

CHARLES M. PAYNE

I'VE GOT THE LIGHT of FREEDOM

THE ORGANIZING
TRADITION AND THE
MISSISSIPPI
FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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Black freedom struggle
yet published."

DAVID J. GARROW
author of *Bearing
the Cross*

Chapter 8

Three

GIVE LIGHT AND THE PEOPLE
WILL FIND A WAY

The Roots of an Organizing Tradition

I believe in the right of people to expect those who are older, those who claim to have had more experience, to help them grow.

ELLA BAKER

We have plenty of men and women who can teach what they know; we have very few who can teach their own capacity to learn.

JOSEPH HART¹

IF SOME BLACK ACTIVISTS working in the South prior to the 1960s left an organizational heritage, others left a distinct philosophical heritage. Leadership among southern Blacks—in churches, on college campuses, within families—has frequently leaned toward the authoritarian. Taken as a group, Mississippi's Black activists before the 1960s reflected that traditional conception of leadership. They were shepherds; the people were to be cared for. Many of them liked being in charge and did not easily share authority, which led to some intramural squabbling among them when they should have been fighting the white folks.² At the same time, other activists across the South were evolving a philosophy of collective leadership. More than any other individual, Ella Jo Baker was responsible for transferring some of those ideas to the young militants of SNCC, but a number of experi-

enced southern activists held ideas similar to hers, and some of them also influenced SNCC directly or indirectly. If people like Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry tested the limits of repression, people like Septima Clark and Ella Baker and Myles Horton tested another set of limits, the limits on the ability of the oppressed to participate in the reshaping of their own lives.

Generalizing about the beliefs of these people risks oversimplifying them.³ The safest thing to say is that all of them had an expansive sense of the possibilities of democracy—an unrealistic sense of the possibilities, their critics would say. Highlander's statement of purpose, drafted by Mrs. Clark, speaks of "broadening the scope of democracy to include everyone and deepening the concept to include every relationship." Including everyone in democracy meant that the common assumption that poor people had to be led by their social betters was anathema. All three espoused a non-bureaucratic style of work, focused on local problems, sensitive to the social structure of local communities, appreciative of the culture of those communities. Above all else, perhaps, they stressed a developmental style of politics, one in which the important thing was the development of efficacy in those most affected by a problem. Over the long term, whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective was likely to matter less than whether the people in it came to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have some say-so in their own lives. Getting people to feel that way requires participatory political and educational activities, in which the people themselves have a part in defining the problems—"Start where the people are"—and solving them. Not even organizations founded in the name of the poor can be relied upon. In the end, people have to learn to rely on themselves.

SEPTIMA CLARK AND MYLES HORTON: DISCOVERING LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Septima Clark of South Carolina is best remembered for the Citizenship Schools she developed in conjunction with the Highlander Folk School. Born in 1898, her first name means "sufficient" in her mother's native Haiti.⁴ She grew up in Charleston, where her mother was a

washerwoman, her father a cook. In 1916, although she had only had the equivalent of two years of college—her parents could not afford more—she passed the teachers' examination. Since Black teachers could not teach in the public schools, she got a job on Johns Island, just off the coast from Charleston, where she and another teacher were responsible for 132 children of all ages. Johns is the largest of the Sea Islands, the coastal islands that traditionally have had Black-majority populations isolated from mainland culture. Most islanders lived a subsistence existence, even though many were landowners. Conditions on the island were primitive. There was little to do after work, so Septima started to spend part of her evenings teaching adults to read, just to occupy some time. She had few teaching materials and got into the habit of developing her own. In place of a blackboard, they used large drycleaner bags on which students wrote stories about their daily lives.

In 1918 someone came to the island talking about the NAACP, and she joined. In 1919 she returned to Charleston to teach in a private academy for Black children. With other NAACP members, she took part in a successful petition campaign to change the policy that prevented Black teachers from working in Charleston's public schools. Eventually hired by the Charleston schools herself, she continued working with the NAACP and a number of other civic groups including the YWCA. Working with these groups eventually brought her into contact with federal judge Waties Waring, arguably the most hated man in Charleston by the late 1940s. The product of eight generations of Charleston aristocracy, the son of a Confederate veteran, Waring had married an outspoken Yankee woman, had ruled that Black and white teachers had to receive the same pay, and in 1947 had ruled that Blacks could not be excluded from the Democratic primary. He let it be known that anyone trying to interfere with Black voters could expect to spend a long time in jail. On the day of the first election after his ruling he spent the day in court waiting, just in case anyone started trouble. After Mrs. Waring gave a speech at the Y in which she characterized anyone who supported white supremacy as mentally ill and morally defective, Mrs. Clark, who had been pressured to cancel the talk, became a friend of the Waring, a friendship that so frightened

the other teachers at Clark's school that they devoted part of a faculty meeting to trying to convince her not to associate with the Warings.⁵

In 1953 a coworker at the Y, looking for someplace in the South where Blacks and whites could meet together, went to the Highlander Folk School in the Tennessee mountains and came back telling Septima that she had to go see the place herself. Highlander was indeed worth seeing. Highlander is what sociologist Aldon Morris calls a movement halfway house, his term for change-oriented institutions, lacking a mass base themselves, that bring together a range of key resources—skilled activists, tactical knowledge, training techniques, networks of valuable contacts.⁶ It was not the communist training school the authorities assumed it to be, but it was a school for social activists.

Highlander was cofounded during the Depression by Myles Horton, who had grown up in a poor white sharecropping family in Tennessee. Horton saw Highlander as a school for the poor of Appalachia, “dedicated to developing its students’ capacities for both individual and collective self-determination,” a place where the “learned helplessness” of the poor would be replaced with a willingness to take more control over their own lives.⁷ In the 1930s, it organized and taught coal miners, millhands, timber cutters, and small farmers. Later the school was heavily involved in training labor organizers, as CIO industrial unions penetrated the South (an often uneasy relationship, given the differences in values between Highlander and the CIO). In the 1950s it became a very important meeting place and training center for civil rights leaders at all levels. Almost from its beginning, defying state law saying that Blacks and whites could neither eat together nor sleep in the same building, Highlander’s philosophy was interracial, a philosophy that frequently generated as much initial discomfort for Black visitors as for white ones. Many visitors testified that the experience of egalitarian living in an interracial situation had greater impact on them than the courses and workshops.

Highlander’s work was guided by the belief that the oppressed themselves, collectively, already have much of the knowledge needed to produce change: “If they only knew how to analyze what their experiences were, what they know and generalize them . . . they would

begin to draw on their own resources.”⁸ Thus, much of the burden of change is on the oppressed themselves.

Workshops at Highlander brought local leaders together to share experiences and to develop techniques that would, in the ideal cases, allow them to return home and develop the leadership potential of others. The emphasis on developing others was crucial to Highlander’s conception of leadership. According to Horton: “We debunk the leadership role of going back and telling people and providing the thinking for them. We aren’t into that. We’re into people who can help other people develop and provide educational leadership and ideas, but at the same time, bring people along.”⁹

Highlander was also committed to a vision of change that respected the culture of the people with whom they were working. People need something for the spirit and soul. Music and singing were an integral part of the Highlander experience. Horton’s first wife, Zilphia, played a particularly important role in preserving the music of the people. Highlander worked with and in providing the music that helped give Highlander workshops their emotional definition. In later years a similar role would be played by Guy and Candie Carawan. It is not accidental that “We Shall Overcome” was introduced to the modern civil rights movement at Highlander workshops.¹⁰

