, 1968), 117.
10. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994), 18, 20.
11. Alfred Uhry, *Driving Miss Daisy* (New York: 1988). See also the film version.
12. Moody, 133-137.
13. Myra Cunningham, interview with author, New York, New York, May 17, 1998.
14. Mazie, anonymous Mississippi black domestic interview #1, interview with author, Jackson, Mississippi, June 2, 1996.
15. Moody, 124. Tera S. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom': Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 27-29, 59-61, passim. Kelley, 18, 21.
16. Ellie S. MacDonald, interview with author, Burke County, North Carolina, April 9, 1998.
17. Kelley, 18-20; Hunter, 60-61, 132-133, 225-227.
18. Mrs. Caldwell Murphy, interview with author, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, June 10, 1998. Glynda Harris Jackson, interview with author, New York, New York, January 7, 1997.
19. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
20. On Citizens' Council see, Neil McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 360.
21. Ella, anonymous Mississippi black domestic interview #4, interview with author, Jackson, Mississippi, June 5, 1996. Sara-Emily Long, interview with author, Raleigh, North Carolina, July 10, 1996. Carrie, anonymous Mississippi black domestic interview #6, interview with author, Frederick, Maryland, July 2, 1998.
22. Moody, 9-10.
23. Jessica Louise Reed Mitchell, "Scripture and the Garden Bible Study," vol. 1, no. 1 (Jackson, 1964), 2. 24; Reed Mitchell, "Scripture and the Garden Bible Study," vol. 1, no. 3, and vol. 1, no. 5 (Jackson, 1964).
25. Luke 13:18-21, NRSV.
26. Reed Mitchell, "Scripture and the Garden Bible Study," vol. 1 no. 8 (Jackson, 1964), 1-2. On the intellectual weakness of the Biblical defenses of segregation, see David L. Chappell, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," *Journal of American Studies* vol. 32 (Aug. 1998).
27. Nancy Goldfarb, interview with author, New York, New York, May 2, 1997.
28. Ibid.
29. Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, 1990), 9. See also Hunter, 97-130.
30. McMillen, passim. See also Mamie Garvin Fields with Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York, 1983), 45-50.
31. Glynda Harris Jackson, interview with author, New York, New York, January 7, 1997.
32. On honorifics, see McMillen, *Dark Journey* 23-24.
33. Hallie, anonymous Mississippi black domestic interview #2, interview with author, Jackson, Mississippi, June 3, 1996.
34. Julia, anonymous Mississippi white homemaker interview #3, interview with author, Jackson, Mississippi, June 5, 1996.

The Christian Conscience *of* Jim Crow

White Protestant Ministers and the Mississippi Citizens' Councils, 1954-1964

by Joseph Crespino

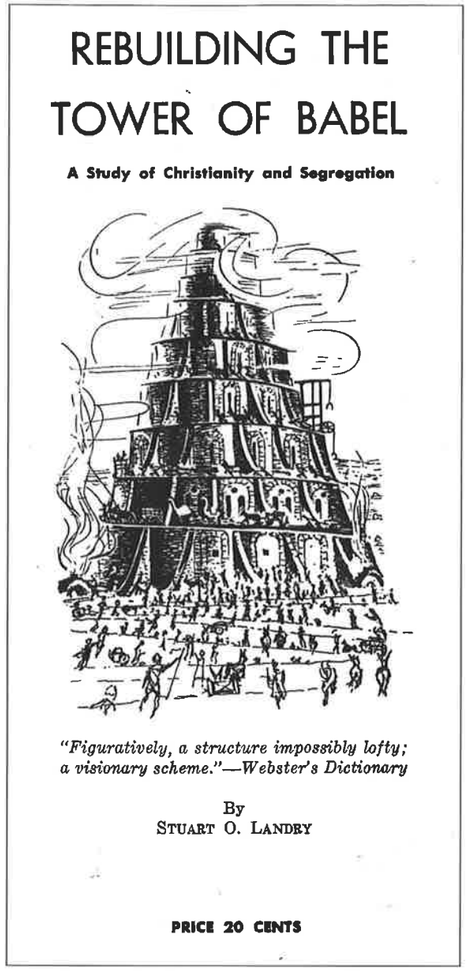
Mississippi ministers who opposed the civil rights movement atruggled to find a Bliblical rationale either to support segregation or to treat it as a political issue outside the scope of religious life.

On the night of June 11, 1958, over 680 members of the Jackson, Mississippi, Citizens' Council attended the organization's annual membership meeting. In the Victory Room of the Heidelberg Hotel, members gathered to hear Henry L. Lyon, pastor of the Highland Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and a two-time president of the more than 600,000 member organization of Alabama Baptists. Lyon delivered an address titled, "Why Racial Integration is Un-Christian," arguing that "separation of the races is the commandment and the law of God."[1] Dismissing the arguments of the "advocates of integration and amalgamation" who claimed the various races to be the result of climate and natural selection, Lyon argued that "the Negro, as well as the Oriental, is a mutation from Adam's stock." Lyon believed God designed these "mutations" to occur so that "distinct and totally new varieties should develop within an original kind."[2]

Lyon's mission before the Citizens' Council was not evangelical, but pastoral. The Citizens' Councils were filled with civic-minded business and professional leaders dedicated to racial segregation. Lyon was assuring the flock that they were right in the stand they had taken against integration. Organized in the wake of the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Citizens' Councils experienced phenomenal growth both in Mississippi and across the Deep South. By October 1956, the Mississippi chapter alone claimed over 80,000 members.[3] Though some members saw the *Brown* decision as an unjust federal imposition on the South's successful and long-established plan for peace between the races, some also believed that in overturning segregation, the Court meddled with a law written not by men but by God.

Lyon and other white, southern Protestant leaders played an important role in southern resistance. The ministers involved in the Citizens' Councils were not partially-schooled, back-country evangelists. Many had studied at well-known theological schools across the nation, some were the leaders of large and powerful Protestant denominations or had served as the heads of southern religious colleges. When these ministers spoke on behalf of segregation, their influence was based in part on the arguments they made to defend segregation, but also in the mere fact of who they were. As moral leaders in their communities, they provided Mississippi's white middle class with a persuasive rationale for maintaining segregation.

Citizens' Council ministers often made very different religious arguments regarding segregation. Some, like Lyon, argued that segregation was primarily a moral and theological issue. This group argued that God ordained segregation as a way of allowing two fundamentally different races of people to coexist peacefully with one another. In this view, integration was sinful because it ignored the divine will of God for the races to remain separate. A second group of Citizens' Council ministers argued that segregation was fundamentally a civil issue to be decided in the political realm. Ministers who supported this view often did so in response to religious leaders or institutions who condemned southern segregation. This second group of Citizens' Council ministers believed that Christianity did not take an explicit moral position on segregation; it was racial discrimination, not racial segregation, that was inconsistent with Christian piety.



Citizens Council Collection, No. 95-20, Folder 22, 1957.

No ministers or laypersons in the Citizens' Councils distinguished between these two positions. In fact, some ministers made both arguments at the same time, quoting scripture to justify segregation theologically while later arguing that Jim Crow was a political issue in which ministers had no special say. As a group, they were divided among and sometimes within themselves about how to make sense of the changes that were taking place in southern white society. Their sermons, public statements and writings in the decade following the Brown decision suggest that behind the bluster of massive resistance, white southern ministers shared an ambivalence about how to reconcile Jim Crow and Christian faith.

Scholars have downplayed the role of religion and religious arguments in the integration conflict of the 1950s and 60s, noting that on race questions "the overall role of the clergy was clearly secondary."[4] In this view, southern Protestant ministers shunned questions of social and political issues, focusing instead on winning converts.[5] Yet in the decade following the *Brown* decision, some ministers played an active role in defending segregation. While the national governing bodies of the major Protestant denominations, as well as their southern branches, had by the mid 1950s issued public statements in support of integration, denominational councils often had little effect on the sentiments and activities of individual southern ministers.[6] White southern ministers regularly contributed to Citizens' Council publications; three of the twelve members of the editorial board of *The Citizens' Council* and its successor publication, *The Citizen,* were ministers.[7] Some ministers like Charles C. Jones of Mendenhall, Mississippi, recruited new members, urging Mississippians to "stand up and be counted by joining the Citizens' Council."[8] Others recruited speakers for Citizens' Council meetings or helped spread Council chapters into neighboring communities.[9]

Ministers reassured Citizens' Council members that their work to defend segregation was pleasing to God. An editorial in *The Citizens' Council,* the organization's official newsletter, proclaimed, "The Citizens' Council not only believes that God is on its side...but it also believes it is on God's side. Every session is opened with fervent prayer to God for guidance, leadership and protection in these times when the devil is shaking the very foundations of our land."[10] Prayer was a regular part of Council meetings. Longtime Mississippi congressman Jamie Whitten spoke at the 1958 membership drive

meeting of the Holmes County Citizens' Council where a Presbyterian minister gave an invocation and a Baptist minister delivered a benediction.[11] In opening and closing their meetings with prayer, the Citizens' Councils did not differ from other public meetings in the South at the time, where public prayer was a regular part of various civic and social gatherings. Yet the organization often blended political mobilization with religious instruction. Editorials from *The Citizens' Council* carried provocative titles such as "Who Has God's Word On Integration" and "Beware of 'Christ-less Christianity'—A Warning to Thoughtful Americans."[12] *The Citizens' Council* reported groups of ministers or laymen who had taken public stands in defense of segregation.[13] The organization also published tracts of pro-segregation sermons or pro-segregation dialogues by prominent religious leaders of the South.[14]

One common argument of Citizens' Council ministers was that God ordained segregation as the proper state of relations between the races. Henry L. Lyon sounded this view in his address before the Jackson Citizens' Council in 1958 and other ministers echoed him. In May 1964, L.B. McCord, a Presbyterian minister who served as the school superintendent in Clarendon, South Carolina, one of the four school districts that made up the *Brown* decision, spoke before the tenth annual meeting of the Jackson Citizens' Council. He described segregation as "morally right and theologically sound" and affirmed that "God is a segregationist as proven by His command that the Jewish nation not intermarry with other peoples."[15] Similarly, in his 1955 letter to the editor urging support for the Citizens' Council, Charles C. Jones argued "the first chapter of the Bible is a chapter on separating, or segregating things that were different. In this chapter according to the will of God everything fell into line after 'its kind.' From that time until now, that has been the order of God's laws."[16]

Citizens' Council ministers in Mississippi gained support from other pro-segregation ministers around the South. One of the more articulate defenders of segregation as God's sovereign plan was James P. Dees, an Episcopal minister from Statesboro, North Carolina, who also was a member of *The Citizens' Council* editorial board. Dees outlined his views in an essay in the pro-segregationist volume *Essays on Segregation*.[17] Dees believed that "mixing the children in integrated schools and churches will break down all sense of race consciousness (which is the express purpose of the integrationists) and will break down finally whatever exists of the integrity of the white races and white heritage as opposed to that of the Negro."[18] Dees believed that desegregation fought against God's will: "Those who are aiding and abetting in the destruction of the white and Negro races…are in fact seeking to destroy what God has done…This consequently, is immoral, since it is in violation of God's natural law in Creation, and…seems to me to be evidence of moral depravity."[19] Dees held that it was "morally mandatory" to protect the white race from "amalgamation, or mongrelization" and, like so many white southerners, denied that this separation necessarily established any caste distinctions between whites and blacks.

No pro-segregation minister argued more forcefully or repeatedly that segregation was God's design for the races than T. Robert Ingram, an Episcopal priest from Houston, Texas, who spoke before the tenth annual meeting of the Jackson Citizens' Council in May, 1962. His speech, later reprinted in *The Citizen* under the title "Why Integration is Un-Christian," made doomsday predictions about the consequences of integration, suggesting that the forces for integration showed two Biblical signs of the anti-Christ: an unswerving hatred and malice for all Christians and a plan to replace Christ with a man. Ingram wrote,

> If any man suffer as a Christian let him not be too naive to admit that what is called "integration" is nothing more that the organized attack of the forces of Hell upon God's order in nature and in human society. To be integrated means to be unified. The root word, integer, means "one." I say that we now, as a part of God's world, are already fully integrated under the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. We *are* unified. We *are* one. Those who say that we must be made one, that we must *become* "integrated," are in fact saying that Christ does not rule—that He has not *made* us one![20]

Ingram saw in the judicial mandate of the Court to desegregate public institutions an insidious liberal conspiracy to overturn God's established order.

Ingram also believed desegregation threatened the best interests of Christian families. He held that the decision of the Supreme Court to "force" integration on the South violated this Biblically-established principle by dictating to parents where, and with whom, their children should go to school. "The question is not whether father and mother are making the right decision," wrote Ingram. "The question is whether father and mother have any power whatsoever to make any decision. And the government says they don't!"[21] Finally, Ingram believed that integration denied the grace given to Christians through the death of Christ. Integrationists, Ingram claimed, believed that the saving grace of Christ was not enough to redeem men but that salvation also required some form of social engineering as well. "If there is anything that I need more than Christ—or in addition to Christ," argued Ingram, "then He is not enough and He is not Lord and we are not saved by grace!"[22]

The Citizen's Council, August 1957, page 2.

