DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Edited by

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Chapter Four

THE SIT-INS AND FREEDOM RIDES

If Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, symbolized a modern-day version of the "shot heard around the world" at Lexington and Concord, the decision of four North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College students to demand service at the lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, represented an updated battle of Bunker Hill. On that eventful day, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, Jr., David Richmond, and Franklin McCain sat down at the lunch counter, ordered coffee and doughnuts, and refused to leave until they were served. By the fall of 1961 every southern and border state—over one hundred communities—had experienced sit-ins. Over seventy thousand individuals participated. Still more donated money or wrote letters of support.

4.1 In the following interview, Franklin McCain, one of the four original sit-in participants describes their plans and feelings. The sit-ins took place against a backdrop of heightened but unfulfilled expectations. The Supreme Court's decision in the Brown *case had led young blacks to believe that Jim Crow was on its deathbed. Yet, segregation remained a fact of life. For example, as of 1961, only .026 percent of North Carolina's schools had desegregated, and North Carolina was considered a moderate state. The NAACP kept hammering away at Jim Crow in the courts, but all of its legal victories produced few tangible changes. Disgusted with local subterfuge, McCain and three other black students at North Carolina A&T decided that the time for waiting for the courts to bring about change had passed. It was time to act.*

4.1 Franklin McCain, "Interview," in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, pp. 75-82.

The planning process was on a Sunday night, I remember it quite well. I think it was Joseph [McNeil] who said, "It's time that we take some action now. We've been getting together, and we've been, up to this point, still like most people we've talked about for the past few weeks or so—that is, people who talk a lot but, in fact, make very little action." After selecting the technique, then we said, "Let's go down and just ask for service." It certainly wasn't titled a "sit-in" or "sit-down" at that time. "Let's just go down to Woolworth's tomorrow and ask for service, and the tactic is going to be simply this: we'll just stay there." We never anticipated being served, certainly, the first day anyway. "We'll stay until we get served." And I think Ezell [Blair, Jr.] said, "Well, you know that might be weeks, that might be months, that might be never." And I think it was the consensus of the groups, we said, "Well, that's just the chance we'll have to take."

What's likely to happen? Now, I think that was a question that all of us asked ourselves. . . . What's going to happen once we sit down? Of course, nobody had the answers. Even your wildest imagination couldn't lead you to believe what would, in fact, happen. . . .

Once getting there . . . we did make purchases of school supplies and took the patience and time to get receipts for our purchases, and Joseph and myself went over to the counter and asked to be served coffee and doughnuts. As anticipated, the reply was, "I'm sorry, we don't serve you here." And of course we said, "We just beg to disagree with you. We've in fact already been served; you've served us already and that's just not quite true." The attendant or waitress was a little bit dumbfounded, just didn't know what to say under circumstances like that. And we said, "We wonder why you'd invite us in to serve us at one counter and deny service at another. If this is a private club or private concern, then we believe you ought to sell membership cards and sell only to persons who have a membership card. If we don't have a card, then we'd know pretty well that we shouldn't come in or even attempt to come in." That didn't go over too well, simply because I don't think she understood what we were talking about, and the second reason, she had no logical response to a statement like that. And the only thing that an individual in her case or position could do is, of course, call the manager. . . . Well, at this time, I think we were joined by Dave Richmond and Ezell Blair at the counter. . . .

Were you afraid at this point?

Oh, hell, yes, no question about that. At that point there was a policeman who had walked in off the street, who was pacing the aisle . . . behind us, where we were seated, with his club in his hand, just sort of knocking it in his hand, and just looking mean and red and a little upset and a little bit disgusted. And you had the feeling that he didn't know what the hell to do. You had the feeling that this is the first time that this big bad man with the gun and the club has been pushed in a corner, and he's got absolutely no defense, and the thing that's killing him more than anything else—he doesn't know what he can or what he cannot do. . . .

There was virtually nothing that could move us, there was virtually nothing probably at that point that could really frighten us off. . . . If it's possible to know what it means to have your soul cleansed—I felt pretty clean at that time. I probably felt better on that day than I've ever felt in my life. Seems like a lot of feelings of guilt or what-have-you left me, and I felt as though I had gained my manhood, so to speak, and not only gained it, but had developed quite a lot of respect for it. Not Franklin McCain only as an individual, but I felt as though the manhood of a number of other black persons had been restored and had gotten some respect from just that one day. . . .

The only reason we did leave is the store was closing. We knew, of course, we had to leave when the store was closing. We said to him [Mr. Harris, the store manager], "Well, we'll have plenty of time tomorrow, because we'll be back to see you." I don't think that went over too well. But by the time we were leaving, the store was just crowded with people from off the streets. . . . As a matter of fact, there were so many people standin' in front of the store, we had to leave from the side entrance.