Many people who were to become well-known civil rights leaders—E. D. Nixon and Rosa Parks of Montgomery, James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth, C. T. Vivian, Bernard Lafayette, Bernard Lee, Dorothy Cotton, Andy Young, Hosea Williams of SCLC, John Lewis, Bob Zellner, Marion Barry, and Diane Nash of SNCC—attended Highlander workshops, and many of them attended regularly.¹¹ Mrs. Clark first visited Highlander in 1954, and she became a regular, carrying other people to workshops there and then directing workshops herself. Never a retiring woman, she said her visits to Highlander made her “more vociferous” and “more democratic.” She first met Rosa Parks while directing a workshop on leadership. Mrs. Parks, quiet and soft-spoken, was quite a contrast to the more outgoing Mrs. Clark. Mrs. Parks had difficulty believing that she was in an interracial environment where she could safely say whatever she felt. She had been working with the NAACP Youth Council at home and had had

some success with the group, enough so that she had begun to get threatening phone calls. She came to Highlander to get more ideas about what she could do with her young people. Highlander workshops often began by asking the participants what they wanted to learn and ended by asking them what they planned to do when they got home. Mrs. Parks wasn't optimistic about the latter. "Rosa answered that question by saying that Montgomery was the cradle of the Confederacy, that nothing would happen there because blacks wouldn't stick together. But she promised to work with those kids." Three months, later, of course, she sparked the Montgomery bus boycott.¹² Septima Clark remembered the 1955 workshop Mrs. Parks attended as a pivotal one. Previously, Negroes had made up only ten to fifteen percent of workshop participants and had tended not to be very outspoken. At this workshop, they were half the participants, and they lost much of their reluctance to speak out, setting two patterns that would continue.¹³

In 1955, the South Carolina legislature, reacting to *Brown*, decided that no city or state employee could belong to the NAACP. Refusing to resign her membership, Mrs. Clark lost her job. Being such a controversial figure—a friend of the despised Warings, an NAACP member, and someone who consorted with the subversives at Highlander—she could find no other work and suffered from the usual harassments and threats. Her sorority, AKA, was supportive enough to give her a testimonial in recognition of her courage, but her sorors took care not to be photographed with her. After failing in her attempts to organize other Black teachers to fight for their rights, she accepted a job at Highlander as director of workshops, starting in 1956. She was so emotionally drained from the experience of losing her job that it was three months before she could sleep well at nights.¹⁴

Highlander had tried with little success to get people from the Sea Islands to attend workshops. Islanders were not anxious for contact with outsiders. Mrs. Clark had the advantage of having taught on one of the islands, and she was able to get Esau Jenkins, whom she had taught on Johns Islands, to start coming to workshops. He came with a practical problem. By the middle 1950s, he had become a respected leader on the island.¹⁵ He had run for school board on Johns Island

and had been defeated because so few Blacks were registered. A small farmer, Jenkins supplemented his income with a bus he used to carry tobacco workers and longshoremen to work in Charleston. One of the women who rode the bus, Mrs. Alice Wine, told him she had only been to the third grade, but she'd like to register if someone would teach her how to read and write. Jenkins's bus became a rolling school. He gave copies of the South Carolina laws on registering and voting to his passengers and went over them line by line. Mrs. Wine, who couldn't read but had a phenomenal memory, just memorized the section of the constitution that potential voters were tested on. She registered successfully, but she still wanted to learn to read and asked Jenkins what school she could go to. The local school principal and a minister that Jenkins approached were both afraid to get involved, and so he turned to Highlander.

With fifteen hundred dollars borrowed from Highlander, Jenkins's group bought and fixed up a run-down building. They called themselves the Progressive Club and had about twenty-six members. They set up the front part of the building like a grocery store, partly so that the white folks wouldn't learn that it was a school. The two back rooms were used for teaching. With the profits from the grocery store, they were able to pay back Highlander's loan. Mrs. Clark was too occupied at Highlander to be the teacher so she recruited her cousin, Bernice Robinson. Robinson was a beautician who had recently moved back to Charleston after living in the North and had worked with Esau Jenkins on a voter-registration campaign, which gave her a certain status on the island. "Esau could be trusted," wrote Mrs. Clark, "and because he could be trusted, he could introduce us to numbers of others who would trust us."¹⁶

For Mrs. Clark, the fact that the islanders did trust Mrs. Robinson and would not think her high-falutin' more than outweighed Robinson's lack of teaching experience. It was not that easy for an outsider to be trusted on the island. Septima Clark was very familiar with the patterns of class and color snobbery among Blacks in the area and the defensiveness these traditions engendered in the poor. Even though she was a teacher and had studied in the North, the light-skinned Negro upper class of Charleston would hardly have considered her a

social equal. Similarly, people from the islands expected Blacks from the mainland to look down on them. That Bernice Robinson was socially accepted on the island was the important thing for Mrs. Clark, not her educational credentials.

Robinson didn't feel competent to be anybody's teacher, so Horton and Clark had to persuade her. Robinson quickly learned that grade-school material did not interest adults, so she worked directly from the voter-registration forms, going over and over short sections of the documents and teaching students to write their names in cursive. The teaching style developed by Robinson and Clark emphasized the direct experiences of the students. Students would talk about whatever they had done that day—started a vegetable plot, dug potatoes; their stories would be written down, becoming the text for the reading lesson. Discussion deliberately emphasized “big” ideas—citizenship, democracy, the powers of elected officials. The curriculum stressed what was interesting and familiar and important to students, and it changed in accordance with the desires of students. When students said they wanted to learn to write money orders, that was added; when some said they wanted to learn to use sewing machines, that was added. Eventually, Robinson began trying to teach skepticism as well, trying to get students to read newspaper stories critically and look cautiously at the promises of politicians.¹⁷

At first classes were held four hours a week for two months, January and February, the time of year when people didn't have much to do in the fields. The initial group brought others, and the following year class was held for three months, and another class was started on a nearby island. From the first class of fourteen people—three men and eleven women—eight were able to get registered.¹⁸ It wasn't long before they had five schools going on various islands.

It took the local whites three years to figure out what was going on, although the increasing numbers of Blacks successfully registering caused a minor panic. Eventually, a white visitor to Johns Island found out about the original school and told the papers. By this time, Black islanders didn't care what white people knew.

By 1961, thirty-seven Citizenship Schools had been established in the islands and on the nearby mainland, and Black voting strength had

increased significantly. The aim of the schools, though, was to create involved citizens, not just voters. Citizenship-School students helped start a credit union, a nursing home, a kindergarten, and a low-income housing project.¹⁹

Highlander was responsible for spreading the Citizenship Schools across the South. At first Mrs. Clark and Horton disagreed on some aspects of the program. He thought that registration campaigns could be conducted without so much emphasis on basic literacy. She disagreed, and they had several shouting matches over the issue, with Clark winning in the end. As the idea of the schools spread, she recruited and trained teachers. By the spring of 1961, she had trained eighty-one of them. About that time, the program was turned over to SCLC. At the time Highlander was afraid that it was about to be shut down by the state and, in any case, Highlander was more interested in starting programs than in administering them.²⁰ Although he was being lobbied by both Ella Baker and Septima Clark and the schools were registering voters across the South in far greater numbers than any SCLC program, Martin Luther King was reluctant to take the program over. Eventually, though, nearly ten thousand people would be trained as teachers, and as many as two hundred schools would be in operation at one time, “in people's kitchens, in beauty parlors, and under trees in the summertime.”²¹

Under SCLC, Clark continued to treat literacy and registration as means to an end, not as ends in themselves. “The basic purpose of the Citizenship Schools is discovering local community leaders,” she said. It was particularly important that the schools had “the ability to adapt at once to specific situations and stay in the local picture only long enough to help in the development of local leaders. . . . It is my belief that creative leadership is present in any community and only awaits discovery and development.”²² Her philosophy of recruiting teachers continued to reflect a concern for how they fit in with the local social structure:

The teachers we need in a Citizenship School should be people who are respected by the members of the community, who can read well aloud, and who can write their names in cursive writing. These

are the ones that we looked for. . . . We were trying to make teachers out of these people who could barely read and write. But they could teach.²³