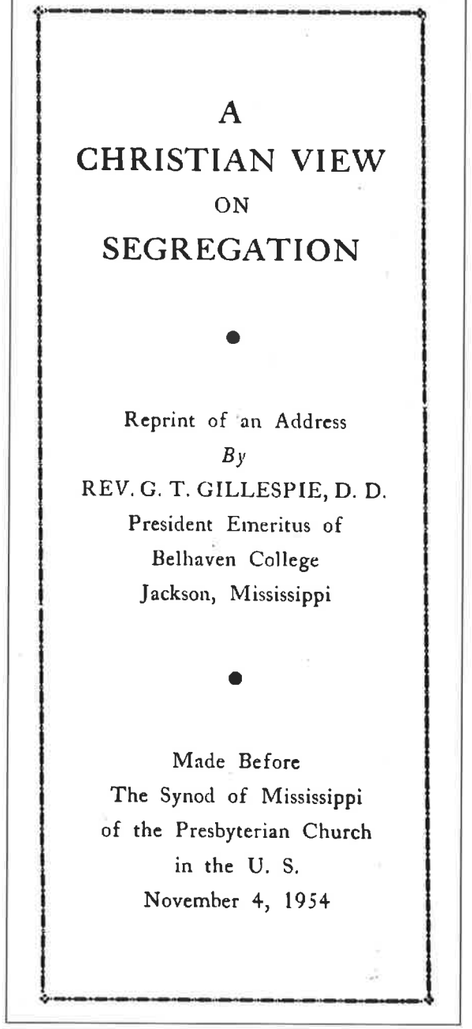
Ingram's accusations that supporters of desegregation denied the sovereignty of God, the integrity of the family, and the grace of Christ shows how many white southerners felt integration was far more serious than a mere political issue. Ingram and others saw integration as a threat not only to southern customs but to the basic order of society. For them, the choice between segregation and desegregation was a choice between God's way or the way of Satan.

While Citizens' Council ministers commonly argued that segregation was part of God's divine order for the races, it was equally if not more common for them to argue that the conflict was primarily political in nature, agreeing with Bob Jones, Sr., founder of Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, who resented "people calling [integration] a Christian issue when Christianity is not involved."[23] These ministers did not repudiate integration, and most often, did not support segregation through references to the scriptures, but rather, defined the issue as a political question or used scripture to show that the Bible did not speak specifically on the subject. This group took a less aggressive tone, not making a case for segregation as God's way so much as defending southern segregation from attacks by northern and liberal clergymen. Above all, these ministers wanted to assure white southerners that their Christian faith did not require them to favor desegregation.

A 1962 article written for *The Citizen* by Albert H. Freundt, Jr., a Presbyterian minister from Forest, Mississippi, exemplified this view. Freundt wrote in response to the white clergy of Oxford, Mississippi, who, in the wake of the violence following James Meredith's integration of the University of Mississippi, called for Mississippians to make Sunday, October 7, 1962, a day of "repentance for our collective and individual guilt."[24] Freundt aimed his article both at the clergy in Oxford as well as "those men who, under the cloak of religion, have gone around the country to incite strife between the races and disobedience to local laws."[25] Freundt believed it was the federal government and outside agitators, not white Mississippians, who needed forgiveness for provoking the violence at Ole Miss: "Are we to repent of our deep convictions that integration is either wrong, or most unwise? Are we to repent of supporting our state loyally in this crisis?"[26]

Freundt's qualification of integration as "wrong, or most unwise" separated him from Citizens Council ministers who believed that segregation was ordained by God. Freundt was unwilling to defend segregation on moral or religious ground: "We have not discussed the political ramifications of this issue from the pulpit

because that is not the place for such interpretations."[27] He referred to the Presbyterian Confession of Faith which counseled churches "to handle or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical, and... not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth." Freundt believed the question boiled down to whether or not southern states had the right to carry on practices which they had for years believed to be acceptable and in the best interests of its citizenry, not whether the current policy of segregation in Mississippi was moral or immoral: "It is not the privilege and duty of Christian pastors to take sides in this issue, committing the membership of their congregations to one position or another. And it is surely not the right of a pastor to condemn his people if they do take sides."[28]



A
CHRISTIAN VIEW
ON
SEGREGATION

•

Reprint of an Address
By
REV. G. T. GILLESPIE, D. D.
President Emeritus of
Belhaven College
Jackson, Mississippi

•

Made Before
The Synod of Mississippi
of the Presbyterian Church
in the U. S.
November 4, 1954

Citizens Council Collection, No. 95-20, Folder 22, 1957.

One of Mississippi's most prominent and influential ministers, G.T. Gillespie of Jackson, Mississippi, was another clerical supporter of the Citizens' Councils who attempted to place the debate over segregation on political rather than religious grounds. A Presbyterian minister and longtime president of Belhaven College, Gillespie proposed a resolution protesting the southern branch of the Presbyterian Church's 1954 adoption of a report by the Council on Christian Relations that supported integration.[29] Gillespie's resolution, adopted by a vote of 62 to 40, advised the Presbyterian General Assembly that it cannot "place the stamp of its approval upon the recommendation that sessions of constituent churches of this Synod admit persons to membership and fellowship without reference to race."[30] Like Freundt, Gillespie believed that by promoting desegregation the church attempted to "deal with this question authoritatively, and to make deliverances concerning it which are obviously intended to bind the conscience of members of the lower courts and congregations, [and] would seem to be in plain violation of the distinctive and important provisions of the Constitution of the Church found in the *Confession of A Faith.*"[31]

Gillespie elaborated his views in an address titled "A Statement In Defense of the Principle of Racial Segregation," which he delivered before the Mississippi Synod and which was later published as a pamphlet by the Citizens' Councils under the title "A Christian View on Segregation." Gillespie referred to scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments that, he argued, supported segregation in principle, if not in fact.[32] His review made two summary conclusions: first, "There is certainly no ground for the charge that racial segregation is displeasing to God, unjust to man, or inherently wrong;" and secondly, "there would appear to be no reason for concluding that segregation is in conflict with the spirit and the teaching of Christ and the Apostles, and therefore un-Christian."[33]

Gillespie did not argue from the Bible in the same way as those who believed in the divine ordination of segregation. Gillespie believed, "The principle of segregation may be defended on Biblical grounds and is not 'UnChristian,'" yet he also wrote, "The Bible contains no clear mandate for or against segregation as between the white and Negro races."[34] While Lyon said segregation was "the commandment and law of God"[35] and

Ingram wrote that desegregation was not just un-Christian, but "anti-Christian,"[36] Gillespie was fundamentally defensive in his examination of scripture.

Gillespie argued that Christians who practiced segregation did not do so out of malice towards African Americans, but rather, out of respect for "a well-considered and time-tested American policy."[37] Gillespie tried to distinguish between racial prejudice and racial pride, comparing the latter with patriotism as a principle that leads to human happiness and progress. As a natural law of the universe, argued Gillespie, humans have segregated themselves into families, tribes, national and racial groups. Gillespie believed segregation provided a plan of progress for all races. He cited three examples. First, he wrote that Jews, who "have achieved the highest moral and spiritual development of all the peoples of the earth," owed their success in large part to the fact that they had preserved "their racial stock and their cultural heritage." Secondly, he cited the "remarkable record of the British people" in conjunction with their development of a "vigorous racial stock and a virile and homogeneous culture" as evidence that segregation played a large part in their worldly success. Finally, he wrote that "the most pertinent illustration of the proposition that segregation [tended] to promote progress is the amazing record of the Negro in America, and particularly here in the South." Taking a pejorative view of Reconstruction that was popular among northerners and southerners of his day, Gillespie wrote that despite poverty, disorganization, and the misguided leadership of unscrupulous whites and incompetent black leaders,

The Citizen's Council, August 1957, page 2.

"the southern Negro is happier and better adjusted than can be said of any comparable number of his race at any time in their history or in any part of the world today."[38]

Both Gillespie and Freundt, having dismissed any religious objections to racial segregation, offered their own conservative social and political commentaries on the civil rights movement. Freundt believed desegregation was a violation of southern states rights. "It is the conviction of most Mississippians that their rights have been violated," he wrote. "As an individual citizen of the State, [I] share this belief."[39] Gillespie feared that the southern civil rights movement covered a much more insidious Communist conspiracy. In defining "the real issue" as "essentially a choice between the Anglo-Saxon ideal of racial integrity maintained by a consistent application of the principle or segregation, and the Communist goal of amalgamation," Gillespie blended traditional southern white fears of interracial sex with red-baiting politics of the Cold War.[40] Underlying these conservative political commentaries and never far from the surface in any of these ministers' discussion of racial politics was the belief in the necessity of a white racial hierarchy in the South.

By the early 1960s, as the civil rights movement gained momentum under the leadership of African American Christian ministers advocating nonviolent protest in the face of southern white violence, the argument that segregation was primarily a political not religious issue became increasingly difficult for Citizens' Council ministers to make. The civil rights movement, which thrived on politics of morality in its efforts to

expose the violence and inhumanity of southern segregation, increasingly exposed conflicts between these ministers' personal politics and traditional Christian teachings. Such discord occurred for W.B. Selah, pastor of the Jackson, Mississippi, Galloway Methodist Church for over 18 years and an early supporter of the Citizens' Councils. In 1956 Selah offered an invocation at a Jackson Citizens' Council meeting, but by 1961 he defeated a segregation resolution proposed by the Galloway church board that instructed church ushers to "decline to admit any person or persons, white or colored, who, in the judgement of the greeters or ushers, seek admission for the purpose of creating an incident, resulting in a breach of the peace." Two years later, after the board adopted a similar proposal by a vote of 184 to 13, Selah resigned.[41]

Selah's objection to Galloway's 1961 segregation resolution did not reflect any fundamental shift in his support for segregated social institutions for blacks and whites. He believed, "It is not sinful for white people to prefer to worship with white people or for colored people to prefer to worship with colored people." Selah opposed the resolution because he felt it was a poor public relations tactic. By the early 1960s, Galloway was the most prominent of a number of white Mississippi churches that civil rights activists targeted to expose the hypocrisy between Christian belief and their support for segregation in the south. The goal was, as one civil rights protestor put it, to "knock on your door and so irritate you that you cannot worship your white God in peace, that you cannot escape thinking about the problems of segregation even on Sunday morning."[42] Selah believed if Galloway turned away black worshipers "we will be playing into their hands" and, with no hint of irony, he argued that civil rights protestors "will cry to high heaven that Galloway bars colored people."[43]

Unlike some ministers who argued that segregation was primarily a political issue, Selah did not deny the moral implications of southern segregation, stating flatly, "There can be no color bar in a Christian church .... The house of God is a place of prayer for all people—black and white." Instead, Selah supported the moral validity of voluntary segregation. He believed that the races had fundamentally different cultural and spiritual needs that could best be addressed through different churches. If an African American applied for church membership at Galloway, Selah "would have to tell him that he would feel more comfortable with his own people and that it was his duty to join a colored church and help it."[44]

The principle of voluntary segregation was particularly useful for a person like Selah dealing with the moral validity of segregation. The argument obscured the historical origins of southern segregation, which were rooted not in individual choice but in the need for post-Reconstruction white southerners to ensure their own social, cultural, and political supremacy. In supporting the moral validity of voluntary segregation, Selah placed himself alongside other Citizens' Council members who by accepting the traditional white southern characterizations of segregation obfuscated not only the historical origins, but also the moral implications of the institution. Ultimately, however, demonstrations such as the ones that took place on the steps of the Galloway church unmasked the assumptions underlying the belief that religious morality could be easily separated from the politics of legal segregation.

Despite the different religious arguments defending segregation, no Citizens' Council ministers attempted to distinguish between the different theological and political rationales. In fact, some Citizens' Council ministers made both arguments at the same time. M.H. Clark, a Presbyterian minister, accompanied two Mississippi state legislators to the organizational meeting of the Citizens' Council chapter in Selma, Alabama, telling the crowd that he had come "to instill...a sense of rightness for your cause."[45] When Clark characterized himself as a private citizen rather than as a minister, he implied that he was not speaking as a minister on a moral issue, but rather, as a private citizen on an issue that did not deal with religion. The "rightness" to which Clark referred was the moral affirmation that segregation was good and that the Citizens' Councils defense of it was justified by a power greater than the one invoked by the two legislators with whom Clark attended the meeting. Yet if Clark was a private citizen speaking on an issue of strictly civil concern, he could not instill this sense of rightness; this kind of affirmation could not come from M.H. Clark, but only from the Reverend M.H. Clark. By downplaying his religious authority, while at the same time asserting the moral and spiritual rectitude of the segregationist cause, Clark was simultaneously defining segregation as both a moral and a non-moral issue.