But back at the campus, there was just a beehive of activity. Word had spread. As a matter of fact, word was back on campus before we ever got back. There were all sorts of phone calls to the administration and to people on the faculty and staff. The mayor's office was aware of it and the governor was aware of it. I think it was all over North Carolina within a matter of just an hour or so. . . .

4.2 Prior to the Greensboro action a remarkable collection of black students had formed the Nashville movement. Under the direction of James Lawson, Jr., a student of Gandhi and the theory and practice of nonviolence, the Nashville (Tennessee) group, which included John Lewis, Marion Barry, and Diane Nash, prepared itself to challenge Jim Crow. Nash was from Chicago. She had come South for the first time in 1959 to study at Fisk University and was appalled by her firsthand contact with segregation. Rather than retreat to the North, however, she committed herself to toppling the "southern way of life."

4.2 Diane Nash, "Interview," in *The New Negro*, ed. by Mathew Ahman (Notre Dame: Fides, 1961).

My participation in the movement began in February 1960, with the lunch counter "sit-ins." I was then a student at Fisk University. . . . My occupation at present is coordinating secretary for the Nashville Non-violent Movement. . . .

In September, 1959, I came to Nashville as a student at Fisk University. This was the first time that I had been as far south as Tennessee; therefore, it was the first time that I had encountered the blatant segregation that exists in the South. I came then to see the community in sin. Seeing signs designating "white" or "colored," being told, "We don't serve niggers in here," and, as happened in one restaurant, being looked in the eye and told, "Go around to the back door where you belong," had tremendous psychological impact on me. To begin with, I didn't agree with the premise that I was inferior, and I had a difficult time complying with it. Also, I felt stifled and boxed in since so many areas of living were restricted. The Negro in the South is told constantly, "You can't sit here." "You can't work there." "You can't live here, or send your children to school there." "You can't use this park, or that swimming pool," and on and on and on. Restrictions extend into housing, schools, jobs (Negroes, who provide a built-in lower economic class, are employed in the most menial capacities and are paid the lowest wages). Segregation encompasses city parks, swimming pools and recreational facilities. . . . Oppression extends to every area of life.

Failure to comply with these oppressions results in beatings, in house-burnings and bombings, and economic reprisals, as we saw in Fayette County, Tennessee. . . .

As can easily be imagined, all this has a real effect upon the Negro. I won't attempt to analyze here the effect of the system upon the Negro, but I should like to make a few observations. An organism must make some type of adjustment to its environment. The Negro, however, continues to deny consciously to himself, and to his children, that he is inferior. Yet each time he uses a "colored" facility, he testifies to his own inferiority. . . .

Segregation has its destructive effect upon the segregator also. The most outstanding of these effects perhaps is fear. I can't forget how openly this fear was displayed in Nashville on the very first day that students there sat-in. Here were Negro students, quiet, in good discipline, who were consciously attempting to show no ill will, even to the point of making sure that they had pleasant and calm facial expressions. The demonstrators did nothing more than sit on the stools at the lunch counter. Yet, from the reaction of the white employees of the variety stores and from the onlookers, some dreadful monster might just as well have been about to devour them all. Waitresses dropped things. Store managers and personnel perspired. Several cashiers were led off in tears. One of the best remembered incidents of that day took place in a ladies restroom of a department store. Two Negro students, who had sat-in at the lunch counter, went into the ladies restroom which was marked "white" and were there as a heavy-set, older white lady, who might have been seeking refuge from the scene taking place at the lunch counter, entered. Upon opening the door and finding the two Negro girls inside, the women threw up her hands and, nearly in tears, exclaimed, "Oh Nigras everywhere!"

So segregation engenders fear in the segregator, especially needless fear of what will happen if integration comes; in short, fear of the unknown. Then Jim Crow fosters ignorance. The white person is denied the educational opportunities of exchange with people of a race other than his own. Bias makes for the hatred which we've seen stamped upon the faces of whites in newspaper pictures of the mob. . . .

Worst of all, however, is the stagnancy of thought and character—of both whites and Negroes—which is the result of the rationalization that is necessary in order that the oppressed and oppressor may live with a system of slavery and human abasement.

I can remember Nashville in this stage of sin when I first came there in September, 1959, a few months before the sit-in movement was to begin. As a new student at Fisk University that September, I was completely unaware that over the next few months I would really experience segregation; that I would see raw hatred; that I would see my friends beaten; that I would be a convict several times and, as is the case at the moment, that there would be a warrant out for my arrest. . . . Expecting my life to pursue a rather quiet course, I was also unaware that I would begin to feel part of a group of people suddenly proud to be called "black." To be called "Negro" had once been thought of as derogatory and had been softened by polite company to "colored person." At one time, to have been called "nigger" was a gross insult and hurt keenly. Within the movement, however, we came to a realization of our own worth. We began to see our role and our responsibility to our country and to our fellow men, so that to be called "nigger" on the picket line, or anywhere, was now an unimportant thing that no longer produced in us that flinch. As to the typical white southerner who compromises with "nigra" we only secretly wish for a moment when we could gracefully help him with his phonetics, explaining that it's "knee—grow. . . ."