Even so pre-eminent middle-class an activity as teaching the poor can and should provide a large share of the leadership. Similarly, Horton, in his work with miners, had learned that they learned best when taught by other miners. "Formally educated staff members, it turned out, were never as effective in teaching as the people themselves, once they saw themselves as teachers." Horton never tried to teach Citizenship classes himself and "discouraged other well-meaning whites from doing so, too."²⁴ With SCLC, Mrs. Clark continued to exhibit a sensitivity to class privilege. She once chided Andrew Young for sitting down to breakfast at a time when there wasn't enough to share with the students. What he needed to do, she told him, was either find money to buy them breakfast or go hungry with them. She criticized Ralph Abernathy for his habit of being late for services at his own church in order "to flaunt his mastery over the common people." She spoke disdainfully of Negro women who came to civil rights meetings to play bourgeois games. "They were going to *be* there because they were going to show those beautiful clothes and those summer furs and the like, but they weren't listening."²⁵

She was never entirely comfortable as a member of SCLC's executive staff. SCLC's conception of leadership was very different from her own. It bothered her that people all around the country would ask King to come lead marches, so "I sent a letter to Dr. King asking him not to lead all the marches himself, but instead to develop leaders who could lead their own marches. Dr. King read that letter before the staff. It just tickled them; they just laughed."²⁶

Mrs. Clark idolized King, but she wasn't blind to his limitations, including his inability to treat women as equals. Women within SCLC circles were expected to neither ask nor answer questions, and that expectation applied to the wives of the leadership as well as to staff. "Mrs. King and Mrs. Abernathy would come and they were just like chandeliers, shining lights, sitting up, saying nothing." She was un-

willing to play chandelier herself, but it didn't make any difference. In executive staff meetings, "I was just a figurehead. . . . Whenever I had anything to say, I would put up my hand and say it. But I did know that they weren't paying any attention."²⁷

Septima Clark's Citizenship Schools became an important organizing tool for younger activists in Mississippi and virtually everywhere else in the South. They were a relatively non-threatening way to get people involved in the broader movement. Once you bring people together to talk about literacy, you can get them to talk about a great many other things. Once the schools became funded, they became a source of income for people fired from their jobs because of activism. Highlander also continued to be an important source of support for SNCC. Indeed, before SNCC launched its first statewide registration campaign in Mississippi, Highlander conducted a week-long training workshop for them. Mrs. Clark and Highlander had evolved a distinctive way of thinking about the process of social change. Through long experience working with impoverished communities, they had developed a faith in the ability of communities of the poor to provide much of the leadership for their own struggle and concrete ideas about how that ability could be nurtured. That faith and those ideas were shared by Ella Baker.

ELLA BAKER: "STRONG PEOPLE DON'T NEED
STRONG LEADERS"

Writing about the students he knew at Howard University in 1962, SNCC's Cleveland Sellers says that when he tried to talk politics with the guys in his dorm, they would grunt and change the subject. "They were much more interested in cars, fraternities, clothes, parties and girls" and the high-paying jobs they expected to have after graduation.²⁸ Yet the turbulent sixties were born among just such students. In Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, four freshmen at North Carolina A & T College decided to go to the local Woolworth's and remain at the lunch counter until they were served. They were not served, although they stayed until closing time, but word of what they had done got back to campus before they did. The next day

they were joined by twenty more students. Within a few days, even though sit-in demonstrations had spread to more stores, there were more students who wanted to sit in than there were places for them to sit. Within two weeks, sit-ins and the boycotts that frequently accompanied them had spread to fifteen cities in five states.²⁹

By the end of March, students on at least twenty-one northern college campuses had become involved, usually by picketing or boycotting the northern outlets of some of the chains being hit in the South. Woolworth's and Kress were popular targets. Within the first year and a half, sit-ins had taken place in more than one hundred cities in twenty states, involving an estimated seventy thousand demonstrators and thirty-six hundred arrests.³⁰ Activity tended to be most intense in urban areas and in border states. Non-urban areas of Deep South states like Mississippi were not much affected.

The sit-ins had substantial impact. Some desegregation took place in at least one hundred cities. Although he did not support the sit-ins at first, Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution* eventually came to feel that "without question," the sit-ins were "productive of the most change. . . . No argument in a court of law could have dramatized the immorality and irrationality of such a custom as did the sit-ins."³¹

At the beginning some, probably most, of the young people involved thought that merely dramatizing injustice would be enough to produce change. It was seen as an aggressive form of moral suasion. However, the sit-ins, like the other forms of direct-action politics that were to develop around them, also meant directly interfering with the life of a community so that it had to respond. If the powers-that-be would not respond to moral suasion, they would have to do something about disruption.

Taking a view similar to that of Jo Freeman, Aldon Morris has explained that the rapid spread of the sit-ins was made possible by pre-existing movement networks. Starting in the early 1950s, what Morris calls local movement centers had begun developing in the South, most of them church-connected and largely church-financed. Montgomery, Alabama, was the most widely known, but there were also centers in Birmingham, Baton Rouge, Nashville, and Petersburg, Vir-

ginia, among other places. After 1957, many of these centers would be connected under the auspices of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. During the first few weeks of sit-in activity in early 1960, leaders from these centers helped spread the idea by contacting student leaders around the South, by providing bail funds, meeting places, and contacts with adults experienced in nonviolence as ideology and practice. The support of these older activists was important in part because the Black colleges themselves, frequently dependent on white economic or political support, were not always free to support the burgeoning movement. Protesting students were often suspended or expelled from publicly supported Black colleges. Dr. King was among the adults involved in furthering the spread of the movement, as were Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham, Wyatt Tee Walker of Petersburg, and Floyd McKissick of North Carolina. Another supportive adult was the omnipresent Ella Baker. After using her enormous contact network to encourage the spread of the movement, she went on to play a critical role in shaping and stabilizing this massive outpouring of activist energies, a role understandable in the context of her long activist history.

James Forman, the most important administrator in SNCC during its early years, has said that without Ella Baker, "there would be no story of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee."³² When she was asked to account for her lengthy activist career, Miss Baker often launched into a description of growing up in rural Virginia and North Carolina just after the turn of the century. Like Medgar Evers, she took considerable pride in being from a family with explicit traditions of defiance and race pride, but her reconstructions of her childhood also emphasize a family tradition of just being concerned about people, being involved in one's community.

She grew up hearing stories about slavery from her maternal grandmother, a light-skinned house slave, a daughter of the man who owned her. Miss Baker's grandmother had refused to marry the equally light-skinned man chosen for her by her mistress. For that, she was whipped and demoted to work in the fields, but she married the man she wanted to marry, a dark-skinned man, a slave on the same plantation, a man proud of being Black almost to the point of

conceit. That kind of pride was not uncommon among the people who raised Ella Baker: "There was pride in Blackness. Even lighter skinned people wanted to be identified with being Black."³³ After the Civil War, her grandfather either bought or leased a large section of the plantation he had worked as a slave and tried to create a model Black community. He broke up the land into various-sized plots—twenty, thirty, forty acres—and settled members of the extended family on them. He was known to mortgage his own farm after the local rivers flooded, so that he could buy food for other families.

Ella Baker's mother was a good public speaker and an ardent church worker active in the efforts of local missionary societies. "I became active in things largely because my mother was active in the field of religion."³⁴ Her mother, like Clark's, was a strict disciplinarian who wasn't too concerned with listening to the opinions of children. Miss Baker had a more playful relationship with both her father and grandfather. Her grandfather, laconic with the rest of the world, liked to talk to her and listen to her. She was a baseball-playing tomboy, but her grandfather called her "Grand Lady" and took her on long horse-and-buggy rides, during which they discussed issues large and small. When he preached, he set up a big chair for her in front of the congregation, right next to his own seat. Her father was a waiter on the ferry that ran between Norfolk and Washington. With him, she could have a discussion, the kind of exchange of opinions that was seldom possible with her mother. Before she was out of grade school, she had acquired both a local reputation as an effective public speaker and a degree of skepticism about the real value of oratory. Her father, well aware of how highly Blacks valued good public speaking, used to speak derisively about preachers who were strong on style but, when you thought about what they said, there wasn't much substance.