Ministers were not the only ones who failed to distinguish between the two arguments. Articles that appeared in Citizens' Council publications put forth both arguments with no explanatory editorial comment or other attempt to distinguish between them. The May 1956 issue of *The Citizens' Council* reported the efforts of a group of forty-four Presbyterian ministers who publicly defended segregation on the grounds that it was not a moral issue, claiming that Christians should not feel conflicted in their support for segregation: "A congregation should not be characterized as Christian or un-Christian by reason of the fact that it is either interracial or not interracial. In such choices Christians can wisely exercise personal preferences."[46] On the same page a second article told of a Texas minister who argued that segregation was "the will of God" and urged "every Bible believer to make protest against desegregation."[47] Dr. E.K. Oldham, minister of the Calvary Baptist Church in Grand Prairie, Texas, argued, "That God...has authorized a distinction of positions and functions among the races in social, civil, and religious life."[48] While the Presbyterian ministers believed that Christians could be either for or against segregation, the Baptist minister from Texas believed God ordained segregation, and thus, Christians should support segregation. The official newsletter of the Citizens' Council was interested in reporting any news that ministers supported segregation, regardless of the actual arguments being made. But the fact that in no Citizens' Council publication was there ever any effort by a minister to distinguish between these two positions suggests that Citizens' Council members either did not notice that they were making two different arguments or were perfectly willing to live with the ambiguity.

The ambiguity can be explained in part by the structure of southern churches. Citizens' Council ministers were members of Protestant denominations that did not have an authoritarian church structure that dictated specific social or theological positions. When individual southern ministers offered their own opinions on an issue as emotionally and politically charged as segregation, specific theological ambiguities took a backseat to larger political unity. What united these ministers was the belief in racial segregation and a willingness to use their moral and spiritual capital as a means to preserve it. For these ministers, and Citizens' Council supporters, it was crucial that the South stand united against all attacks on its way of life, whether they came in the form of judicial mandates or liberal church resolutions.

Citizens' Council ministers, however, were never of one accord on how to defend segregation. In the face of the gathering moral and political momentum of the southern civil rights movement, the Citizens' Council depended on white ministers to provide the religious guidance white southerners needed to fight desegregation. Yet when called upon to chime in for the resistance, Citizens' Council ministers sounded notes muddled by ambiguity. Their sermons, teachings, and public commentaries in the decade following the *Brown* decision suggest that, even in the deepest parts of the segregated South, Jim Crow's dubious moral character was difficult to hide. MF

JOSEPH CRESPINO is a graduate student at Stanford University.

NOTES

1. "Segregation is Law of God, Says Lyon," *State Times* (Jackson, Miss.), June 12, 1958.
2. Ibid.
3. *Southern School News,* October 1956.
4. Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 148. Also see Samuel Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967); David Reimers, *White Protestantism and the Negro* (New York: Oxford, 1965). For more recent studies of religion and civil rights, see Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Mark Newman, "The Mississippi Baptist Convention and Desegregation, 1945-1980, *Journal of Mississippi History,* (Spring 1997), 1-31.
5. Reimers, *White Protestantism and the Negro,* 187. Also see Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism,* 146-147.
6. C. Vann Woodward noted the racial progressiveness of Protestant denominations as a sign of hope in the 1950's desegregation campaign: "In the present movement for Negro rights," he writes, "virtually all of the major national churches, supported by their Southern branches, have in some degree come out against the segregation system" (*Commentary,* June 1956, 507). However, in the 1950s South, as Bailey points out, "Actions did not always follow resolutions" (*Southern White Protestantism,* 141). Also, see McMillen, *Citizens' Councils,* 171-175.
7. "Why Integration is Unchristian," *The Citizen,* June 1962, 6-16; "Oxford Clergy Wrong in Calling for 'Repentance'," *The Citizen,* October, 1962, 4-6; *The Citizens' Council,* March 1961 and *The Citizen,* September, 1962. The three members were the Henry J. Davis, of Dundas, Virginia; James Dees, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Statesville, NC; and L.B. McCord of Clarendon, SC.
8. Letter to the editor, *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Miss.), December 22, 1955.
9. "Louisville Council Hears Paul Johnson," Jackson *Clarion-Ledger,* February 18, 1963.; "3 State Speakers Outline Citizens Council Plans As 'Bama Town Forms Unit," *Jackson Daily News,* December 1, 1954. C.L. Bryant, a minister in

Louisville, Mississippi, introduced then Lieutenant Governor Paul Johnson before Winston County, Mississippi Citizens' Council.
10. "Citadel of Strength," *Citizens' Council,* May 1956, 2.
11. "Whitten Speaker At Council Meeting, "Lexington *Advertiser,* October 31, 1958, 6. There are numerous examples of ministers participating in Citizens' Council meetings. See *Southern School News,* Oct. 1957, April 1959, March 1957, April 1958, April 1956, June 1958.
12. *Citizens' Council,* April 1956 and June 1956.
13. "Southern Sentiment, *"Citizens' Council,* Feb. 1956, 2 and "Church Leaders Defend The Southern Viewpoint," *Citizens' Council,* May 1956, 4.
14. See Gillespie, *A Christian View on Segregation* (Greenwood, Miss.: Association of Citizens' Councils of Mississippi, 1955) and "Conflicting Views on Segregation," *Citizens' Council,* October 1955, 4.
15. "South Carolina Ministers Lambastes Integration," Jackson *Clarion-Ledger,* May 20, 1964, 7.
16. Letter to the Editor, *Clarion-Ledger,* December 22, 1955.
17. The Citizens' Council's monthly newsletter summarized Dees' essay. See "Episcopal Minister is Anxious to Preserve Integrity of White Race; Says Mixers are Morally Depraved," *Citizens' Councils,* April-May, 1961, 1, 4.
18. Ibid, 1, 4.
19. Ibid, 4.
20. T. Robert Ingram, "Why Integration is Unchristian!" *The Citizen,* June 1962, 10.
21. Ibid, 13.
22. Ibid.
23. "Churchman Hits The Mixiecrats," *Citizens' Council,* March 1956, 3.
24. *Daily News* (Jackson, Miss.), October 4, 1962, 14. The Oxford clergymen also called for "the acceptance of the actions of the Court and whole-hearted compliance with these as individuals and as a state."
25. Albert H. Freundt, Jr., "Oxford Clergy Wrong In Calling for 'Repentance!'" *The Citizen,* October 1962, 6. Freundt, a native of Savannah, Georgia, received his divinity degree from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. A regular contributor to the *Presbyterian Journal,* a conservative weekly, Freundt occasionally taught religion courses at Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi.
26. Ibid, 5.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid, 6.
29. G.T. Gillespie, *Christian View.* A native Mississippian, Gillespie received his BA degree in 1905 from the University of Mississippi, a BD degree from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia in 1911, did post-graduate work at Columbia University, and in 1928, was honored with the Doctor of Divinity degree from Southwestern Divinity School. He served as a Presbyterian minister in Oklahoma and Mississippi until he assumed the presidency of Belhaven College in 1921.
30. "Synod Takes Stand," *Southern School News,* December 1, 1954, 8.
31. Ibid.
32. Gillespie cited three Biblical references, in Genesis, Deuteronomy, and Ezra, to argue for the demoralizing effects of intermarriage (Genesis 6:1-7; Deuteronomy 7:3; Ezra, chapters 9-10). In Genesis he referred to God's separation of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:11-26), the division of Noah's sons after the flood (Genesis 9:18-29), God's purpose in separating the races at Babel by giving them different languages (Genesis 11:19), and God's calling Abraham and the Jewish people to a separate life (Genesis 12-25) as evidence that legitimated certain forms of social division.

Everett Tilson's book *Segregation and the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958) reviewed Gillespie's arguments as well as other arguments made by pro-segregation ministers, exposing logistical flaws and scholarly inconsistencies in Gillespie's scriptural interpretations.
33. Gillespie, *Christian View,* 8-13.
34. Ibid, 8.
35. "Segregation is the Law of God, Says Lyon," *State-Times,* June 12, 1958.
36. Ingram, "Integration," *The Citizen,* June 1962, 6.
3 Gillespie, *Christian View,* 13.
38. Ibid, 5-14. Scholars have noted how mythical notions about the horrors and abuses of Reconstruction became a tool for legitimating white racial hierarchy in the Jim Crow era. See Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 75-84.
39. Gillespie, *Christian View,* 5-14.
40. Gillespie, *Christian View,* 3.
41. Minutes from June 12, 1961 meeting of the Official Board of the Galloway United Methodist Church, Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi; "Dr. Gillespie Will Address Local Council," *Jackson Daily-News,* Jan. 25, 1956; W.J. Cunningham, *Agony at Galloway: One Church's Struggle With Social Change* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1980), 5-6.
42. Edwin King, *Life in Mississippi,* unpublished manuscript, as quoted in Charles Marsh, "Jesus in Mississippi: The Civil Rights Movement as Theological Drama," *Books & Culture,* March/April 1998, 17. Also, see Marsh, *God's Long Summer.*
43. Galloway Church Board minutes, June 12, 1961.
44. Ibid.
45. "3 State Speakers," Jackson *Clarion-Ledger,* December 1, 1954.
46. *Citizens' Council,* May 1956, 4.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.

Singing a New Song

THE FORMATION OF THE BLACK STUDENT UNION CHOIR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

by Peter Slade

In a series of interviews, the first members of the BSU Choir remember forming their own institutions, choosing and learning songs, and taking music back to their communities. Through gospel music, choir members joined the traditions of church singing with the new opportunities and new pressures of university life.

The Black Alumni reunion weekend at the University of Mississippi is a new tradition at an institution which is celebrating its hundred and fiftieth anniversary. Attended by around seventy alumni in 1998, the focus of the weekend was the Sunday morning service at the Second Baptist Church in Oxford. Many had come to hear the Black Alumni Reunion Choir, made up of past members of the Black Student Union Choir (which later became the University of Mississippi Gospel Choir). This year they were joined by current choir members.

The tradition of gospel music holds an important place in the story of African Americans at the University of Mississippi. Cheryl Sanders, in her book *Saints in Exile* elaborates on the significance of gospel choirs found on college campuses.

"Black gospel choirs are found at public and private colleges all over the United States, including those whose student bodies are predominantly white. To designate the proliferation of collegiate gospel choirs as a movement seems appropriate because they emerged as student-initiated organizations during the peak period of black student involvement in public protests, political organizations, and demands for black studies programs and have outlasted many other institutionalized expressions of black awareness among college students."[1]

The choir at the University fits the pattern Sanders describes. In continuous existence on the campus since 1974, the student initiated group had direct links to the politically active Black Student Union. Interviews with early choir members display its varying layers of significance. The choir helped African American students form a community in a socially segregated, often discouraging environment–a community drawing strength and identity from their collective church traditions and empowered with a voice to represent a new future for the University of Mississippi.

Forced to integrate by federal ruling in 1962, the University only began to admit African Americans in significant numbers in the Fall of 1968.[2] The Black

Student Union was formed that first semester. On March 25, 1969 the BSU received a charter as a student organization. Two days later they published demands in the campus newspaper *The Daily Mississippian,* which included the recruitment of black athletes, the employment of black faculty, security officers, administrators and counselors, the appointment of a black chaplain, and the addition of courses in black history, civil rights and literature.[3] In 1970 there were only around 200 African American students registered. Though they were starting to see their demands met, most obviously in the introduction of a Black Studies program, the pace of change was too slow for the BSU, who staged a protest in Fulton Chapel on February 25, that disrupted a performance of a travelling musical called "Up With People." Although the protest was peaceful, sixty-one students were arrested and spent the night in police cells and eight were eventually suspended.[4]

Members of the BSU Choir, 1978. Photo courtesy Linda Taylor.

While African Americans integrated the classrooms, there was little social integration with the overwhelming white majority of students. In 1972, *The Spectator,* a publication of the BSU, reported the situation.

"Many black students at the University of Mississippi think that they are partially accepted socially. 'I feel like I am being prepared academically, but my social life is extremely limited,' a female sociology major commented. 'It is as though I am being prepared as a partial person.' Because black students do not fit easily into the campus social life, they have formed their own social groups as a means of adjustment."[5]

By 1974 when Linda Redmond, a freshman from Jackson, Mississippi, came to the University she was one of 316 African Americans. She recalls,

"We African Americans mostly separated ourselves from the majority. It was only in class where most of the time I was maybe the only African American in the class, but after classes were over we all just kinda mingled together all the time, which was not good in a lot of ways, but that's what we did. So it was like high school really because I went to a high school with a majority European American population. So it was a continuation of high school, go to class with them, come home and be with us."[6]

The small number of African Americans, combined with a sense of social isolation, helped a vibrant and vital sub-culture form on campus. Cheryl Weakley, a contemporary of Linda Redmond, remembers the closeness and solidarity that the students had at that time:

"I see somewhat of a difference between being at Ole Miss at that point in time. I had the pleasure of coming back to the University in 88 to 90 to do graduate work. It may have been because I was older and not in the student scene, but it just appeared to me that students were a lot closer when we were at Ole Miss. Maybe it was because Ole Miss was new and we were all dealing with what the media had blown up. A lot of it wasn't what we experienced on the campus. Most of us had really good Ole Miss experiences, we just had those negative racial experiences, a lot of us did. It appears to me to be a bigger thing in the media than when you were living it on campus. We were closer then. Everybody knew everybody."[7]

The seventies were a time of growing confidence for African Americans on the campus, as the BSU started experiencing some success making the administration more receptive to their demands. Jerry Christian came to the University in 1971 from Booneville, Mississippi, majoring in psychology and social science. He was an active member of the BSU.