Through the unity and purposefulness of the experience of the Nashville Negro, there was born a new awareness of himself as an individual.

There was also born, on the part of whites, a new understanding and awareness of the Negro as a person to be considered and respected.

4.3 On Easter weekend, 1960 (April 15-17), close to 175 students from 30 states, mostly southern, many of them sit-in participants, attended the Student Leadership Conference on Nonviolent Resistance at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the meeting sought to enrich the students' understanding of nonviolent direct action and to coordinate their future efforts.

Ella Baker, whose firsthand report on the conference is reprinted here, was a graduate of Shaw University, a one-time assistant field secretary and president of the New York branch of the NAACP, and, as of 1960, executive director of SCLC. Baker played a seminal role in organizing the conference and in prodding the students to establish a new civil rights organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Both in public, as in the following article, and behind-the-scenes, Baker emphasized the necessity of developing a decentralized and democratic movement—one that did not rely upon a single charismatic personality (like SCLC).

4.3 Ella Baker, "Bigger than a Hamburger," *Southern Patriot*, Vol. 18 (1960).

The Student Leadership Conference made it crystal clear that current sit-ins and other demonstrations are concerned with some thing much bigger than a hamburger or even a giant-sized coke.

Whatever may be the difference in approach to their goal, the Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life.

In reports, casual conversations, discussion groups, and speeches, the sense and the spirit of the following statement that appeared in the initial newsletter of the students at Barber-Scotia College, Concord, N.C., were re-echoed time and again:

"We want the world to know that we no longer accept the inferior position of second-class citizenship. We are willing to go to jail, be ridiculed, spat upon and even suffer physical violence to obtain First Class Citizenship."

By and large, this feeling that they have a destined date with freedom, was not limited to a drive for personal freedom, or even freedom for the Negro in the South. Repeatedly it was emphasized that the movement was concerned with the moral implications of racial discrimination for the "whole world" and the "Human Race."

The universality of approach was linked with a perceptive recognition that "it is important to keep the movement democratic and to avoid struggles for personal leadership."

It was further evident that the desire for supportive cooperation from adult leaders and the adult community was also tempered by apprehension that adults might try to "capture" the student movement. The students showed willingness to be met on the basis of equality, but were intolerant of anything that smacked of manipulation or domination.

This inclination toward *group-centered leadership*, rather than toward a *leader-centered group pattern of organization* was refreshing indeed to those of the older group who bear the scars of the battle, the frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay.

However hopeful might be the signs in the direction of group-centeredness, the fact that many schools and communities, especially in the South, have not provided adequate experience for young Negroes to assume the initiative and think and act independently accentuated the need for guarding the student movement against well-meaning, but nevertheless, overprotectiveness.

Here is an opportunity for adult and youth to work together and provide genuine leadership—the development of the individual to his highest potential for the benefit of the group.

Many adults and youth characterized the Raleigh meeting as the greatest or most significant conference of our period.

Whether it lives up to this high evaluation or not will, in a large measure, be determined by the extent to which there is more effective training in and understanding of non-violent principles and practices, in group dynamics, and in the re-direction into creative channels of the normal frustrations and hostilities that result from second-class citizenship.

4.4 Along with Baker, James Lawson played the lead role at SNCC's founding conference. Even more so than Martin Luther King, Jr., Lawson captured the student's imagination with his discussion of nonviolence. As he explained, nonviolence and passivity were not identical. Nonviolence did not mean pursuing a moderate agenda through tame means. On the contrary, nonviolent direct action entailed a radical transformation of human relations.

4.4 James M. Lawson, Jr., "From a Lunch-Counter Stool," April 1960, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers.

These are exciting moments in which to live. Reflect how over the last few weeks, the "sit-in" movement has leaped from campus to campus, until today hardly any campus remains unaffected. At the beginning of the

decade, the student generation was "silent," "uncommitted," or "beatnik." But after only four months, these analogies largely used by adults appear as hasty cliches which should not have been used in the first place. The rapidity and drive of the movement indicates that all the while American students were simply waiting in suspension; waiting for the cause, that ideal, that event, that "actualizing of their faith" which would catapult their right to speak powerfully to their nation and world. . . .

But as so frequently happens, these are also enigmatic moments. Enigmatic, for like man in every age who cannot read the signs of the times, many of us are not able to see what appears before us, or hear what is spoken from lunch counter stools, or understand what has been cried behind jail cell bars.

Already the paralysis of talk, the disobedience of piety, the frustration of false ambition, and the insensitivity of an affluent society yearns to diffuse the meaning and flatten the thrust of America's first non-violent campaign.

One great university equates the movement to simply another student fad similar to a panty raid, or long black stockings. . . . Amid this welter of irrelevant and superficial reactions, the primary motifs of the movement, the essential message, the crucial issues raised are often completely missed. So the Christian student who has not yet given his support or mind to the movement might well want to know what the issue is all about. Is it just a lot of nonsense over a hamburger? Or is it far more?