She once described her childhood as a kind of family socialism.³⁵ Surrounded by kin, it was taken for granted that food, tools, homes, and responsibility for children would be shared.

Where we lived there was no sense of social hierarchy in terms of those who have, having the right to look down upon, or to evaluate as a lesser breed, those who didn't have. Part of that could have re-

sulted . . . [from] the proximity of my maternal grandparents to slavery. They had known what it was to not have. Plus, . . . [we had] the "Christian" concept of sharing with others. . . . Your relationship to human beings was far more important than your relationship to the amount of money that you made.³⁶

By her own interpretation, having been raised with an abiding sense of community was one of the motive forces behind her activism and

helped to strengthen my concept about the need for people to have a sense of their own value and *their* strengths and it became accentuated when I began to travel in the forties for the National Association of Colored People. . . . As people moved to towns and cities, the sense of community diminished.³⁷

Her model of the Good Life was not derived from the lifestyle of middle-class whites, as it was for some of her NAACP colleagues, nor from any pre-cut ideological scheme, as it was for some of her Marxist acquaintances. During the decades when Blacks were fleeing the South, physically and often emotionally, she was trying to recreate the spirit of the self-sufficient, egalitarian people who raised her.³⁸ Like the people at Highlander, she found in folk culture sources of strength, not something to be ashamed of.

She attended both high school and college at Shaw University in Raleigh, finishing as valedictorian of the class of 1927, with nearly twice the number of credits needed to graduate. Scholarship aside, the administration was undoubtedly glad to see her leave; she had been protesting the school's restrictive dress code for students, its policy of having students sing Negro spirituals for white visitors, and its policy of forbidding men and women students from walking across campus together.³⁹ She claimed to have left college with conventional notions of personal success, but that seems to have included a desire to be socially useful.⁴⁰ After graduation she wanted either to study sociology at the University of Chicago—sociology was still thought of as a helping occupation—or become a medical missionary. The family's financial situation would not allow her to do either, so in the summer

of 1927, she migrated to New York, staying with a cousin her mother had raised. In New York, despite her record at Shaw, she could only find factory work and waitressing jobs. Her mother wanted her to go into teaching, but Miss Baker didn't want to do that, partly because a Black woman with a degree was expected to teach, partly because too many of the teachers she had known had been fearful people, afraid to have an opinion on anything or take a stand on anything lest they lose their jobs. She valued her opinion more than that.

Ideas were easier to find than jobs. The smorgasbord political environment of the city intrigued her:

I went everywhere there was discussion. New York was not as hazardous as it now is. You could walk the streets at three in the morning. And so wherever there was a discussion, I'd go. . . . And maybe I was the only woman or the only black, it didn't matter. . . . You see, New York was the hotbed of—let's call it radical thinking. . . . Boy, it was *good*, stimulating!⁴¹

Her community involvement started almost as soon as she got to New York. In 1928, she organized a Negro History Club at the 135th street YMCA in Harlem. Between 1929 and 1932, she was on the editorial staffs of at least two newspapers, the *American-West Indian News* and *Negro National News*.

Given her childhood, organizing economic cooperatives probably had a natural appeal. Around 1930 she was among several young Negroes who wrote responses to a column in one of the Negro newspapers urging Negroes to form cooperatives. The young people formed the Young Negroes' Cooperative League, which proceeded to establish stores, buying clubs, housing developments, coop restaurants and other cooperative economic ventures in Black neighborhoods up and down the East Coast, as far west as Omaha, as far south as New Orleans. For the first two years, she was the League's national director, and in one form or another she was involved with coops for at least a decade.

Largely forgotten now, there was vigorous interest among Blacks in cooperative ventures during the Depression. In a report written

around 1941, she was still optimistic about their potential, noting that the mortality rate was high but those that survived were often valuable parts of their communities and sometimes forced other businesses to modify policies toward Black customers and employees. The high mortality rate she attributed partly to the fact that many groups, impatient to get started, launched their enterprises with insufficient capital, and partly to insufficient business expertise, problems compounded by the fact that initially, Negro wage earners of marginal economic status had been the most interested segment of the community.⁴²

The Depression played an important part in her rejection of "the American illusion that anyone who is determined and persistent can get ahead."⁴³ She worked with a variety of labor organizations in Harlem, including the Women's Day Workers and Industrial League, which focused on the problems of domestic workers. At one point, Miss Baker pretended to be a domestic worker in order to investigate the employment conditions of Black domestics.⁴⁴ Her awareness of the problem of change-oriented organizations betraying their founding ideals may have stemmed from her work with labor organizations during this period. In the early days, she thought,

basically, the labor movement was meeting the need of the non-powerful. . . . But I'm afraid it succumbed, to a large extent to the failures of what I call the American weakness of being recognized and of having arrived and taking on the characteristics and the values even, of the foe.⁴⁵

In 1964, when Blacks in Mississippi were fighting to form their own political party, she warned an audience that "we must be careful lest we elect to represent us people who, for the first time, feel their sense of importance and will represent themselves before they represent you."⁴⁶ This woman who spent so much of her life working for and creating social change organizations had a generic distrust of organizations, especially large ones, and of those who led them.

By the Depression, she had a clear conception of what good political work meant that expressed itself even in relatively mundane

projects. From 1934 to 1936 she was connected with the Adult Education Program of the Harlem library. A letter of recommendation written some years later by the librarian summarized her accomplishments:

Her work was particularly good in organizing and acting as adviser to Young People's Forum. The group appealed to was from sixteen to twenty-six years of age, one not ordinarily touched by our education activities. Miss Baker successfully formed an active organization, which she brought into touch with other youth groups in the neighborhood and city. The public meetings included forums on social, economic, and cultural topics, literary and musical programs, debates and contests. Prominent speakers were brought into these meetings, but it was Miss Baker's plan always to place emphasis on increased participation by the members themselves. . . . Although Miss Baker left us for a better position, many of these people still show an active interest in the library's community program.⁴⁷

Organizing means helping others develop their own potentials, and participatory social forms are a key part of that process. She was already a seasoned organizer. When she applied for an NAACP position, her application noted that she had been involved with the "Harlem Adult Education Committee, the Workers' Education Movement, the Consumer Movement, on both a national and local scale" and had maintained at least a speaking acquaintance with the leaders of "the articulate mass and semi-mass movements" in the area. Starting with the NAACP as an assistant field secretary in 1941, she found herself in a job that meant extensive travel through some quite dangerous parts of the South, raising funds, organizing new branches, and trying to make old ones more effective. She spent about half of each year on the road—especially in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia. She organized at least three hundred membership drives and often traveled twelve thousand exhausting miles a year to do it. Returning to New York from one long trip, she wrote a friend:

I am too weary to think; and even if I could think, I could not write. This race saving business is. . . . But who am I to weary of the noble task of molding the destiny of 13,000,000?⁴⁸

From the viewpoint of the national office, no part of her job was more important than conducting the membership campaigns upon which the organization's financial health depended. Some branches had the leadership to conduct effective campaigns. This was partly a matter of whether local leaders were willing to do the necessary "spadework," to use one of Miss Baker's favorite terms. In Birmingham, for example, "we have as chairman the Rev. J. W. Goodgame, Jr. . . . He is all preacher, but unlike most of them, he knows that it takes work to produce and he will work. We spent the morning visiting barber shops, filling stations, grocery stores and housewives, getting people to work."

Most branches were depressingly dependent on help from the national office: "What promised to be a well organized campaign here (Jacksonville, Florida) has turned out to be the usual thing of literally starting from scratch." Starting from scratch meant identifying a campaign chair, identifying workers and dividing them into competing teams, outlining a publicity plan, lining up speakers, doing advance canvassing of community groups, businesses, fraternal groups, churches, social clubs, unions, all while refereeing the personality conflicts that debilitated many branches.⁴⁹ It is hard to imagine a more effective practicum in the emerging social structure of Black communities. After being exposed to a broad spectrum of ideologies and change-oriented organizations as a young woman exploring New York, she now was making innumerable contacts and friends among southern leaders while being exposed to the widest possible variety of grassroots leadership styles and organizing tactics.