"I was very much involved in the Black Student Government. Part of the challenge with the Black Student Government was trying to get some African American representation in the University student government, which was very difficult at the time. And also to recruit black athletes, which we didn't have when I first went there. I helped recruit Ben Williams and James Reid, the first two football players over there."[8]

Christian explains his reasons for choosing the University of Mississippi over another school:

"The challenge of changing a predominantly white school. I've always been one that loved a challenge, especially a difficult challenge and that's exactly what that was. And I wanted to get a degree from that University so... that's where I decided to go. [My family were] very supportive, wanted me to do whatever I felt that was in my best interest. We're a strong Christian family and we had faith enough to believe that if I went there then God was going to take care of me."[9]

For most, however, the main reason for coming to the University was to earn a degree unavailable any where else in the state. Otis Sanford, Christian's room mate and the president of the BSU in 1974 -75, transferred to the University in 1973 from Northwest Community College.

"I was a journalism student, and I got a journalism scholarship to go to Ole Miss and that's the reason I was there, I had a journalism scholarship and a chance to write on the campus paper, and that's what I wanted to do. It really wasn't a strange thing for me to decide to do.

"There were a lot of issues, I'm certainly not saying there weren't issues when I was there, issues that were adverse to African Americans on that campus, no question about that. And I can certainly talk about those issues but I can also talk from a very personal standpoint, and from a very personal standpoint I was on the campus for really one purpose and that purpose was to get a journalism degree, that's the only reason I was there at that point.

"Certainly I got in the Black Student Union, I got involved in the choir, I got involved in the activities of student life as much as I wanted to. My primary goal was to get a journalism degree because I knew that that was the only way I could get to be a newspaper reporter and that's all I wanted to do."[10]

For Weakley it was the courses at the University that led her to Oxford, courses that only a few years earlier would not have been available to her in Mississippi.

"I was interested in being in Pharmacy and Ole Miss had the only Pharmacy school in the state. [I was] apprehensive mainly about just leaving home and going to college. I guess any college I would have gone to I would have felt probably the same way. Once I got there, there were a number of us in the same type boat I was in and we became real fast friends. I had real good experiences at Ole Miss. I guess that's one reason I remained involved in alumni situations. [I was] just somewhat apprehensive because of the fact that it was my first time away from home, not so much the history of Ole Miss."[11]

The University met some success in their efforts to recruit African American students and overturn the school's negative image. Linda Redmond was one of the new recruits.

"I was supposed to have been kind of smart back then and Ole Miss invited me to the National Black Achievement Conference, or something to that effect, and they must have known that the way to my heart was through my stomach because they fed us wonderfully those three days. I told my mother, 'this is where I want to go.' Not to know I was going to be hungry and eat grilled cheeses for four years [laughs.] That's why [I chose to go], the campus was beautiful and the food was good those three days.

"I didn't have any negative thoughts about it. I don't know why I was untouched by the reality of what was going on, but I don't remember negativism. I had a good time in school."[12]

The Choir

At the beginning of the Fall semester in 1974, a group of students formed a gospel choir, rehearsing in the Y building on the campus. Important for the success of the choir and indicative of its significance was that one of the founder members was Otis Sanford.

"Well, at the time I was the incoming president of the Black Student Union on campus. We had talked very early, this was my senior year, at the Ole Miss a few of us, Jerry Christian was my room mate at the time, we had talked about wanting to possibly do this. And there was another young lady [Linda Redmond] on the campus who was a pianist from Jackson who was strongly interested in doing it also, and we decided it would be a good outlet for students on the campus to possibly form a BSU choir. Because there was a very small African American population on the campus at that time we just started asking around to see if anyone would be interested, and they said 'Yeah' and we found a place where we could have our rehearsals and people showed up. We just started doing it, and then after we sort of formed it we started making appearances.

"Started out we went to a church in Oxford and soon after that people who were from towns not that far from Oxford. And we just started booking concerts,

booking appearances at churches around the area on Sunday afternoon."[13]

The BSU Choir, 1978. Photo courtesy Linda Taylor.

Christian remembers that the choir originated from a small group which started meeting as a religious gathering.

"I got a few people together and we just started singing and sharing together for fellowship, because there wasn't that many of us there. And then the idea hit me to form a gospel choir, and so we started recruiting all of the African Americans on campus that wanted to sing in that gospel choir. That was in 1973, I believe it was.

"Well we tried it and nobody really showed up, and then we tried it once and we really didn't have... we had a musician but they wasn't the person for the job, and then when Linda came around on the scene I recruited her to be our musician. And me and her really composed the music and got the choir together [and] Otis Sanford, I am trying to think, there were a couple more girls that could really sing, I can't remember their names, I can remember their faces. It was about six of us who really started it and then we started recruiting through telephone contacts, in the student union building, when we see each other on campus we talk about it and tell them what time. We sent out flyers to different ones trying to recruit in that area. One night we had rehearsal and there was about 10 or 12 of us and then before you know it we ended up with about 30 or 40."[14]

As both Sanford and Christian acknowledge, key to the success of the new choir was their recruitment of a musician. Linda Redmond had barely unpacked and registered for her first classes before she was acting as musical director.

"I understand they had attempted to have a choir before I arrived, but for some reason it didn't get off the ground and when they (when I say they, certain key people who thought they were important on campus) heard that I could play they approached me to ask would I do it. And one of them is Jerry Christian who is now a minister with the CME church. I'll just say Chris, we called Jerry Christian, Chris. He was one of them, one of the main ones. [The choir started by] word of mouth.

'Y'all wanna sing in the choir?' [emphasized accent] 'We gonna have choir rehear-sal on Thursday night.'

"Well, the Black Student Union, which was more active back then, a lot of the members were already in that organization so we just branched off from that. [There was a] great turn out, probably about 25 I'd say showed up.

"[They were] continuing home traditions, as I was. I'm sure a lot of people loved gospel music and at school there was no gospel music I'll say. Even in the Oxford community we had the Redmond Brothers, no relation to me, but they did quartet songs, but there was no gospel music as a lot of us were used to. Second Baptist had hymnal singing mostly."[15]

Redmond shaped the new choir musically, drawing from her background growing up in her father's congregation in Jackson.

"We thought [the music] was quite current back then. Songs like *Jesus is the Answer for the World Today* by Andre Crouch and a lot of a group's songs from Jackson, Mississippi called The Voices of Faith, they had written a lot of material. So since I loved The Voices of Faith we did a lot of their material. We used to sing songs like *Talk it Over with Jesus, We Will Be Forgiven*.... Probably, well I know today's young people wouldn't have the songs we used to do because my son does not like to hear them today. "Old fashioned" but they were good songs.

"We rocked of course and clapped, but we had a lot of saved people I'd say in the choir who were growing. Everyone who's saved is still growing to make it... but we had a different, I won't say aura, we had God's approval I'll say, and you could hear it in our singing. It wasn't just a good sound, we had a wonderful sound I think, but it was in the sincerity. We weren't there for shape, form or fashion. (I'm thinking about my daddy when I say some things) because we enjoyed lifting up praises.

"I was not a musician back then, if we had had someone who really knew how to play we would have been better, but since I was the only one I did what I could, but I really felt like I was inadequate for the job a lot of times because I never, I still don't think I can play. I just sort of wanted to set the record straight. I could not play the piano I needed to have been able to play to lead the choir. And a lot of the times I would...during concerts I would go blank and couldn't remember the songs, although I think I faked real good, but it was a lot of pressure on me for some reason when I would sit at the piano. Maybe my inadequacy made me forget the music. But when you said about your musicians now I thought about how we really needed a musician back then, I could just plonk you know, I plonked."[16]

Weakley remembers Redmond as a good musician whose serious approach to music and singing gospel set high standards for the choir and led to challenging, enjoyable rehearsals.

"[Linda] is very involved in music, I guess from childhood, so she is real serious about it and she wants you to be real serious about it too. She was very good in dividing parts and bringing out the best in you. She was a good choir director, really good. Very committed. Her commitment, that was her strong point. I guess her weak point was because she was so committed and involved, it bothered her when people weren't as committed or involved as she was. It was sort of a strong point for her and a weak point for her, because she was just so passionate about it.

"I remember [the rehearsals] being a lot of fun, I remember it being really exciting. It didn't take on the make up of something just getting started in awkwardness. We had rehearsals in the Y building and every one just fell together real naturally. Every one was pretty talented I guess, had been in choirs from home, school choirs or church choirs, something like that, Every one pretty naturally divided off into their parts and they were usually good choir rehearsals."[17]

Redmond acknowledges that her views on the authority that came with the role of musical director placed a strain on her friendship with Weakley, her roommate. The incident throws light on Redmond's character, the determination and seriousness with which she approached her task.

"My roommate Cheryl Weakley Turner, I put her out of the choir. [laughs.] She didn't want to follow my leadership [laughs.] She claims I put her out, but it was a mutual agreement that she was not able to follow the leadership so she had to go."[18]

Weakley elaborates:

"Linda and I were roommates, we went to Junior High together, and she began to start the choir and I was interested in being in it and singing. It was almost a natural progression for me with her being my roommate. It was just real silly. You know I really can't remember the details that much.

"We had another friend in the choir, Rhonda, that was very, very musically... you know... had a lot of talent. I think she and Linda had a difference as far as the music goes, selection or some kind of way the music was being done. It was carried over into a meeting once, and they were going back and forth at each other about it. Rhonda got up and left so I left with Rhonda, it was real silly. I wanted to go back, and wanted to go back, just had too much pride to do that. Initially we had our little rounds about it, but Linda and I were always real cool with each other and eventually it just turned into a joke for us."[19]

The main reason that the choir proved to be successful was that it was *needed.* Christian appreciated this fact, and it motivated him to start the choir.

"They were interested because you have to understand in 1973 there was nothing on campus for African Americans to participate in except intramural basketball and intramural softball and whatever...we did all of that but basically *that was it.* There was not too much else to participate in because you were not very much part of the athletic department, student government was solely controlled by the anglos on campus. The University was totally run by the anglos on campus so we had to come up with something that we considered was ours. And the Gospel Choir was ours. We started it, we founded it, we made it work. And at the beginning they would not even give transportation for us to travel. We had to use our own cars and everything."[20]

Redmond reflects on an even deeper need the choir was meeting. In addition to recreation, she believes that the choir provided a place of psychological and spiritual security.

"I thought of how important home training is for youth, children and youth, because I know without us

having that background of the church and being as spiritual as we are, it had to come from home, and as I said that was like a continuation of something familiar for us when we got to school and could congregate as a group who had similar Christian beliefs. That was important for us at Ole Miss I'd say, because the majority are so different from us, we needed that home kind of familiarity. Does that make any sense? We needed that experience for sanity. It was a relief every Thursday night [for] everybody, and then you know when we got together I had to always say [screechy voice], "Be quiet y'all" because they were so happy to be together, you know as a group."[21]

The popularity of the choir shows it was meeting a need. In 1975-76 the choir had forty-eight members, approximately a sixth of the African American students. Elridge Rose, a freshman in 1975-76, recalls how in succeeding years numbers would be even higher.

"We'd always put out flyers and word of mouth that the choir was going to start practicing on such and such a night, normally we gave the new students a month to adapt to their new surroundings and somewhere about mid September the choir would start meeting. And you would have a rush of students like 75 to 80 students coming in to see what the choir was about. After about mid October we found out those members who were going to be dedicated because that last group, the 75 or 80 members who initially came dropped down to about 50 and those were the dedicated members, and that 50 carried the choir throughout the year."[22]

Lucretia Jones, Linda Redmond, and Cheryl Weakley, Choir Leaders amd sweethearts of Omega Psi Phi, 1976. Photo from 1976 Ole Miss year book.

Jerry Christian has fond memories of the choir's closeness.

"I remember some of the trips we had together, and if we were coming back late at night we'd stop and eat somewhere and its just great fellowship. Sometime we'd come back and if we were in that area we'd always go out to Sardis…a good way from campus. We'd stop and go out there sometime and just have a picnic. All of us together, it was real nice."[23]

The BSU choir was not the only new organization run by African Americans at the University. During the same period black fraternities and sororities were arriving on the campus. Redmond, Weakley and a fellow choir member Lucretia Jones joined the Delta Sigma Theta sorority in 1975.