To begin, let us note what the issue is not. . . .

Police partiality is not the issue. Nashville has been considered one of those "good" cities where racial violence has not been tolerated. Yet, on a Saturday in February, the mystique of yet another popular myth vanished. For only police permissiveness invited young white men to take over store after store in an effort to further intimidate or crush the "sit-in." Law enforcement agents accustomed to viewing crime, were able to mark well-dressed students waiting to make purchases, as loitering on the lunch-counter stools, but they were unable even to suspect and certainly not to see assault and battery. . . . Such partiality, however, is symptomatic of the diagnosis only—an inevitable by-product—another means of avoiding the encounter. But the "sit-in" does not intend to make such partiality the issue.

Already many well-meaning and notable voices are seeking to define the problem in purely legal terms. But if the students wanted a legal case, they had only to initiate a suit. But not a single sit-in began in this fashion. No one planned to be arrested or desired such. The legal battles which will be fought as a consequence of many arrests never once touch on the matter of eating where you normally shop, or on segregation *per se*. . . .

Let us admit readily that some of the major victories gained for social justice have come through the courts. . . . The Negro has been a law-abiding citizen as he has struggled for justice against many unlawful elements.

But the major defeats have occurred when we have been unable to convince the nation to support or implement the Constitution, when a court decision is ignored or nullified by local and state action. A democratic structure of law remains democratic, remains lawful only as the people are continuously persuaded to be democratic. Law is always nullified by practice and disdain unless the minds and hearts of a people sustain law. . . .

Eventually our society must abide by the Constitution and not permit any local law or custom to hinder freedom or justice. But such a society lives by more than law. In the same respect the sit-in movement is not trying to create a legal battle, but points to that which is more than law.

Finally, the issue is not integration. This is particularly true of the Christian oriented person. Certainly the students are asking in behalf of the entire Negro community and the nation that these eating counters become places of service for all persons. But it would be extremely shortsighted to assume that integration is the problem or the word of the "sit-in." To the extent to which the movement reflects deep Christian impulses, desegregation is a necessary next step. But it cannot be the end. If progress has not been at a genuine pace, it is often because the major groups seeking equal rights tactically made desegregation the end and not the means.

The Christian favors the breaking down of racial barriers because the redeemed community of which he is already a citizen recognizes no barriers dividing humanity. The Kingdom of God, as in heaven so on earth, is the distant goal of the Christian. That Kingdom is far more than the immediate need for integration. . . .

In the first instance, we who are demonstrators are trying to raise what we call the "moral issue." That is, we are pointing to the viciousness of racial segregation and prejudice and calling it evil or sin. The matter is not legal, sociological or racial, it is moral and spiritual. Until America (South and North) honestly accepts the sinful nature of racism, this cancerous disease will continue to rape all of us. . . .

In the second instance, the non-violent movement is asserting, "get moving." The pace of social change is too slow. At this rate it will be at least another generation before the major forms of segregation disappear. All of Africa will be free before the American Negro attains first-class citizenship. Most of us will be grandparents before we can live normal human lives.

The choice of the non-violent method, "the sit-in," symbolizes both judgment and promise. It is a judgment upon middle-class conventional, half-way efforts to deal with radical social evil. It is specifically a judgment upon contemporary civil rights attempts. As one high school student from Chattanooga exclaimed, "We started because we were tired of waiting for you to act. . . ."

But the sit-in is likewise a sign of promise: God's promise that if radical Christian methods are adopted the rate of change can be vastly increased. Under Christian non-violence, Negro students reject the hardship of disobedient passivity and fear, but embrace the hardship (violence and jail) of obedience. Such non-violence strips the segregationalist power structure of its major weapon: the manipulation of law or law-enforcement to keep the Negro in his place. . . .

4.5 At the Raleigh conference, SNCC drafted its "Statement of Purpose." Crafted largely by members of the Nashville movement, the manifesto displayed the organization's commitment to nonviolence. Heeding the advice of Ella Baker, SNCC decided to remain independent of SCLC and other adult organizations. It elected its first chairman, Marion Barry, a native of Itta Bena, Mississippi, a member of the Nashville movement, and the future mayor of Washington, D.C., and established an office in Atlanta, soon to be staffed by James Forman, Julian Bond, Jane Stembridge, and an assortment of other volunteers.

4.5 SNCC, "Statement of Purpose," April 1960.

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step toward such a society.