What she saw ran the gamut:

Rome [Georgia] manifests all the expected symptoms of a branch that has had the same president for 24 years; and a community that thinks nothing can be done in the South that would challenge the

status quo; and hence makes of the NAACP meetings occasions for demonstrating literary, musical and oratorical abilities. However, I think our visit has served to "shock" them into greater action, as one "leader" put it.

Factionalization within branches required her to act as "Mother Confessor to the Little Folk":

The outlook for this trip does not appear very rosy. . . . For instance, how can I create an alert and dynamic branch in West Point [Virginia] where the not-more-than three hundred colored residents are divided by one "fraction" after the other, when I am here but for a day and a night?

On another Virginia trip:

All in all the branches visited were in a healthy state. Where they are engaged in securing school transportation, equal salaries for teachers or some local program . . . community response and support of the NAACP is no problem. The newer branches . . . exist largely on being new. Less active branches suffer from lack of functioning committees which places too much responsibility on the branch presidents or one or two officers and a lack of local programs which often springs from a lack of knowledge as to how to go about developing one.⁵⁰

The problem was deeper than not knowing how to develop a program. Many local officers thought their entire reason for being was to support the national office; running a local program didn't occur to them as an option:

As his answer to those who wish to know what the branch is doing locally Mr. Gilbert of Titusville [Florida] states that he hopes the time will never come when the branch will be *needed* locally (meaning, of course, that he hopes Brevard County will have no lynchings or race riots or the like).⁵¹

In an area where Blacks suffered every racial indignity—one nearby school had twenty-six classrooms for 1,876 students—local leadership saw no role for the branch in speaking to day-to-day injustices. It was a national problem, not just a southern one. While visiting the Albany, New York, branch, she repeatedly heard the opinion "that if cases were not brought to the branch, it could not be expected to seek them and that as long as it helped some unfortunate person in the South through its apportionment to the national office, the branch had fully justified itself."⁵² She steered the conversation to local matters. It turned out that while the local schools were technically integrated, Black youngsters were almost automatically shunted into the dummy academic track. She began helping them map out a strategy for changing that. Every branch could find some local concern to work on. "Any branch which says it has nothing around which it can build a program is simply too lazy to concern itself with things on its own doorstep."⁵³ As soon as you can say you've done something, anything, people will respond, because they want action, not talk.

From her perspective, the national organization was victimized by its own success. It was successful enough with its program of attacking the legal base of racial oppression that its very success blinded the organization to its shortcomings. The legal strategy "had to be" directed by lawyers and other professionals, leaving most of the huge mass base of the NAACP—four hundred thousand members by 1944—little meaningful role in the development of policy and program except raising funds and cheering the victories as they came. Her criticisms were similar to those of many Deep South leaders. She thought the leadership was overly concerned with recognition from whites, a concern that helped prevent the organization from taking a confrontational stance even when such a stance would have made tactical sense. She thought the program was overly oriented to a middle-class agenda and not nearly strong enough on the kinds of economic issues that meant most to working-class Black people. The Second World War, she thought, had generated a more aggressive mood among Negroes, and the organization seemed unwilling or unable to capitalize on it. Perhaps above all she found the organization too centralized; too many decisions were being made in New York. "The work of the

National Office is one thing but the work of the branches is in the final analysis the life blood of the Association."⁵⁴

She intended "to place the NAACP and its program on the lips of all the people . . . the uncouth *MASS*es included." She advocated regional offices so that local leaders would have a source of assistance nearer than New York. She suggested that at annual conferences, "instead of staff members making speeches, several delegates [from local branches] be designated to talk out of their branch experience." She argued that the overall structure of fieldwork in the Association made no sense. Three or four field workers were responsible for the whole country. They barely had time to organize membership campaigns, let alone help branches develop local programs. Getting the man or woman in the street need not be all that difficult if the organization made it a priority:

We must have the "nerve" to take the Association to people wherever they are. As a case in point, the mass-supported beer gardens, night clubs, etc. in Baltimore were invaded on a small scale. We went in, addressed the crowds and secured memberships and campaign workers. With the results that were well summed up in a comment overheard in one club, "You certainly have some nerve coming in here, talking, but I'm going to join that doggone organization."⁵⁵

Part of the problem, she maintained, was simple class snobbery. Like Septima Clark and Myles Horton, Miss Baker was sensitive to the way in which such class antagonisms, real or imagined, could undermine everything. An important part of the organizer's job was to get the matron in the fur coat to identify with the winhead and the prostitute, and vice versa. Significantly, she adds:

And so you have to break that [inability to identify] down without alienating them at the same time. The gal who has been able to buy her minks and whose husband is a professional, they live well. You can't insult her, you never go and tell her she's a so-and-so for taking, for *not* identifying. You try to point where her interest lies in

identifying with that other one across the tracks who doesn't have minks.⁵⁶

Everyone has a contribution to make. The organizer has to be aware of class exploitation, sensitive to class snobbery, without losing sight of the potential contribution to be made by those who do succumb to it. Just as one has to be able to look at a sharecropper and see a potential teacher, one must be able to look at a conservative lawyer and see a potential crusader for justice.

Given her populist stance, it is surprising that she became one of the Association's national officers. In April 1943, she was in Alabama when a letter from Walter White, national secretary of the Association, caught up with her, bringing the news that she had been appointed national director of branches. Despite her surprise ("Were I not more or less shock-proof," she wrote White, "I would now be suffering from a severe case of hypertension caused by your letter of the 15th"), she accepted the position and brought her agenda to it during the time when the Association was experiencing the most rapid growth it had known.⁵⁷

From the director's chair, she was able to push regionalization and to reorganize membership campaigns in order to leave field workers more time for working with branch programs. Perhaps most characteristically, she was able to establish a training program for local leaders. Her superiors were skeptical about how much demand there would be for such programs, but by late 1944 she had won permission to do one training conference on an experimental basis. The theme for that first conference was "Give Light and the People Will Find a Way." Response was so good that the conferences became a permanent feature of the Association's program. She ran at least nine more of them in the next year and a half, usually holding them over a weekend and typically attracting a hundred or more delegates each time.⁵⁸

Similar in structure and intent to Highlander workshops, the conferences (one of which was attended by Rosa Parks) were both skill-enhancing and consciousness-raising. Before they came, delegates were asked what issues they wanted addressed. What they asked for

ranged from basic issues of organizational development (getting committees to function, holding on to members, mounting publicity campaigns) to more substantive requests for information on what to do about police brutality or employment discrimination or about reintegrating veterans into the community. The conferences then presented other local leaders who had successfully addressed the same kinds of dilemmas or national officers with some pertinent expertise. At the same time they tried to help local leaders find more effective ways to attack local problems the conferences also tried to help them see how local issues were, inevitably, expressions of broader social issues. While she was never satisfied with the thoroughness of the conferences, delegates themselves seemed well pleased, as with the 1945 Texas delegates who praised their conference for "a wonderful fellowship and [the] contacts . . . and the many and varied benefits resulting from the exchange of experiences and expert information."⁵⁹

The conferences were a well-established feature of the Association's work when she resigned from the Association in May 1946. Her resignation letter gave three reasons for her leaving:

I feel that the Association is falling far short of its present possibilities; that the full capacities of the staff have not been used in the past; and that there is little chance of mine being utilized in the immediate future.