"A lot of them were just coming on campus, Linda and I pledged at the same time, we pledged Delta Sigma Theta, we were on the same line in the spring of '75. It had only been there about a year. They were all just coming on campus at that point and they held some importance, but not a great deal because they were all new. I guess the Black Student Union and the Choir were the main thread of commonness that pulled us together more than the fraternities and sororities. Now when the fraternities and sororities came on campus they were exciting and gave us another avenue."[24]

The high profile of the choir members among the African American students shows in the University yearbooks. In the 1976 yearbook Redmond, Jones and Weakley appear as Omega Psi Phi sweethearts. "You know that it was just an honorary thing, I think they felt sorry for us when we were on the line [laughs] because we didn't have to do a thing. I think they thought that first of all we were cute, and it was honorary because we didn't have to do anything."[25]

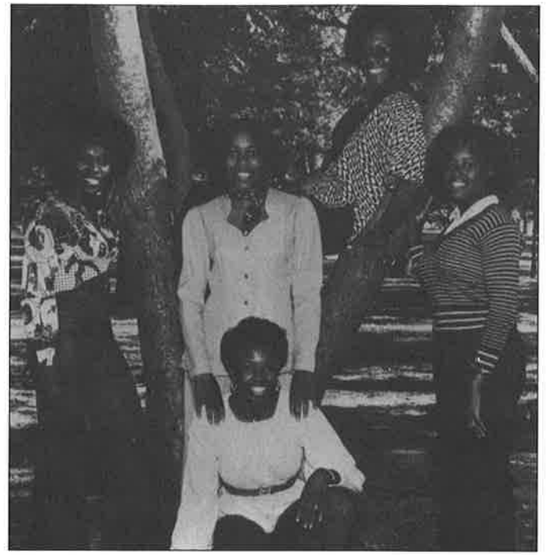
In the 1977 yearbook photograph of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority no fewer than four of the five women were in the choir. As the Greek system gained influence for African American students, the significance of the choir was not lost on its members.

"It was like if you were not a member of this fraternal organization you were an outsider. I think that's the way that some of the Greeks saw it. The choir formed a cohesion among all the students as well as the fraternal organizations. When we were in the choir we forgot about our Greek difference, we were just choir members singing the gospel for the Lord."[26]

As part of the BSU, the choir was involved on the campus promoting Black History Week. In February 1975, Otis Sanford wrote in the *Daily Mississippian,* 'The 1975 edition of Black History Week on campus will open Sunday with a gospel concert at 6 pm. in Fulton Chapel. The famous Voices of Faith from Jackson will appear along with the Voices of Oxford. The Black Student Union Choir is sponsoring the concert and will handle the entire program.'"[27]

Fulton Chapel seats 900 and is the University's main auditorium. The concert was given only one semester after the choir started and featured The Voices of Faith, Redmond's favorite group. It is surprising that neither she nor Otis Sanford has any recollection of the event.

"I can't remember ever performing a concert on campus, I can't. Not until that last, the first reunion, seems like that's the first time we sang on campus, and that is like ten years after I was gone, fifteen years…but, no I can't remember a campus concert."[28]



The Delta Sigma Theta sorority, 1977. Photo from the 1977 Ole Miss year book.

There is no doubt that the event took place, as it made an impression on Redmond's sorority sister.

"Yeah, I do remember that, the Voices of Faith were there. It was exciting. Just to have the Voices of Faith, they were a big deal then, they preceded the Mississippi Mass Choir. Being from Jackson I knew a lot of them, and a lot of them went into the Mass Choir when it formed. I guess that was just like the seed for the Mass Choir, but it was real exciting.

"I remember it was packed, there were a lot of people there. The churches were very supportive of us, so we had a lot of people there from the churches and those type things."[29]

This impressive event, while filling Fulton Chapel, drew little attention from the white student body. There was no follow-up report in the *Daily Mississippian* and few whites attended. Christian explains,

"We started celebrating Black History Month and a few of them [whites] came, not many. We would have programs on campus and a few would come. We never did get any recognition in the *Daily Mississippian,* the campus newspaper, they never would do any profiles or articles on the choir. Well we all knew what the reason was, but they would always say they didn't have the space or that they'd already used up all of their whatever…"[30]

Perhaps the lack of memory surrounding concerts on campus is because the University, and the majority of the student body remained unappreciative of the choir's achievements. The bulk of the choir's performances, and the greatest reception they received, was outside the confines of Ole Miss.

The Black Student Union Choir - Ambassadors for the University.

From the first semester of its existence, the choir started to perform in churches around Mississippi. Initially invited to home congregations of the choir member's, the leaders quickly realized that they were working to change the University. Young people at these concerts could see that it was possible to be a student at the University of Mississippi and be African American. Slowly the University realized the recruitment potential of the choir.

"We were promoting the University. It was very positive for the University, because especially at that point in time Ole Miss was having a lot of bad press, earlier at least before we got there, with the flag, and the Meredith thing was relatively recent, but it gave the University [the image] of being progressive, and about the business of having a lot of different avenues for a lot

of different people, and being a home for different people. So I think we served as ambassadors for the University. Really I don't know if that was Linda's main thing when she decided to form it, but it really was a mission, one of our goals.[31]

"The choir came to be an ambassador to the University, that's why I think a lot of students came here, because of the choir. We'd go into different towns singing; Clarksdale, Greenwood, Greenville, Jackson, Gulfport, just around the towns and cities. A lot of students heard the choir and they came here as a result of that. The University finally recognized the choir as an Ambassador, I think it was during the fall of '79, the University finally provided the BSU choir with a bus. So the University would actually charter a bus for the choir to go to the program.

"The first trip we took was to Forest City, Arkansas on this chartered bus. It was a big deal because we were accustomed to going in cars."[32]

On these trips the choir was primarily performing for an older generation, often their parents. For that generation Ole Miss was the symbol of white privileged Mississippi, one of the potent symbols of what James Silver, one time history professor at the University, called "the Closed Society." The very name Ole Miss echoes the social castes and codes of the slave society romanticized by whites. For older generations of African Americans, hearing a choir from "Ole Miss" consisting of their sons, daughters, grandchildren and their friends, must have been poignant.

BSU Choir members and family, 1978. Photo courtesy Linda Taylor.

"The trips that we would make to churches in the area, you know we would pool the cars, not all of us had cars but a few of us did, we rode with each other and I just remember going there. We didn't take any money for it, sometimes we got money for some gas, but we certainly didn't charge anything for going and playing and we went to a lot of small churches, sort of out in the countryside.

"I remember that the people who attended the concerts, I think they were more impressed that here was a bunch of black students from Ole Miss…of all places, getting together to do this. They were more impressed with that than even probably with our singing abilities. (Our singing was OK, we were a good choir.) I'm not putting us down, but it was just the camaraderie and the fact that we were able to do that on the Ole Miss campus and then take it out to the communities. The black churches in small towns, and the people who came to see us, were so impressed to hear these black kids in the early seventies on the Ole Miss campus, it kind of made them feel a little proud. That's what I remember most."[33]

These visits to home congregations put parents' minds at ease that their child was making the most of her or his time at school, and that they were continuing in the faith and traditions in which they had been raised.

"Their parents were probably struggling to put them through school, and we were going back out to those communities to not just sing to them but to show them that your daughters and your sons are doing something that we think is worthwhile, while we are on this campus. We are not all just in fraternities having beer parties, that we are also doing something to give back to the community."[34]

The choir spent many Sundays on the road, sometimes singing at more than one church in a day. What sounds like a grueling schedule worked to bring these students close together.

"I remember us going around to a lot of the churches, we did a lot of that type thing. There would be some days, I remember one Sunday we sang at Second Baptist and then we left and went somewhere away. To me these places were all far from Oxford. I was from Jackson, so you know those little communities, when I would hear of Aberdeen or whatever, they sounded way far away. Now that I live in this area they're really not.

"But I can remember us traveling all day that day and taking our books and studying while we were going, while we were riding in the car. Going about the business, and going to some of these churches, some small, some a little larger. Just traveling around spreading the Word, and the Gospel through song and having fun doing it.

"I don't think it was every Sunday, but we did quite a bit. I guess that was what my interest was too. We sung quite a bit, and sometimes like I said it would be at least two different places in a day, in a Sunday at least. At one point we were going quite a bit, but I can't say it was every Sunday because I can remember still going home at least once a month, and those would be times that the choir wasn't really singing."[35]

One of the main problems standing in the way of this traveling was availability of transportation. Cars were scraped together to make up the numbers, and the trips were often not without incident. Rose has very strong and fond memories of the choir's road trips.

"We would go in cars, 10 to 12 cars. That's a lot of cars to have students anywhere from 18 to 22 years old traveling in a convoy, anything could happen. We paid dues, like I think it was 50 cents a meeting (we met every Thursday night from 7 to 9) 50 cents wasn't no big deal and that way we'd have enough money to put gas in the cars. Sometimes you'd have anywhere from 10 to 12 cars, there were a lot of these football players on campus who had cars and they would actually provide us with some transportation for the choir to be going to and fro. Because the football players dated some of the choir members and you had guys like Ben Williams, Eddy Coles, Gary Turner, these guys had cars, they would provide the choir with transportation. You had a lot of students who didn't sing in the choir because they couldn't carry a *tune* in a *bucket* but they still would provide transportation. It was a good feeling being associated with the choir.

"The choir was going to somewhere, I think it was Greenwood or someplace. We'd always heard these stories that a highway patrol man or a state trooper could only stop one person for speeding. Now that's not true. One particular incident, it was a convoy of probably about ten cars, back then the speed limit was 55, even on the interstate. I think this convoy was going about 70 miles per hour, it was speeding. This one particular state trooper, he pulled over about three or four cars, and I think the students who were driving protested that, I don't know what happened but three or four students got pulled over for speeding.

"The choir had two stipulations when we went off to a church. Greenwood and Clarksdale were like home away from home when it comes to singing and eating. We had a lot of members from Clarksdale, probably like 10 or 12. We would sing at something like 2 different churches in Clarksdale on a Sunday. We had two stipulations, one being food…soul food, the other being provide us with a little gas money for transportation, often times the church would take up a little public collection to give to the choir. We would always tell them, some of the smaller churches didn't have 40 members so they couldn't take up a big collection, we'd tell them 'although you can't give us any money for transportation *you've gotta have food!'* [laughs]

"Often times the students would eat all they could, unlike kids today eating hamburger and pizza, we weren't like that–we liked *chicken, greens, corn bread, and peas and cobbler.* We were eating real food. So we would eat all we could at this church and turn around and take a plate home [laughs] you were letting the locals know you appreciate their cooking.

"We went to a small town 50 miles from here called Blue Mountain, a little small church and I knew a lot of the locals around there. And these are just down home good hearted people, just down home country people, just like Andy Taylor type, just country. So I knew they liked a lot of wild food; rabbits and squirrels and deer and coons. So one of the local women told me, she said, 'Now some folks are gonna bring some coon and possum and you'd better ax what you eatin before you start eatin.' So this was the choir's first time going there and I saw a lot of choir members eating, like 55 going North, and I knew a lot of them were eating possum and raccoon but I didn't say anything to them. [laughs] They don't know to this day they ate coon and possum. It was a good time, a fun time."[36]

Rose's recollections resonate with the camraderie of those early choir trips. From his story, and from the other interviews, one hears that the choir started to change the monolithically white culture of the University of Mississippi. Such changes elicited strong support for the choir from the rest of the African American students on campus. As Rose recalls, "It was a good feeling being associated with the choir."

Conclusions

The success of the Black Student Union Choir was not defined by the white majority nor confined by the parameters of protest. The choir was an expression of its members culture, one that made the University of Mississippi campus more of a home and helped forge friendships. For those with ears to hear, it was the music of a changing world.

With twenty-four years of hindsight, the first directors of the choir reflectes on the significance of what they had been involved in.

"The fact that we were able to accomplish something as a handful of African Americans on a predominantly white campus that developed some long lasting friendships and relationships that still stand to this day.

"It was something new, and we saw God at work in it, to help show that African Americans could be an integral part of a predominantly white University. That we were just as intelligent and smart as our white counterparts if not smarter. And we were just determined to make it work, even though we had some setbacks we were determined that it was going to work.[37]

"It was one of the few organized groups where we were able to grow together and then to...really become like a family...and I was the mother. [laughs] I don't know how Ole Miss would have been without the choir...sometimes I think about how I did help make history you know, hung in there for four years with the choir that tried to start before I got there but for some reason they didn't get it off the ground, and when I hear anybody say anything about the BSU choir I wonder, 'Do you all know me? I'm your grandmother.' [laughs] Anyway, it was a lot of fun, seriousness and a lot of fun."[38] MF

Peter Slade is a graduate student in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi.

Interviews with the author.