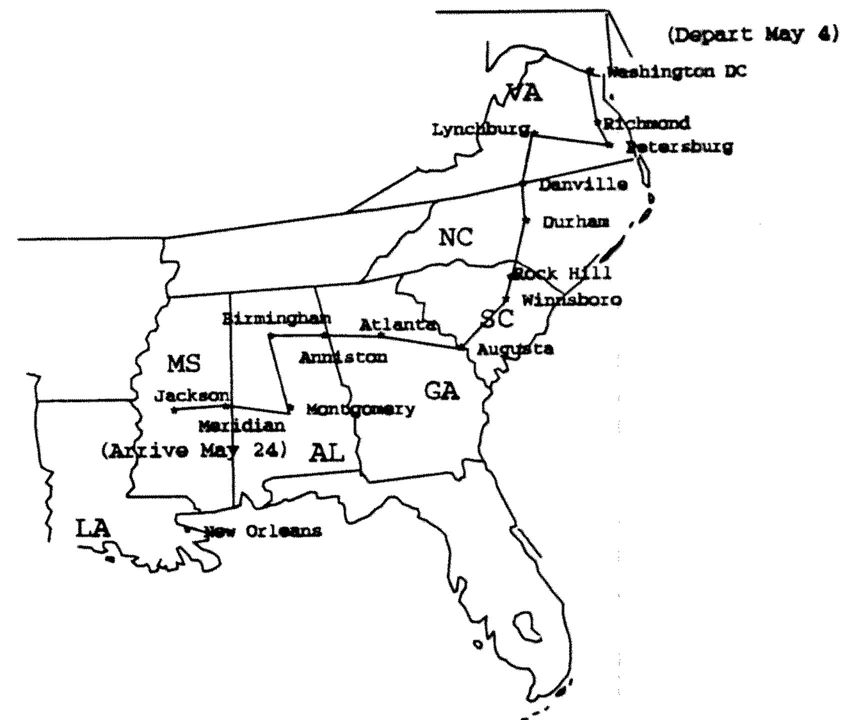
Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.

4.6 The Freedom Rides marked the spread of the nonviolent direct action (Fig. 4.1). The Supreme Court's decision in the Boynton *case (February 1, 1961), which expanded the ban against segregation in interstate travel, provided the immediate impetus for the rides. President Kennedy's reluctance to initiate civil rights reform added to the Congress of Racial Equality's decision to undertake the endeavor. By traveling on two separate buses and using various facilities, in the South, in an integrated manner, the riders sought to test the implementation of the* Boynton *decision. If southern authorities resisted, and CORE expected they would, the rides would generate publicity, which, in turn, could compel the federal government to intervene. In addition, CORE leaders sensed that the rides would revitalize its reputation. The Congress of Racial*

Figure 4.1
Route of Freedom Rides



Equality was an established civil rights organization. In the mid-1940s it had staged Freedom Rides, known as the Journey of Reconciliation, in the border states.

One of the thirteen freedom riders who departed from Washington, D.C., was James Peck, a veteran of CORE's 1947 Journey of Reconciliation. Peck's autobiographical account of the rides vividly describes the resistance that the riders met when they reached Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama. Though nearly killed by a white mob, Peck vowed to press on. As he noted, if whites could deter him through violence, then the southern way of life would remain in place.

4.6 James Peck, *Freedom Ride* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962), pp. 115-119 and 123-129.

The group which assembled May 1 at Fellowship House in Washington for training totaled thirteen. It was a very different type of group from the one which had gathered in Washington fourteen years previously for the same type of project. It included a number of what has become known as "the new Negro"—southern students who took part in the sit-in movement and for whom arrest or the threat thereof had become commonplace. Most of the group were young people in their twenties. Very few of them were pacifists. . . .

Danville, Virginia was the first place where testers were refused service. At the colored counter, Ed Blankenheim, a white, sat for ten minutes until his bus was ready for departure. Genevieve Hughes, a white, and I, aboard a later bus, were at first refused service but we—and Walter Bergman—finally got refreshments after a brief discussion with the manager.

Greensboro, though reputed for its liberalism, was the first city where the color signs started to become the rule. The first greeting to arriving bus passengers were oversized signs all around the building with arrows pointing to the colored waiting room. On the other hand, the colored lunch room which was no bigger than a good-sized closet and equally gloomy, had been closed permanently a week before our arrival. . . .

Charlotte was the scene of the trip's first arrest—and the birth of a new "in," the shoe in. Charles Person climbed onto a shoeshine chair and, after being refused service, remained seated until a cop with handcuffs arrived. . . .

Violence against the freedom riders erupted for the first time in Rock Hill, South Carolina, where the press had headlined our arrival and where hoodlums had recently attacked lunch-counter pickets. In fact, several of the hoodlums waiting at the Greyhound station were recognized as the same individuals who had assaulted the local student pickets.

As the Greyhound contingent of riders arrived, some twenty of these

ruffians were waiting. When John Lewis, who is Negro, approached the entrance of the white waiting room, he was assaulted by two of them. Three started slugging Albert Bigelow, a white, who was next in line. . . .

In Atlanta, we were welcomed at the Greyhound terminal by a large group of students, many of whom had participated in the local lunch-counter picketing and sit-in's. The terminal restaurant was closed but we used the waiting room and rest rooms. The Trailway's terminal restaurant was open, and two of our teams tested it on departure without incident. . . .