The letter registered her complaint about the "inclination to disregard the individual's right to an opinion" as well as the "almost complete lack of appreciation for the collective thinking of the staff," the latter witnessed by the paucity of staff meetings during the "critical and portentous" war years. She was also disturbed by a demoralizing atmosphere among the staff occasioned by a supervisory style tantamount to espionage. Her public reasons for resigning reflected the criticisms she had long been making of the Association—lack of imagination in program, lack of democracy in operating style.⁶⁰

She worked for a while as a fund-raiser for the National Urban League and continued to work with the NAACP at the local level. She became president of the New York City branch, which, in her phrase,

she tried to "bring back to the people" by moving the office to a location more accessible to the Harlem community and by developing a program in which Black and Hispanic parents actively worked on issues involving school desegregation and the quality of education. For her, the point was that the parents worked on the issues themselves rather than having civil rights professionals work on their behalf.⁶¹

In the mid-1950s, with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison, she helped organize In Friendship to offer economic support for Blacks suffering reprisals for political activism in the South. Even before the Montgomery bus boycott, the group had been discussing ways to develop the idea of a mass-based southern organization as counterbalance to the NAACP. When the boycott came, they saw it as the potential base for developing something. From that idea, developed by several groups simultaneously, grew the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

It is not clear whether without outside encouragement the local leadership in Montgomery would have sought to build something larger from the boycott. According to some observers, the momentum had stopped, and no plans were being made to carry on. When Baker asked Martin Luther King why he had let things wind down, she apparently offended him, not for the last time:

I irritated [him] with the question. . . . His rationale was that after a big demonstration, there was a natural letdown and a need for people to sort of catch their breath. I didn't quite agree. . . . I don't think the leadership in Montgomery was prepared to capitalize [on what] . . . had come out of the Montgomery situation. Certainly they had not reached the point of developing an organizational format for the expansion of it.⁶²

Levison and Rustin felt that the fledgling SCLC needed an experienced organizer and were able to talk a reluctant Ella Baker into taking the job.⁶³ Some of the ministers involved had substantial political experience before Montgomery—Martin Luther King was not among them, though—but none had the depth and breadth of political experience that Miss Baker could offer. In 1957, she went South

intending only a six-week stay. She wound up staying two and a half years, becoming the first full-time executive director. At the beginning, she used to joke, SCLC's "office" was her purse and the nearest phone booth. She was responsible for organizing the voter-registration and citizenship-training drives that constituted the SCLC program during this period, which she did largely by exploiting the network of personal contacts she had developed while with the NAACP.⁶⁴

As with the NAACP, she had trouble getting her own thinking built into the programs of SCLC. She wanted the organization to go into some of the hard-core counties where Blacks were not voting at all. Prophetically, she tried to get the organization to place more emphasis on women and young people, reflecting her sense of how southern Black organizations worked:

All of the churches depended, in terms of things taking place, on women, not men. Men didn't do the things that had to be done and you had a large number of women who were involved in the bus boycott. They were the people who kept the spirit going [the women] and the young people.⁶⁵

Being ignored was hardly a surprise to her:

I had known . . . that there would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister. . . . The basic attitude of men and especially ministers, as to . . . the role of women in their church setups is that of taking orders, not providing leadership.⁶⁶

Many SCLC preachers could go out and give stirring speeches about human equality and then come back and treat the office staff as if they were personal servants, never seeing the contradiction, although Miss Baker repeatedly pointed it out.

SCLC as it actually developed was a far cry from her sense of an effective social action organization. For all its faults, the NAACP had at least been a disciplined, tightly run ship, dependent on no one personality. SCLC's internal culture could be frustratingly disorganized, and its dependence on centralized, charismatic leadership was a lead-

ership style of which she was most skeptical. She was certainly thinking of King, but not just King, when she said:

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he *is* the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.⁶⁷

Under the best circumstances, traditional leadership creates a dependency relationship between the leaders and the led. Talk of *leading* people to freedom is almost a contradiction in terms. "Strong people," she said in one interview, "don't need strong leaders."⁶⁸

My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice. . . . People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves.⁶⁹

Thus, leadership should be a form of teaching, where the leader's first responsibility is to develop the leadership potential in others: "I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others."⁷⁰ Just as she was out of step with SCLC on the nature of leadership, she held her own opinions about nonviolence: "I frankly could not have sat and let someone put a burning cigarette on the back of my neck as some young people did. . . . If necessary, if they hit me, I might hit them back."⁷¹

She was similarly skeptical about the long-term value of demonstrations, preferring to emphasize the development of stable, ongoing or-

ganizations at the local level. Nor was she particularly enamored of large organizations, with their tendency to make the individual irrelevant. She thought that one of the most sensible structures for change-oriented organizations would have small groups of people maintaining effective working relationships among themselves but also retaining contact in some form with other such cells, so that coordinated action would be possible whenever large numbers really were necessary. For this reason, she admired the cell structure of the Communist Party: "I don't think we had any more effective demonstration of organizing people for whatever purpose."⁷²

It is impossible to say how deeply she was disturbed by being marginalized inside the organizations she worked for. She said many times that being shoved to the side and ignored did not necessarily bother her because her ego wasn't involved in that way. Such statements should probably be taken as reflecting more her ideals than her actual feelings. By this time, she had worked with any number of leaders and would-be leaders whose effectiveness was undercut by their egos, and it was only natural that she try to distance herself from them.

Her thinking was so fundamentally different from that of the men who ran SCLC that it is hardly surprising that few of her ideas were implemented. One of her suggestions did bear fruit. She tried to convince SCLC to build a program around the citizenship training schools that had been developed by Septima Clark and the Highlander Center. She was, again, unable to get this idea adopted while she was with SCLC, but after her departure in the summer of 1960, SCLC did take over the citizenship schools.

A memo she wrote in the fall of 1959 conveys some sense of her thinking just before the sit-ins began and just before she left SCLC. Addressed to SCLC's Committee on Administration, the memo tries to expand on the idea of SCLC as a "Crusade for Citizenship." To her, she says, the word *crusade* denotes "a vigorous movement, with high purpose and involving masses of people."⁷³ To be effective, she continues, such a movement must provide a sense of achievement and recognition for many people, particularly local leadership. The memo outlines four concrete steps by which such a crusade might be realized. SCLC, she suggests, could start searching out and sponsoring indigenous leadership, especially in the hard-core states. The examples

she gives are all of people working on voter registration in Mississippi, people whose work, she feels, could be strengthened with some of the resources SCLC could draw on. It sounds very much like an elaboration of the In Friendship idea—find someone who is already working and support that person.

The second idea calls for recruiting one thousand ministers to participate in house-to-house canvassing for voter registration. Each would be asked to give only eight hours a month and if each worked for ten months, she estimates, three hundred thousand persons could be contacted personally. The same emphasis on working directly with people is reflected in the third idea, a campaign to reduce illiteracy. She thinks SCLC could coordinate women's groups, church groups, and sororities in a campaign using the Laubach literacy method. The Laubach program asks that each person who learns teaches someone else, a feature she must have found appealing. She sees the idea as an investment in developing people: "The real value to S.C.L.C. would be that more people would be equipped with the basic tools (reading and writing) and would then be ready for effective social action." As with most of the other ideas, she mentions several people or groups who might be helpful, another reflection of her extensive contacts within politically active groups.

She notes that the literacy project could provide a "respectable" channel for helping the cause for those who would be uncomfortable being identified with the more militant aspects of the struggle—again, there is work for the matron in the fur coat. The final idea calls for training teams in techniques of nonviolent resistance, with the teams to be composed of persons committed to doing spadework in their local communities. She may not have been personally committed to nonviolence, but she was willing to use it. None of the ideas reserved a central place for Dr. King.

The memo was dated late October 1959. The sit-ins would start in February 1960, less than four months later. With Ella Baker's help the sit-ins would develop into an organization that would lead a more "vigorous" movement, involving masses of people; that would share her skepticism about the long-term value of centralized leadership; would stress the development of indigenous leadership and would work directly with the people; would go into the hard-core areas of

the rural South that other organizations had shunned and that would, far more than previous organizations, make it possible for women and young people to take leadership roles. The young people who formed SNCC were the product of a number of political influences, but Ella Baker's was among the most significant. In its organizational structure, its program, its ideology, early SNCC would be almost exactly the kind of organization Ella Baker had been trying to create for almost three decades.