Jerry Christian, Telephone, 3/18/98
Elridge Rose,Oxford, 3/20/98
Otis Sanford, Telephone, 4/21/98
Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor, Memphis, 2/11/98.
Telephone, 4/21/98
Cheryl Weakley Turner, Telephone, 4/22/98

Footnotes

1. Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 93.
2. Nadine Cohodas. *The Band Played Dixie; Race and Liberal Conscience at Ole Miss,* (New York, The Free Press, 1997), 168.
3. Anne Percy. "The History of the Black Student Union at the University of Mississippi," Unpublished Course Paper, University of Mississippi, 1993.
4. Cohodas, 148.
5. "Blacks unsocialized", *The Spectator,* March 1972,3.
6. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.
7. Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98.
8. Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98.
9. Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98.
10. Otis Sanford interview, 4/21/98.
11. Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98.
12. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.
13. Otis Sanford interview, 4/21/98.
14. Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98.
15. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.
16. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.
17. Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98.
18. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.
19. Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98.
20. Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98.
21. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.
22. Elridge Rose interview, 3/20/98.
23. Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98.
24. Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98.
25. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 4/21/98.
26. Elridge Rose interview, 3/20/98.
27. Otis Sanford, "Black History Week Slated", *Daily Mississippian,* Feb. 5, 1975, 3.
28. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.
29. Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98.
30. Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98.
31. Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98.
32. Elridge Rose interview, 3/20/98.
33. Otis Sanford interview, 4/21/98.
34. Otis Sanford interview, 4/21/98.
35. Cheryl Weakley Turner interview, 4/22/98.
36. Elridge Rose interview, 3/20/98.
37. Jerry Christian interview, 3/18/98.
38. Linda Redmond Sanford Taylor interview, 2/11/98.

Reviews

DEFINING THE FOLK

"We'll Never Turn Back"

A film by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee

In 1963, SNCC workers made a film about Mississippi. Their goal, clearly, was to dramatize both the problems African Americans faced in Mississippi and to celebrate the strength and creativity of Mississippians who were fighting those problems. The 35-minute film in grainy black and white consisted primarily of black Mississippians and some SNCC workers from outside the state telling their stories.

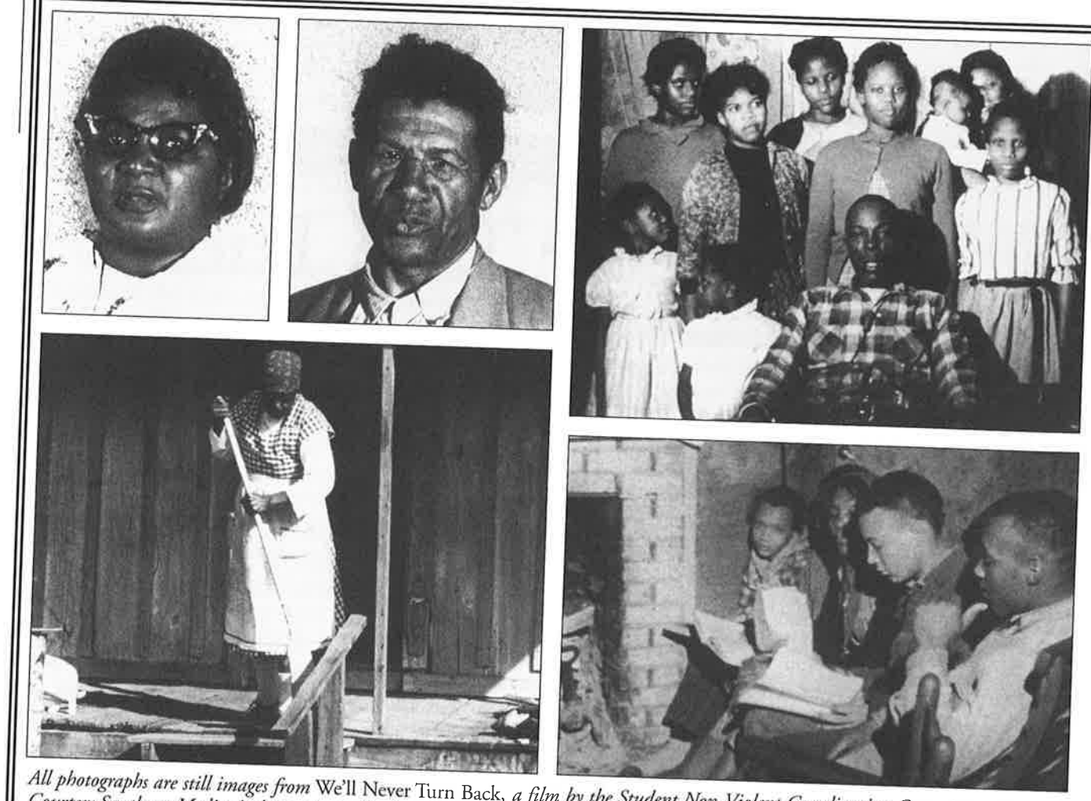
The film never mentions the concept of "the folk," but its makers confronted the issue of how to portray the lives of rural African Americans. SNCC leaders rightly have the reputation of not trying to impose their own ideas on people in local communities. Thus, *We'll Never Turn Back* wanted in no way to suggest that black Mississippians were helpless victims. On the other hand, SNCC workers wanted to avoid romanticizing poor rural people. They knew that excessive praise for the local culture of black Mississippians might have the effect of suggesting they were doing well enough without the help of a national civil rights movement and without access to the national government.

There was a long tradition of worrying about folk presentations in documents of protest. Most obviously, Frederick Douglass in 1845 made a point of rejecting the popular notion that the music of African Americans showed their basic contentment. "Slaves sing most," he made clear, "when they are most unhappy."[1] He, like W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk,* suggested that folk culture offered both the strength to deal with adversity and the inspiration to change things, but both worried that readers would get the wrong idea. In the early twentieth century, many politically aware writers criticized Zora Neale Hurston for writing in black folk dialect and for not confronting issues of power and powerlessness. Numerous African American writers such as Richard Wright and Anne Moody excoriated the religion of their childhoods for sides they saw as either accommodationist, otherworldly or apolitical.

Dwelling on the strength of black folk traditions could have implications troubling to political action. Some of the young, white volunteers who travelled to Mississippi in Freedom Summer were so impressed by the strength and character of the African Americans they met that they wondered what they were trying to change. One young protester wrote back home with a "strong ambivalence which goes with this work. I sometimes fear that I am only helping to integrate some beautiful people into modern white society....It isn't 19th century pastoral romanticism which I feel, but a genuine respect and admiration for a culture which, for all the trouble, still isn't as commercialized and depersonalized as is our Northern mass culture."[2]

We'll Never Turn Back wanted to dignify without romanticizing the people fighting white supremacy. SNCC leaders such as narrator Chuck McDew appear only briefly and give way to the true heroes of the film. The clearest way to demystify rural people was to listen to them as individuals. Maybelline Wilson, from the town of Liberty, looks into the camera and tells her story about trying to register to vote. Curtis Dawson, also of Amite County, tells about the violence he faced when he tried to register. Stories of economic oppression and political violence mount one by one, and viewers of the film have to be impressed by the courage and tenacity of individual men and women.

The film does little to try to elicit sympathy by appealing to comforting images of rural tradition. It is significant that groups of people seldom appear—there are no church congregations, no groups singing, no groups working in the fields.



All photographs are still images from We'll Never Turn Back, *a film by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, 1963. Courtesy Southern Media Archive, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi.*

Still, SNCC chose to include in the film a few aspects of what might be called folk culture.

1. The large family. One image of nine daughters surrounding their father seems a Mississippi version of American Gothic. The large family had long been a sensible economic strategy for agricultural households, and it must have struck most viewers as a dramatic difference between their lives and life in Mississippi. The image offered a sense of family work and family togetherness. For this father of nine to tell his story of twice moving the family to escape retribution for trying to vote dramatized the risks—and the stakes—of protest.

2. Women wearing head rags. Since the early twentieth century, some African American leaders in northern cities had been telling black southerners to put aside the look of agricultural laborers. The decision by SNCC's filmmakers to portray women wearing head rags reflected the organization's basic philosophy of respecting all people and not encouraging assimilation to middle-class ideals.

3. Music. The film contains nine freedom songs, most of which combined Biblical imagery with political goals. As Worth Long discusses in this journal, music gave strength to potentially frightened individuals and unity to potentially fragile groups. The striking feature of the songs featured in the film is that, no matter how religious they were, they did not sound like the songs of church congregations. Especially compared to the sound of most African American churches, which had substantial female majorities, male voices dominated. And the songs emphasized the unity of the group, not solos that showed the potential for individual conversion or sanctification.

4. New heroes. The Mississippi speakers themselves are the heroes, facing potential death in order to register to vote. One hero is never pictured. Images (pictured above) of the family of Herbert Lee, who was murdered by a south Mississippi politician, makes the point that both oppression and protest can disrupt those large families. Near the end of the film, a freedom song depicting Lee as a Christian martyr ("he died for you and he died for me") urges people to keep up Lee's fight. This vivid example of the creation of folklore merged important aspects of African American tradition—Christianity, song, and the large family—into inspiration for protest.

TED OWNBY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

NOTES

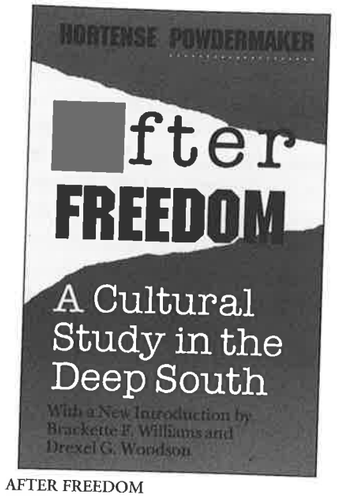
1. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 58.
2. *Letters from Mississippi,* edited by Elizabeth Sutherland (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 52.

RE-READING A CLASSIC

After Freedom After Freedom Summer

Another Look at the Classic Study of a Mississippi Community

Hortense Powdermaker's *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* remains an important work in the canon of southern cultural anthropology. *After Freedom,* which was first published in 1939 (and which has recently been reissued with a new introduction by the University of Wisconsin Press), originally wielded an influence because it was among the first scholarly studies to apply the methodology of cultural anthropology to a contemporary American community. "There is no reason," Powdermaker argued in the book's original introduction, "why anthropology should not be used to help make our civilization, as well as savage ones, intelligible." It endures because of its insights into the social machinations of a bi-racial community, despite the serious flaws inherent in Powdermaker's conception of class and her racially reductionist treatment of African American culture. While Powdermaker anticipated an anti-Jim Crow movement in "Cottonville," she also misplaced its social origins and her forecast missed the civil rights movement's development by about two decades.



AFTER FREEDOM
A Cultural Study in the Deep South
Hortense Powdermaker. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997

Even so, *After Freedom* cannot be easily dismissed.

Powdermaker's "Cottonville," like the sociologist John Dollard's "Southerntown," was a not-very-well-disguised Indianola, Mississippi. (Powdermaker admitted as much in her 1966 book *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist,* but not before W.E.B. DuBois had already "outed" the Delta town in a review of *After Freedom.*[1]) With the help of the poet William Alexander Percy, Powdermaker established herself as a "participant-observer" in Indianola in 1932, and she set about studying the Sunflower County town's Negro population with the goal of gauging how much blacks had "acculturated" since emancipation. Powdermaker's descriptions of the African American community form a well of primary information from which modern students of Mississippi can draw. While the pictures she paints of white Indianola and white Indianolans' racial attitudes are at times simplistic, they too remain valuable.

In *After Freedom* Powdermaker evinced three keen insights that her successors would do well to remember. First, she described the town of Indianola as a holistic entity; she realized that "an attempt to study the Whites without taking cognizance of the Negroes, or vice versa," would be "arbitrary and impracticable"(7). Second, Powder-maker acknowledged that the members of Indianola's black and white communities lived within a plantation system—both a racial system and an economic system—and she explored the lives of

Indianolans within those dual worlds. Last, and most importantly, Powdermaker did not conceive of the African American community in "Cotton-ville" as a monolith, as most of her contemporaries and too many modern-day scholars have been wont to do. Powdermaker des-cribed an African American community divided along class lines, which was something of an innovation for her time.

As innovative as that description was, however, modern readers will have to look twice at the distinctions Powdermaker draws on to differentiate between economic classes in the black community of Indianola. Powdermaker's "Negro middle class," for instance, was determined by "mode of behavior and the degree of acceptance of white patterns," and not by income or occupation (67). Her "Negro upper class" contained schoolteachers, preachers, and small business owners, but they made it into the upper ranks of black society as Powdermaker defined it not because they were economically independent (or independent of whites), but because they had accepted white, bourgeois expectations of behavior. The thousands of black Delta sharecroppers, literally one step removed from slavery, constituted Powdermaker's "Negro middle class," which she further divided into upper- and lower-middle classes. Prostitutes, the chronically unemployed, and charity cases made up the "Negro lower class." Class, here, is measured on a scale that has nothing to do with mode of production and everything to do with accommodation to "white" behavior. Those who prefer the strict Marxian definitions of class that have become popular since *After Freedom* first appeared will find these definitions tough to swallow at best, and anachronistically racist at worst.