The most nightmarish day of our freedom ride was Sunday, May 14, Mother's Day. I identify the date with Mother's Day because when Police Chief Connor was asked why there was not a single policeman at the Birmingham Trailway's terminal to avert mob violence, he explained that since it was Mother's Day, most of the police were off-duty visiting their mothers. That there was going to be a mob to meet us had been well known around Birmingham for several days. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth told me so when I phoned to give him the scheduled arrival times of our two buses.

However, we did not know in advance that a similar mob was waiting in Anniston, a rest stop on the way. Our first contingent, aboard Greyhound, learned of this when their bus stopped just outside of Anniston. . . .

When the Greyhound bus pulled into Anniston, it was immediately surrounded by an angry mob armed with iron bars. They set upon the vehicle, denting the sides, breaking the windows, and slashing tires. Finally police arrived, and the bus managed to depart. But the mob pursued it in cars. One car got ahead of the bus and prevented it from gathering speed. About six miles out, one of the tires went flat, and the bus was forced to pull over to a gas station.

Within minutes the pursuing mob was again hitting the bus with iron bars. Their rear window was broken and a bomb was hurled inside. Suddenly the vehicle became filled with thick smoke. The passengers, including the freedom riders, ducked toward the floor in order to breathe. A few climbed out of a window. Some tried to get out of the door, but it was being held shut from the outside.

As Henry Thomas tells it, he shortly succeeded in pushing the door open. As he stepped out, he walked toward a man who looked friendly. Suddenly the man wielded a club from behind his back and struck him over the head.

All the passengers managed to escape before the bus burst into flames and was totally destroyed. The extent of the destruction was shown in the grim newspaper photos. . . . Policemen, who had been standing by, belatedly came on the scene. . . .

When the Trailways bus carrying our contingent arrived in Anniston an hour later, the other passengers learned of what had happened to the Greyhound bus and discontinued their trips. While waiting for the bus to proceed, we heard the sirens of ambulances taking the injured to the hospital, but we did not know what had happened.

We learned of it only when eight hoodlums climbed aboard and stood by the driver as he made a brief announcement. He concluded by stating that he would refuse to drive unless the Negroes in our group moved to the formerly segregated rear seats. They remained quietly in their front seat. The hoodlums cursed and started to move them bodily to the rear, kicking and hitting them. . . .

Walter Bergman, who is a retired professor, and I were seated toward the rear. We moved forward and tried to persuade the hoodlums to desist. We, too, were pushed, punched, and kicked. I found myself face downward on the floor of the bus. Someone was on top of me. I was bleeding. Bergman's jaw was cut and swollen. None of us realized that he also had received a crushing blow on the head which would bring him close to death. . . .

Finally, all of our group—whites and Negroes—and one Negro passenger who had not gotten off, had been forced to the back of the bus. The hoodlums . . . sat in the very front. . . . At that point the driver agreed to proceed to Birmingham. . . .

Upon arrival in Birmingham, I could see a mob line up on the sidewalk only a few feet from the loading platform. Most of them were young—in their twenties. Some were carrying ill-concealed iron bars. . . . All had hate showing on their faces. . . .

Now we stood on the Birmingham unloading platform with the segregationist mob only a few feet away. I did not want to put Person in a position of being forced to proceed if he thought the situation too dangerous. When I looked at him, he responded by saying simply, "Let's go."

As we entered the white waiting room . . . we were grabbed bodily and pushed toward the alleyway leading to the loading platform. As soon as we got into the alleyway and out of sight of onlookers in the waiting room, six of them started swinging at me with fists and pipes. Five others attacked Person a few feet ahead. Within seconds, I was unconscious on the ground. . . .

When I regained consciousness, the alleyway was empty. Blood was flowing down my face. I tried to stop the flow with a handkerchief but it soon became soaked. A white soldier came out of the waiting room to see whether I needed help. I declined, because I suddenly saw Bergman coming from the loading platform. He helped me to get a cab. . . .

The first thing Reverend Shuttlesworth said to me as I got out of the cab was, "You need to go to a hospital. . . ." I did not realize how seriously I had been hurt. My head required fifty-three stitches. . . .

Finally, after eight hours in the hospital, I was discharged, my face and head half hidden by bandages. . . . I said that for the most severely beaten rider to quit could be interpreted as meaning that violence had triumphed over nonviolence. . . . My point was accepted, and we started our meeting to plan the next lap. . . .