The actual formation of SNCC took place in April of 1960. Soon after the sit-ins started, Ella Baker decided that they needed some coordination. With eight hundred dollars appropriated by SCLC, she arranged a conference of sit-in activists at Shaw University, her alma mater, where she was still in friendly contact with one of the deans. More than two hundred delegates attended the meeting, twice the number she had hoped for. The Reverend King spoke, as did the Reverend James Lawson, who had been working with a group of activist young people in Nashville. The fiery Lawson, the young people's Martin Luther King, as some called him, received a standing ovation from the students.⁷⁴ Miss Baker's own speech, titled "More Than a Hamburger" got a more polite reception. She tried to get them to see sit-ins as a wedge into a broader array of social problems affecting Blacks. She also warned the students against letting themselves be coopted by older groups. According to Julian Bond, students at that point just weren't ready to see past hamburgers: "To our mind, lunch-counter segregation was the greatest evil facing black people in the country."⁷⁵

Helping people see the connection between personal troubles and larger social issues was a central concern of Miss Baker's. It is also typical of her, though, that, having made the point, she apparently did nothing to push it, perhaps as a result of her feeling that it was important for young people to learn to think things through for themselves and decide things for themselves. Within a few years, the young people of SNCC had learned on their own to see more clearly the connections she was pointing them toward. A number of descriptions of her emphasize her willingness to let people think through issues on their own.

SNCC's Courtland Cox said:

The most vivid memory I have of Ella Baker is of her sitting in on these SNCC meetings that ran for days—you didn't measure them in hours, they ran days—with a smoke mask over her nose, listening patiently to words and discussions she must have heard a thousand times.

Much of her interaction with students took the form of her asking questions, sometimes quite aggressively, rather than telling them what they had to do. Still, she could get her points across, and one of her frequently stressed points was a warning against dogmatism. Mary King, who worked closely with Ella Baker, claims that:

At a very important period in my life, Miss Baker tempered my natural tenacity and determination with flexibility and made me suspicious of dogmatism. . . . She taught me one of the most important lessons I have learned in life: There are many legitimate and effective avenues for social change and there is no single right way. She helped me see that the profound changes we were seeking in the social order could not be won without multiple strategies. She encouraged me to avoid being doctrinaire. "Ask questions, Mary," she would say.

Similarly, Tim Jenkins notes that SNCC's original approach was just to attack all the ministers as Uncle Tom sell-outs. "One of the major contributions she made," he says, "was to help us see them in some way that was positive and [see] some way we could coordinate our efforts [with them] and be non-threatening to them."⁷⁶ Another of her contributions was the style of interpersonal interaction she modeled for the young people. One of the reasons Bob Moses wound up working for SNCC rather than SCLC was his feeling that Ella Baker cared about him as a person in a way that Martin Luther King did not. Diane Nash said, "When I left her I always felt that she'd picked me up and brushed me off emotionally." According to Moses, partly because of Miss Baker SNCC evolved an operating style with certain characteristics:

Whenever you want to really do something with somebody else then the first thing you have to do is make this personal connection, you have to find out who it is you're really working with. You really have to be interested in that person to work with them. . . . You saw that all across the South in the grassroots and rural people. That was their style and Ella carried that style into this other level. . . . She's sort of shepherding the SNCC people through this maze and in doing that part of the initial steps is always making these personal connections with all of them as they come through.⁷⁷

The Raleigh meeting reflected her distinctive style. She kept the press out of policy sessions. She was aware of the advantages of publicity, but she was aware of its drawbacks as well. She was also at pains to see that the representatives of northern colleges met separately from those of southern colleges. The students from the North were better educated, more articulate in terms of political and social philosophies. The southern students, in contrast, came with what she saw as "a rather simple philosophical orientation, namely of the Christian, non-violent approach,"⁷⁸ but they had been the ones actually involved, demonstrating their capacity for suffering and confrontation in ways that the northern students had not. They were the ones who suffered from the problem and it was important to her that they be allowed to determine the shape and substance of the response to it. The southern character of the movement had to be preserved.

If her attempts to get students to think in terms of a whole social structure that needed changing did not go very far, Miss Baker was more immediately successful in her attempt to keep one of the established civil rights groups from absorbing the new student movement. The established groups were very interested in doing so. CORE, which had never established an organizational base in the South, saw the student movement as the solution to that problem. The NAACP, which had been less than enthusiastic about the sit-ins at first, was interested in the fund-raising and public-relations advantages of being associated with the most interesting thing going on in the South. Many of the sit-inners had been NAACP youth chapter members. SCLC was also

interested and appeared to have the inside track. King was widely known and respected; SCLC had bankrolled the conference, it had been organized by one of their staff, and many SCLC leaders knew the student leaders and had worked with them over a period of time.

Miss Baker was adamantly opposed. She walked out of an SCLC staff meeting where strategies to bring the kids on board were being discussed. At the Raleigh meeting, her position prevailed, partly because some of the young people were skeptical of older leaders, even Dr. King, and partly because King, perhaps not wishing to look like he was trying to empire-build, did not push the issue as hard as he might have.⁷⁹ All this aside, Julian Bond is likely quite right when he says that the students were just excited about the possibility of running things themselves.

You were running your own little group. You had your own office.

You may have had your own bank account. *You* made decisions.

You sat down with whoever was the biggest nigger in town before you came along. You spoke with white folks, made them tremble with fear. It was very heady stuff.⁸⁰

It was also very idealistic stuff. The statement of purpose adopted a month later reflected southern Christian ideals, leavened with this new nonviolence:

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 the Judeo-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. . . . 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 overcomes 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.⁸¹

SNCC would never become a very large organization and would seldom receive as much publicity as some of the other civil rights organizations did. Nonetheless, it is not too much to say that it did a great deal to invent the sixties. Bernice Reagon calls the civil rights movement the “*borning struggle*” of the decade, in that it was the movement that stimulated and informed those that followed it. In the same sense, SNCC may have the firmest claim to being called the *borning* organization. SNCC initiated the mass-based, disruptive political style we associate with the sixties, and it provided philosophical and organizational models and hands-on training for people who would become leaders in the student power movement, the anti-war movement, and the feminist movement.⁸² SNCC forced the civil rights movement to enter the most dangerous areas of the South. It pioneered the idea of young people “dropping out” for a year or two to work for social change. It pushed the proposition that merely bettering the living conditions of the oppressed was insufficient; that has to be done in conjunction with giving those people a voice in the decisions that shape their lives. As SNCC learned to see beyond the lunch counter, the increasingly radical philosophies that emerged within the organization directly and indirectly encouraged a generation of scholars and activists to reconsider the ways social inequality is generated and sustained. SNCC’s entry, along with the expanded visibility of the similarly aggressive CORE, pressured older civil rights organizations into a reconsideration of tactics. It put the NAACP in a position where it was forced to support some direct-action projects, even though that ran counter to the organization’s essential style. Similarly, it is likely that SCLC’s return to direct action in 1962 has to be understood in the context of SNCC and CORE having stolen the initiative in 1960 and 1961. SNCC strengthened the negotiating position of the older organizations. In 1962 or 1963, even King was considered too radical by many of the powers-that-be. The development of a left

wing in the movement, essentially SNCC and CORE, made centrist organizations like SCLC more acceptable. Given a choice between the relatively reasonable ministers of SCLC or the sometimes brash, frequently uncompromising young people of SNCC, business and political leaders were likely to choose SCLC. It very soon became impossible to think of the NAACP as “*radical*” at all.⁸³

SNCC is so different from the better-known civil rights organizations that it is easy to see it as a sharp break with the past. In fact, while SNCC was primarily an organization of young people, it was an organization that owed a great deal to a much older generation of activists. Philosophically, the distinctive style of work SNCC would carry into the hard-core South drew directly and indirectly from the congealed experience of people like Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Myles Horton, experience acquired in exactly the kinds of communities the SNCC kids would work in.