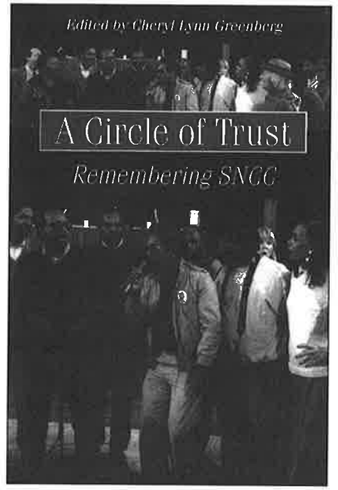
Academics seldom prove good fortune tellers, and Hortense Powdermaker was no exception. Many of her implicit prognostications regarding the future of race relations in Indianola have not stood the test of time. Powdermaker predicted, for instance, that black buying power would, sooner rather than later, force Indianola's white shopkeepers to break ranks with Sunflower County's plantation aristocrats and abandon the harsher aspects of Jim Crow. Powdermaker also argued that younger white Indianolans did not hold to the "creed" of black inferiority as strongly as did their parents, and that subsequently they were certain at least to ensure that separate educational facilities be made equal. Yet two decades later, in 1954, the same members of the white merchant class whom Powdermaker had predicted would break ranks with the planters initiated the white supremacist Citizens' Council movement in Indianola. On the eve of the *Brown* decision, at a time when Powdermaker's "younger generation" oversaw Sunflower County's school system, Sunflower County spent more than twice as much on classroom education per white child as it did per black.

Powdermaker's major prophecy, however, cannot be dismissed. Throughout her conversations with black Indianolans Powdermaker heard, "as a refrain," the insistence, "I want to be treated like a human being." (330) She predicted that the faith blacks held in education and the vote would eventually win them this treatment, but only after they had organized to dismantle Jim Crow. Powdermaker saw the work of women in the black church training them for exactly this purpose, and it is here that Powdermaker's conclusions ring truest (even if she assumed that the civil rights movement in Sunflower County would begin in the 1940s). For it was black churchwomen—the Fannie Lou Hamers and Mae Bertha Carters—who were ultimately responsible for the organizing work that won African Americans the right to vote and the right to be "treated like a human being" in Sunflower County. It is this conclusion that gives *After Freedom* its most enduring importance. Powdermaker's methodology provides a framework for modern community studies, and her descriptions of race relations constitute a valuable primary source for students of rural and small-town Mississippi under Jim Crow. Powdermaker's on-the-spot examination of the origins of the modern civil rights movement incline a modern reader to forgive the drawbacks of *After Freedom* and accept it for what it is—an inspired, if significantly flawed, classic.

TODD MOYE,
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

NOTES

1. See W.E.B. DuBois, *"Review of After Freedom," Social Forces* 18/1 (October, 1939), pp. 137-9. For other contemporary reviews of *After Freedom,* see Charles S. Johnson, "A Study in Black and White: Review of *After Freedom," The New Republic* 99 (June 21, 1939), pp. 195-6; Carter G. Woodson, "Review of *After Freedom," Journal of Negro History* 24 (1939), pp. 219-220; and Horace Mann Bond, "Review of *After Freedom," Annals of the American Academy* 205 (September 1939), pp. 201-2. See also the special issue of the *Journal of Anthropological Research,* Vol. 47/4 (Winter 1991) devoted to the life and work of Hortense Powdermaker.



A CIRCLE OF TRUST
Remembering SNCC
Cheryl Lynn Greenberg. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

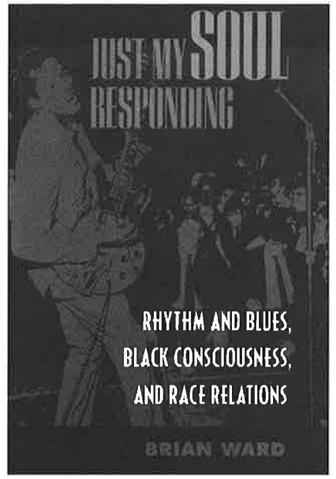
Over two decades ago Nikki Giovanni wrote in a review of Howell Raines' *My Soul is Rested* (1977) that, "Oral tradition, when Black Americans, Africans, Indians, and Hispanics practice it, is used as evidence of our 'lower cultural development.' When oral tradition is practiced by white journalists and sociologists, it is considered a new and exciting form." Therefore, Giovanni asserted, the oral history structure of Raines' work illustrates the "best tradition of the sixties," which is to say that it represents the reclamation of the oral culture of the black struggle for freedom in the 1960s. In 1998, Cheryl Lynn Greenberg builds on this reclamation with one important amplification; in *A Circle of Trust,* oral history goes beyond the typical format of interviewer and subject. Instead, oral history becomes collective and communal, reflecting the participatory and sometimes argumentative but always democratic and ultimately loving nature of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a radical, student-led civil rights organization formed in 1960.

Greenberg's work is an edited version of a conference at Trinity College in 1988 which reunited members of SNCC, many of whom had not seen each other in twenty-five years. The event seemed at times contentious; in a recent interview, Chuck McDew, chair of SNCC from 1960 to 1963, affectionately noted that, "if SNCC folks get together today, they will be arguing about something." The conference proceedings certainly bear witness to this great capacity for debate, a capacity cast in defensive tones at times. Generally, all of the participants asserted that the historical record of SNCC's activities and purpose is inaccurate. Much of their remembrances reveal an attempt, in the words of McDew, to "tell the story," more accurately. Participants addressed such controversial (and at the time, potentially divisive) topics as nonviolence versus violence, voter registration or direct action, feminism, and black power. In addition, all participants recalled the importance of SNCC's work in Mississippi and Alabama, especially SNCC's focus on the development of local leadership and their willingness to work in those areas where most civil rights organizations refused to go. While the remembrances seem at times romanticized visions of the past, most of the activists attempt to deal fairly with SNCC's history, showing an organization that, according to Julian Bond, "both reflected and challenged" the problems of the day.

In the pantheon of civil rights heroes, most names in this book will seem unfamiliar. Readers of Taylor Branch will have found a few names scattered through his voluminous works; others who are familiar with Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (1995, John Dittmer's *Local People* (1994), and David Halberstam's *The Children* (1998), will recognize these typically unknown organizers from those recent efforts to incorporate the stories of grassroots organizers. *A Circle of Trust* represents a different contribution to civil rights scholarship—it answers the lament of those in the movement who, as Payne asserts, do not recognize the movement from most histories of it. And the work reinvents the process of oral history by bringing together several activists and allowing them to interact with each other's remembrances. Memory, then, becomes cooperative, and while the effect is not always cohesive it is rather more demonstrative of the fits and starts, missteps and successes that constitute social action.

In resisting the monolithic paradigm of much civil rights historiography which focuses on larger organizations and well-known leaders, Greenberg's text offers a new glimpse into the struggles of the movement. That glimpse reveals a more accessible history, made up of ordinary people taking their lives into their own hands. Those who have always suspected that this portrait was true, and especially those readers who believe Dr. King created the movement alone, must engage this book.

SUSAN M. GLISSON
UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI



JUST MY SOUL RESPONDING
Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations
Brian Ward. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Brian Ward's *Just My Soul Responding* is an ambitious effort to integrate studies in popular music and culture into a larger historical context. Specifically, the author attempts to correlate various trends in rhythm and blues over a twenty-five year period to the expectations and frustrations of African Americans during the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights era. In Ward's view, one cannot separate the music from the outlook or the outlook from the music; each necessarily contains and explains the other. Significantly, his study is meant not as a history of rhythm and blues or of popular music, but rather as a critical look at an often-neglected, yet vital aspect of black thought and the black freedom struggle in the second half of the twentieth century.

Ward, who teaches American history at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in England, generally succeeds in his endeavor. His overall thesis, that changes in musical tastes reflected variations in the African American response to their own fluctuating position within the mainstream, is convincing. He suggests, for instance, that postwar rhythm and blues, once a music that documented cultural circumstances unique to the black community, evolved into a form of expression that appealed to a wider audience following the *Brown* decision. Ward contends that the transformation, not simply the machinations of the culture industry to sell more records, began within the African American community itself as an optimistic reflection of integrationist aspirations.

The continued hope for racial progress through integration during the 1950s and early 1960s saw the evolution of black pop, a music that increasingly addressed the needs of a youth audience rather than a racial one. Generally indistinguishable from other songs that emphasized the themes of teenage love and heartbreak, Ward locates within these color-blind paeans to romance the highpoint of black integrationist optimism.

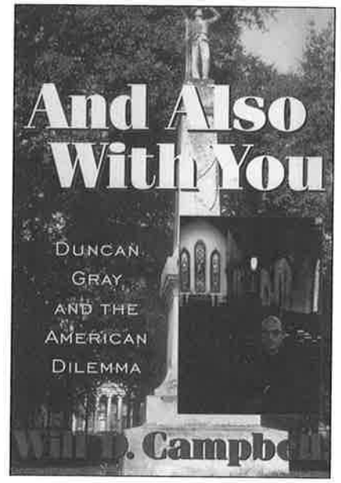
With the development of gospel-tinged soul in the early 1960s, Ward suggests that African Americans as a whole expected the creation of a pluralist society where inclusion into the mainstream did not necessarily demand the negation or subjugation of one's culture. The possibility did exist that blacks and whites could exist together while mutually respecting and appreciating the other. While Ward asserts that this conviction persevered in the hearts of the majority, he also recognizes that the failure of white America to abandon racism forced many African Americans to adopt a separatist ideology by the mid to late 1960s, a circumstance that the author obviously regrets.

The music of the period, too, takes on characteristics that illustrate the despair associated with the collapse of the civil rights movement. Denied a legitimate political and economic place in the mainstream, African Americans create and consume a rhythm and blues that becomes more overtly misogynist, male-centered, and self-destructive. Even the music that holds the promise to reunite black and white funkadelic is couched in a bizarre language and persona that insinuates the improbability of racial rapproachment in the real world. What is left by the middle of the 1970s is the vacuous, mechanized, and corporate-controlled disco.

Along the way of his narrative, Ward provides many perhaps surprising insights regarding the often indifferent relationship between black musical entrepreneurs and the black freedom struggle and the lack of direct activism by rhythm and blues entertainers in the cause of civil rights. His interpretations remind us that the period was a very complex one not easily given to generalization.

While Ward's writing style (particularly his inclination to incorporate song lyrics and titles to complete his own sentences) frustrates the reader, overall his work cannot be ignored. It provides a necessary addendum to our understanding of postwar race relations. Well-researched and documented, *Just My Soul Responding* definitely deserves a place alongside traditional and conventional accounts of the Civil Rights Era.

MICHAEL BERTRAND
UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI



AND ALSO WITH YOU
Duncan Gray and the American Dilemma
Will Campbell. Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House, 1997.

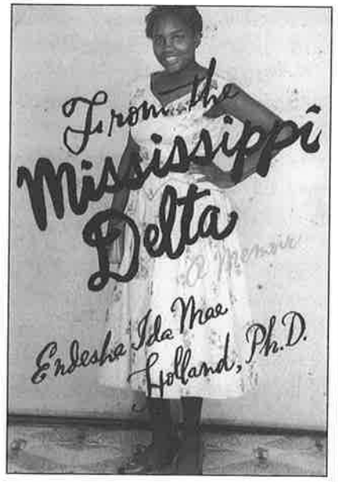
With the evening sky darkening and filled with smoke and tear gas, a slight, balding cleric climbs onto a Civil War monument to try and address the riotous mob below. The night is September 30, 1962. The crowd is there to prevent James Meredith from entering the University of Mississippi, by any means necessary. The fading daylight streams through the thick, deeply colored stained glass window honoring the University Greys, Ole Miss' confederate heroes who had marched to their deaths almost one hundred years previous to this night. In the presence of their ghosts and face to face with another southern lost cause, Duncan Gray, Jr. risks his life in an effort to bring peace on this violent and turbulent night.

In his book, *And Also With You: Duncan Gray and the American Dilemma,* Will Campbell traces the path of Duncan Gray's activism for human rights from its inception on "the mountain" at Sewanee's School of Theology to the strife of Mississippi in the early sixties to his role as the seventh Episcopal Bishop of Mississippi, the story comes full circle when Gray returns to the mountain of the University of the South as Chancellor. Gray is portrayed as a great man of immense conscience who almost fearlessly treads where most white southerners dared not in the early sixties. He scorned the white Citizens Council and the State Sovereignty Commission, not by violence or protest, but in the pulpit and through his actions with the *Book of Common Prayer* in hand.

Campbell portrays the life of Duncan Gray with respect and dignity, but he never attempts deification. He presents a very human man who had a vision of equality and faith in God's will to fight the good fight. Campbell, a religious white supporter of civil rights himself, paints a portrait of a man of God who was content with just being a good man, husband, father and priest. The book gives a previously obscured side of the civil rights movement: the role of the Southern white Protestant church in the fray. Duncan Gray wore his faith and grace in the face of danger like a cloak against the night. As problems intensified, he wrapped his beliefs around himself tighter and continued his struggle against segregation.