4.7 Though determined to continue, Peck and most of the other original riders were unable to do so because of their wounds. But, with Diane Nash leading the way, SNCC and other independent activists rushed to the deep South to complete the rides. They did so because, as Nash proclaimed: "We can't let violence overcome" (Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters, *p. 430). Among those to take part in the rides were numerous students from Howard University, especially members of the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), a SNCC affiliate. In the following article, William Mahoney, a member of NAG, explained his decision to join the rides. Mahoney and hundreds of others landed in jail because of a deal struck between Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. The governor agreed to protect the riders; in exchange, neither Robert nor John Kennedy intervened when Barnett proceeded to arrest the riders on trumped-up charges, such as trespass.*

4.7 William Mahoney, "In Pursuit of Freedom," *Liberation* (September 1961), pp. 7-11.

Monday, May 15th . . . , I saw pictures of a fellow Howard student with whom I had participated the past year and a half in the Non-Violent Action Group (N.A.G.) of Washington, leaving a flaming bus on the outskirts of Anniston, Alabama. The caption said that the student, whose name was Henry Thomas, had been struck on the head as he left the bus. I was infuriated. . . .

Late one evening, two members of N.A.G., Paul Detriecht and John Moody, called at my room to say goodbye before leaving for Montgomery. Paul and John joined the Freedom Riders. . . . [From Montgomery] Paul called N.A.G. and pleaded for as many as possible from the District to come down. . . . The project seemed to be at its most trying stage and my brothers in the South needed every person they could possibly muster, so I decided to go. I could quit the 60-cent-an-hour job and either take exams early or have them put off until I returned. . . .

I knew that my parents would oppose my decision, so I wrote them a letter of explanation (which I mailed while already on the way to

Alabama). I consoled myself with the thought that all revolutions have created such conflicts within families. . . . At 11 P.M. on Friday, May 26th, Frank Hunt, also a N.A.G. member, and I boarded a Greyhound bus in Washington with tickets for Montgomery.

. . . During our one-day journey Frank and I discussed race problems and eavesdropped on other passengers's conversations. An Air Force man just back from overseas sat in front of us talking to three other white passengers about the Freedom Riders. The consensus was that the integrationists should be hung from the nearest tree. . . . At one point a woman spoke loudly about the hardship she was suffering as a Negro, saying that she was the last hired at a job, the worst paid and the first fired. She complained about the rents one had to pay even to live in a slum. The whites in the front showed no reaction to the woman's loud despair. It was as though the bus riders were from two different worlds, the inhabitants of each being invisible to those of the other. . . .

At 7:00 Sunday Morning [May 28th], we entered the Montgomery bus station amidst a confusion of photographers, reporters, National Guardsmen and bus passengers. The white lunch counter was closed before we arrived and when we entered the colored waiting room, its lunch counter was quickly shut down.

With two rifle-carrying Guardsmen in the front seat and jeeps leading and following the bus we sped to the border. Waiting rooms at all stops along the way were closed. At the state line the commanding officer of the Guard boarded the bus and in a pleasant voice wished us luck, saying that we could expect a long stay in Mississippi. . . .

As we rolled toward Jackson, every blocked-off street, every back road taken, every change of speed caused our hearts to leap. Our arrival and speedy arrest in the white bus station in Jackson, when we refused to obey a policeman's order to move on, was a relief. A paddy wagon rushed us down the street to the police station.

While being interrogated I asked the detective if he knew that legally and by the moral standards America professes to the world we had a right to act as we did and that his actions were helping to tear down any respect that the world might have had for our country. He said that this might be so but that the South had certain traditions which must be respected.

On Tuesday, we were taken across the street to the county jail and locked up with the first group to have been arrested in Jackson. I had finally caught up with Henry Thomas, John Moody, and other friends. . . .

[The Riders were subsequently moved to Parchman Penitentiary.] The thirty or more of us occupied five cells and dining halls on the top floor. At night we slept on large bags of cotton and were locked in small, dirty, blood splattered, roach-infested cells. Days were passed in the hot, overcrowded, dining room playing cards, reading . . . and singing. . . .

On Saturday, June 24th the guards decided that the Freedom Riders' singing was too loud and took the mattresses away as punishment. At first this was taken as a joke and songs were made up about the incident, but after three days of sleeping on a cement floor or a steel shelf with an air-conditioning system on full blast the cell block became silent and gloomy. Another time when the Riders sang too loud for the guards, six of them were dragged down the hall with wrist-breakers (clamps tightened upon their wrists) and thrown into dark six-by-six boxes for a couple of days. As the spunky fellows were being taken to solitary they sang, "I'm Going to Tell God How You Treat Me."

When fellow prisoner Jim Farmer, national director of CORE, went before the superintendent to protest the treatment he was told that if we didn't cooperate conditions would deteriorate. A request was made for a written statement of rules to define what was meant by cooperation, but none was ever issued. Consequently, the imprisoned men drew up their own code of minimum standards for they felt that although they were obligated to respect the authorities, the authorities had an obligation to treat them as human beings. . . .

Most felt that the search for order and meaning in life could best be carried out in group devotion, where sermons could be delivered and group singing takes place. Phrases pertaining to the Freedom Rides were put to the tune of Negro spirituals, work songs, and union songs. When Henry Thomas finished with Harry Belafonte's "Day Oh," it became:

> Freedom, Freedom/Freedom come and I gonna go home.
> I took a trip down Mississippi way (Hey)
> Freedom come and I gonna go home.
> Met much violence on Mother's Day (Hey)
> Freedom come and I gonna go home. . . .

At 5 P.M. on July 7th those remaining of the first and second groups were released on appeal bonds after 40 days in jail. When we left, the number of Freedom Riders in jail was close to a hundred.

Before parting for our various destinations we stood in a circle, grasped hands and sang a song called "We Will Meet Again." As I looked round the circle into my companions' serious faces and saw the furrowed brows of the 19- and 20-year old men and women, I knew that we *would* meet again.

4.8 While in jail, the civil rights movement matured. Sustained by freedom songs, the freedom riders forged bonds that would help them withstand further travails. Inspired by the courage of the SNCC volunteers, young blacks flocked to the direct action campaigns against Jim Crow. SNCC and CORE flourished, with both organizations promoting themselves as the most militant and committed civil rights organizations. Jealousies and rivalries materialized, particularly between SNCC and the NAACP and SCLC. Initially, however, these differences did not hamper the fight for equality. The following promotional piece, issued by CORE in 1963, captures the bravery and commitment of many activists and presents a subtle criticism of the more moderate and established civil rights organizations. In time this critique would grow in importance.

4.8 CORE, "All About CORE," 1963, CORE Papers.

Twenty-seven CORE Freedom Riders, many of them fresh from beatings with fists, boots and iron bars, stood in their cells in the Hinds County, Mississippi, jail and sang. They sang new versions of old folk and gospel songs such as "We Shall Overcome Someday." "For the first time in history," wrote James Farmer, CORE's national director and one of the jailed Freedom Riders, "the Hinds County jail rocked with unrestrained singing of songs about freedom and brotherhood."

For the first time, too, the words of "We Shall Overcome" began to acquire reality for opponents of segregation in the Deep South. The Freedom Rides eventually desegregated 120 interstate bus terminals. But more important, they showed that non-violent action worked in the fight against racial discrimination even in the deepest part of the South. The Rides, like the sit-ins before them, demonstrated that anyone who opposed segregation—student, housewife or laborer—could drive a nail in the coffin of Jim Crow. They spurred the rapid spread of civil rights activity throughout the South and the entire country.

By the spring and summer of 1963, thousands of Americans, tired of waiting for their fellow-citizens to honor the Bill of Rights, had carried their protests into the streets. . . . Jail became a mark of honor. America was learning what Thoreau meant 120 years before when Emerson asked him why he was in jail for refusing to pay a poll tax and he replied, "Why are you *not* here?"

. . . In the North, demonstrators protested against de facto segregation in housing, education and employment, and filled government offices in patient but determined sit-ins to gain more than campaign promises from liberal politicians. Here, too, many went to jail. And here, too, the progress made was a hint of the progress to come. . . .

For too long, and for too many people, "segregation," "civil rights" and "racial equality" had been abstractions. They had inspired meetings, speeches and, sometimes, violent emotions, but very little constructive action. . . .

By the time sit-ins attracted national attention in 1960, direct action had been enabling CORE members to fight discrimination in their own communities for 18 years. CORE's action projects have been carried out by local people whenever appropriate, and they have always been non-violent. Why non-violent? CORE seeks understanding, not physical victory. It seeks to win the friendship, respect and even support of those whose racial policies it opposes. People cannot be bludgeoned into a feeling of equality. Integration, if it is not to be tense and artificial, must, in CORE's view, be more than an armed truce. Real racial equality can be attained only through co-operation; not the grudging co-operation one exacts from a beaten opponent, but the voluntary interaction of two parties working toward a solution of a mutual problem.

CORE sees discrimination as a problem for all Americans. Not just Negroes suffer from it and not just Negroes will profit when it is eliminated. Furthermore, Negroes alone cannot eliminate it. Equality cannot be seized any more than it can be given. It must be a shared experience.

CORE is an inter-racial group. Membership involves no religious affiliation. It is open to anybody who opposes racial discrimination, who wants to fight it and who will adhere to CORE's rules. The only people not welcome to CORE are "those Americans whose loyalty is primarily to a foreign power and those whose tactics and beliefs are contrary to democracy and human values." CORE has only one enemy: discrimination, and only one function: to fight that enemy. It has no desire to complicate its task by acquiring a subversive taint, and it avoids partisan politics of any kind. . . .

A great deal has been achieved for civil rights through the courts, and legal action has an important place in the civil rights movement. But legal action is necessarily limited to lawyers. CORE's techniques enable large numbers of ordinary people to participate in campaigns to end discrimination.

Direct action has a value that goes beyond its visible accomplishments. To those who are the target of discrimination, it provides an alternative to bitterness or resignation and, to others, an alternative to mere expressions of sentiment. . . .