Will Campbell's *And Also With You: Duncan Gray and the American Dilemma* is both a moving account of a man and his role in history and a spiritually uplifting book of grace. By intertwining two stories that appear to be different, the author creates a cohesive vision of grace. Campbell recounts Duncan's own definition of "grace" as "the power of God at work in our lives, but it is a power that comes largely in and through these gifts. To be loved unconditionally, to be forgiven for all my sins, and to be totally accepted is power; the power to be better than you ever thought you could be. . . It is power and it is joy"(250).

LEANNE DOSS GAULT,
STARKVILLE, MS



FROM THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA
A Memoir
Endesha Ida Mae Holland, Ph.D.. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

Greenwood, Mississippi, center of the Mississippi cotton trade and state headquarters of the all-white Citizens Council in the early 1960s, was the site of the first major Delta initiative by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SNCC leaders such as Bob Moses organized voting drives, distributed food to the poorer Delta residents, marched in protest down city streets, and were

arrested and jailed as the civil rights movement swept in and changed Mississippi and its Delta. But the frequently named and heavily documented SNCC leaders did not do this work alone.

The autobiography of Endesha Ida Mae Holland, Ph.D., *From the Mississippi Delta,* provides a powerful, illuminating, and personal view of one of these less well-known actors. In a narrative that reads like a novel, Holland presents Greenwood before the civil rights workers, or "Riders," came to town, the life events that could lead a young Mississippi woman from resignation to willful rebellion, and the reverberating effects that involvement in the movement could have on a person's life.

Holland concentrates the majority of her text on the years of her life leading up to her civil rights involvement—and they are quite colorful years. The depiction of her youth and involvement with SNCC provides an example of the "bondage-freedom-flight" pattern of African American autobiography that David Dudley describes in *My Father's Shadow* (1991). As an adolescent, Holland develops an all-consuming desire to escape from the "barless prison we called Mississippi Delta"(109). She schemed and planned her escape through the various routes of traveling shows and fairs and eligible men passing through Greenwood, wanting to "go North and be somebody—a famous singer"(129). This aspiration even led her into prostitution and performing in a traveling strip tease show, though it never led her out of the Mississippi Delta.

The "escape" she finally achieves takes place within the city limits. Spotting a nicely dressed Bob Moses walking down the street one day and recognizing him as an obvious out-of-towner, she follows him, in hopes of landing a high-paying customer and, possibly, a ticket out of town. Instead, she finds herself working regularly in the SNCC office where she is treated with respect–"something wholly new" –and fulfilling her "unofficial 'official job' in the Movement,... be[ing] arrested, go[ing] to jail, and stay[ing] there as long as other workers needed me" (253). This newfound role finally provided her long-awaited "escape." Soon, she reports, "Being around the SNCC people had turned my narrow space into a country bigger than I'd ever imagined,"(219) and "I swore I would never leave Mama and Cedric [her son] and the Delta. I didn't have to anymore, I didn't want to" (225).

Holland's story provides a lens through which to view many facets of life in the pre-civil rights Mississippi Delta. Being the youngest of four children, she spent many days at home listening to her mother "playliking" the stories of her life and of the community. Holland learned the African American tradition of passing down history through oral stories, and now conveys her own stories as a nationally recognized playwright. Returning to the arms of the church, she explains her realization of the institution's significance in the community as a "place where fairness and goodness–in short supply everywhere else in Greenwood–flowed freely" (110). She describes the "secret of invisibility that all blacks knew" around whites and the white paternalism of hand-me-down dresses, leftovers and discarded books (82).

Unlike *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1970), Anne Moody's autobiography of Mississippi Civil Rights activities, *From the Mississippi Delta* does not end in the 1960s, or on a negative note.

Holland's story continues through to the 1990s, coming full circle as she returns to her hometown in 1991. Noting the 825-plus black elected officials in the state, receiving a key to the city and a commendation from Governor Ray Mabus on the steps of the city hall where, thirty years earlier, Greenwood's black residents had fought for the right to vote, she hears Mississippi's governor announce, "Her history has served as a model for all people and shows how, with determination, we can overcome obstacles for a better life, she affirms, "Amen to that" (312). *From the Mississippi Delta* successfully brings intense, personal and riveting detail to an important story.

SARAH TORIAN
SOUTHERN CHANGES,
ATLANTA, GA

WHEN WE WERE GOOD
The Folk Revival

Robert Cantwell. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996.

The 1960s marked a golden age for American popular music. Various songs and performers became synonymous with the great social and cultural transformations taking place. Even today Hollywood and Madison Avenue focus their efforts on choosing the right songs from this era to set a mood or catch an audience with a familiar hook. Fortunately, the '60s provided a wide selection of music. Rock-n-Roll proved its staying power as it incorporated every influence it encountered, jazz explored and expanded the boundaries of music itself, rhythm and blues witnessed the rise of the sweet, smooth sound of Motown along with the raw passion of the Atlantic-Stax artists, and even country music found its next generation of "outlaws" that would challenge the dominant Nashville Sound. Folk music too experienced a renaissance during this turbulent era, but this rebirth is often overshadowed by the one giant that emerged from the folk scene: Bob Dylan. Robert Cantwell, in his new work *When We Were Good,* recovers the '60s folk revival, rightfully placing folk music in the pantheon of American music and at the center of the decade's cultural upheaval.

The book offers two significant arguments: the historical conception of folk music and the explanation of the folk revival as cultural process. Cantwell defines the years of the folk revival as spanning from 1958, when the Kingston Trio topped the charts with "Tom Dooley," to 1965, when the British invaded and Bob Dylan went electric. Cantwell traces the origins of folk music back to the rise of black minstrelsy in the 1830s. By the 1930s, this southern music, with its African, Anglo, and Celtic roots, and its connections with jazz and Tin Pan Alley, had become the core of American folk music. During the Depression and World War II years, popular front musicians consciously selected the music and defined the performance context that would compose American folk music. During the 1950s, the virulent anti-communist attacks on groups like the Weavers and Pete Seeger silenced the overtly political nature of folk music, but not the milieu, that the popular front had established. This was the tradition that the folk revival inherited in 1958.

The other noteworthy idea Cantwell develops concerns the process of cultural revivalism. Folk revivalism constitutes a social theater where music and performers play out the ground rules for negotiating the hurdles and pitfalls of society. This new vision creates a group solidarity among participants or "folk," as they explore and incorporate this new view through the experiences of the folk revival both individually and collectively. Unlike the 1930s, however, the process and experience of the folk revival of the 1960s became increasingly individualistic rather than collective, and the movement disintegrated by the middle of the decade.

The book is quite clever in its organization. Chapters range from historical processes like the evolution of black minstrelsy to the rise of communal folk music performances that culminated in the Newport Folk Festival. Other chapters examine key figures or groups in the evolution of folk music such as the Almanac singers, the Weavers, Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Joan Baez, and especially Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan. Finally, there is one chapter on the "Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music." In the '60s, this seminal vinyl recording became the guiding light for musicians searching for authentic American folk music. Collectively, these chapters provide a multi-perspective look at the evolution of American folk music and the birth of the folk revival.

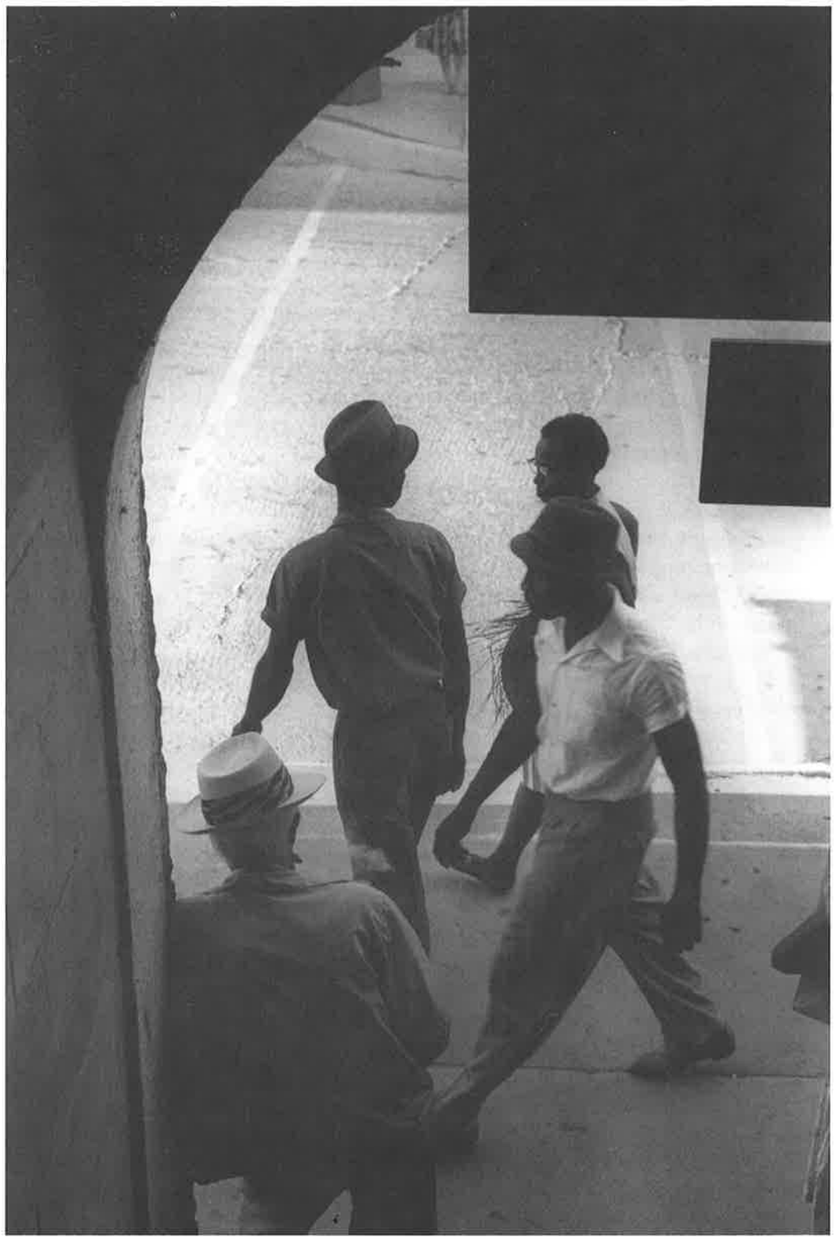
While one should not quibble with what is left out of such a large study, readers should understand there is little that directly touches upon the South or Mississippi during the peak folk revival years. This is ironic since the cover of the book features a photograph of the late Mississippian John Hurt during the 1960s college circuit tours. Moreover, while Cantwell claims that the folk revival promoted democracy, the democracy of this work means forming personal identity rather than participating in social decision-making. Only as a brief aside does the author recall Seeger's encouragement to Bernice Johnson to spread the word of the civil rights struggle through the movement's songs. Taking her cue from the Almanac Singers and through Seeger's tour connections, Johnson led the SNCC Freedom Singers on their consciousness-raising tour of American colleges.

The book does possess several serious shortcomings. The prose is bombastic. Routinely, Cantwell interrupts significant analytical points, or even worse, a good story with a non sequitur or the obvious. The turbid prose is matched by turgid narration. Cantwell's choppy flow includes frequent switching from third person to first person anecdotes, or an extensive discourse on an academic work that obliquely touches upon the subject at hand.

Unfortunately, the stylistic drawbacks of *When We Were Good* may limit the audience, which would be a shame, for Cantwell has produced an important book on the folk revival. In years to come, Cantwell's explanation of folk revivalism as a cultural process, and his historical construction of the evolution of folk music will become a touchstone for scholarly research of this era and genre.

SCOTT HOLZER
JEFFERSON COLLEGE

Parting Hand



Martin J. Dain, Dain Collection, Southern Media Archive, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi.

From the back porch to the pulpit . . .

Mississippi Folklife, formerly the *Mississippi Folklore Register,* publishes articles, photographic essays and reviews about the diversity of folklife and culture in Mississippi and adjoining regions. To subscribe and join the Mississippi Folklore Society, please fill out this form and mail it to the address below.

Annual membership rate *(includes two issues per year)*
$10.00 - U.S.
$15.00 - Canada
$20.00 - International
$100.00 - Lifetime membership

Payment Options
❑ Bill Me
❑ Payment enclosed
❑ Please charge my Visa or Mastercard *(please circle one)*
Credit card no. _____ Exp. Date _____

Signature _____

❑ YES! I would like a subscription and membership for _____ year(s). Cost: _____

Send to:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

❑ Please send me more information about the Center for the Study *of* Southern Culture

Mississippi Folklife
SUBSCRIPTION DEPARTMENT
301 Hill Hall
The University of Mississippi
University, MS 38677

Center for the Study *of* Southern Culture
THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI
University, MS 38677
http:\\www.cssc.olemiss.edu

University Miss 38677

Non-Profit Org
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 6