The three of them took remarkably similar lessons from their experiences. They were all radical democrats, insistent on the right of people to have a voice in the decisions affecting their lives, confident in the potential of ordinary men and women to develop the capacity to do that effectively, skeptical of top-down organizations, the people who led them, and the egotism that leadership frequently engendered. Therefore, they were committed to participatory political forms because people develop by participating, not by being lectured to or told what to do. They might all be called localists in terms of how they thought programs should be developed but they were hardly parochial. They all thought that if one worked on “*local*” problems with an open mind, one was likely to learn that the roots of those problems lay elsewhere. They all liked to think of themselves as non-dogmatic, able to hold strong beliefs while remaining open to learning from new experiences. All of them found in southern folk culture, Black or white, a set of values more sustaining than those of bourgeois culture and a code of conduct for governing interpersonal relationships. What Bob Moses said about Ella Baker could have been said about all of them: they were taking the style and substance of the rural South and elevating it to another level. If many of Mississippi’s early Black leaders seemed to have an expansive sense of citizenship, these three

Eight

SLOW AND RESPECTFUL WORK

Organizers and Organizing

Bob and a band of ten or so organizers, all under 20, could go into a community in the morning . . . find their contacts, establish sleeping quarters and some means to eat, get a church and turn out the community for a mass meeting that same night.

JEAN WHEELER SMITH

Anytime a man come in my community and took the hardships that he took, if he was wrong, I better join with him anyway. He's ready to take a beating, [get] jailed, being bombed and get back on two feet. . . . I'm ready to join that fellow, wherever he is, right or wrong.

PERCY LARRY
McComb

I hope this [newsletter] will give you some idea of one phase of the activity in Amite County. It is less spectacular than marches and such, but, I feel, much more meaningful. Marches help to remove some of the external barriers to the Negro people's freedom. They do little to emancipate people from within. . . . It is by talking and acting together—on their own initiative and their own decision—that some of these bonds begin to be loosed.

MARSHALL GANZ
SNCC

What we did in essence was to try to do for the community people that we were working with what Ella had already done for us.

BOB MOSES¹

MORE HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the role of oratory in the movement than about the role of organizing. Historian David Garrow contends that the real emergence of a sustained, widespread movement in the South can be traced in many respects to SNCC's decision in the summer of 1961 to create a cadre of locally based, full-time, grass-roots organizers, marking the first time that indigenous activists had such day-to-day assistance available to them. "It was the firsthand experience of working with people, day in, day out, that educated both local activists and field secretaries to the item-by-item, conversation-by-conversation reality of what 'leadership' really amounted to in the civil rights movement."² We have overlooked the crucial level of leadership provided by the Sam Blocks, the Willie Peacocks, and the Hollis Watkins's of the South.

Howard Zinn has given us a portrait of the Mississippi field staff as it existed near the end of 1963.³ The forty-one workers comprised about one-third of the total SNCC staff in the Deep South. Thirty-five of them were Black. Two of the six whites and twenty-five of the Blacks came from the Deep South. The white youngsters and most of the northern Blacks came from middle-class homes; their fathers were ministers or teachers or civil-service workers. All of the southern workers came from homes where the mothers had been maids or domestic workers, and most of the fathers had been farmers, factory workers, truck drivers, and construction workers. The ages ran from fifteen to over fifty, but most were in their late teens or early twenties. The staff, then, was mostly Black, mostly southern, mostly from working-class backgrounds. The common image of SNCC as being an organization of middle-class college kids is misleading as applied to the Mississippi staff. It is true that many of them either were in college or were planning to go until the movement got in the way, but most of those represented the first generation in their families to attend college. They were an upwardly mobile group, but few were products of the traditional southern Black middle class. None of the early Greenwood organizers came from the most oppressed strata of Mississippi Blacks, but none of them came from backgrounds that could reasonably be called middle-class. Indeed, they came from backgrounds very much like those of the people they were trying to organize.

In Florida during the 1940s there was a school principal and NAACP officer named Harry T. Moore, who helped lead the fight to get equal pay for Black teachers in his area. He was fired and then, on Christmas Eve 1951, his home was bombed and he and his wife killed. Black people in the area did not soon forget the work he had done. According to Ella Baker:

You could go into that area of Florida, and you could talk about the virtue of the NAACP, because they knew Harry T. Moore. They hadn't discussed a whole lot of theory. But there was a *man* who served *their* interests and who *identified* with them.⁴

In the same way, for many people in Mississippi, attachment to the movement meant attachment to the particular individuals who represented it rather than to particular organizations or political strategies. Percy Larry, a McComb resident who supported SNCC's early initiatives in that town, said "I don't understand the position of some of the people that came here. I've never understood their position. But I would go along with them."⁵ You don't, he explained, have to understand everything about a man's politics to appreciate the "fullness" of a man. Waite Johnson and George Greene made the same comment about people in Greenwood; not everyone understood all the political ramifications of what they were being asked to do—although they understood perfectly well what it would cost them—but they came to appreciate the people doing the asking. CORE's Matt Suarez, who worked in and around Canton, Mississippi, commented that country folk

deal more with the character of an individual rather than what he's saying. . . . When you met him, whatever way he was when you met, when you saw him ten years later . . . he would still be that same way, ten years down the road. And they had much more of a perception about the real character of a man. They didn't get caught up in images. . . . A lot of people who came into Canton, [the local people] didn't respond to and it was simply because they

could see a lot of stuff that we couldn't see about an individual. They knew who was strong and who was for real and who wasn't. . . . We would get caught up in words and logic. That didn't mean nothing to them. They were dealing with motives and intent. Skip all the words and everything else. They brushed that aside and got right to what the individual was about.⁶

Organizers were in a situation in which their character was being continually assessed. Once they were judged to be worthwhile people, they and local people often entered into relationships in which each side called forth and reinforced the best in the other. Amzie Moore spoke with evident sincerity about how much he admired the courage of the youngsters:

But when an individual stood at a courthouse like the courthouse in Greenwood and in Greenville and watch tiny figures [of the SNCC workers] standing against a huge column . . . [against white] triggermen and drivers and lookout men riding in automobiles with automatic guns . . . *how they stood* . . . how gladly they got in the front of that line, those leaders, and went to jail. It didn't seem to bother 'em. It was an awakening for me.⁷

In turn, virtually every early COFO worker in the Delta has commented on how inspiring Amzie Moore's courage was. It was hardly possible for idealistic young people to spend time with a Mrs. Hamer or a Mrs. McGhee and not feel some stiffening of their own spines. Bob Zellner, commenting on the courage of Moore and the McGhees, added "We breathed people like that. . . . There was nothing I could refuse them." It wasn't just courage. Martha Prescod Norling man has pointed out that people referring to SNCC as non-elitist often forget that SNCC had no choice in the matter. If you wanted to be around people like Amzie Moore or Mrs. Hamer, you had to be non-elitist, and you had to listen. Mrs. Annie Devine played a crucial role in the movement in Canton, Mississippi. CORE's Rudy Lombard speaks of a meeting where "She looked me in the eye and said 'Rudy, I *know* you won't deny us your talents in Canton this summer. I'm

depending on you.' I knew I was trapped. No way I could turn that woman down."⁸ The organizers and the local people who took to them were in a positive feedback loop, in which the courage and humanistic values of one side encouraged a like response from the other. "They were gentlemen," said Mr. Larry of the McComb organizers, "and around them we were gentle." That would be even more true in reverse.

In Greenwood, the praise of local people for the organizers is effusive and is only partly about their courage. Dewey Greene thought the world of the SNCC kids. He couldn't say enough about them. Silas McGhee was especially impressed by Stokely Carmichael and his strong beliefs. "He was highly educated. He was very intelligent, and he knew how to communicate with a person." Waite Johnson thought even the worst Tom in Greenwood couldn't find anything negative to say about Block and Peacock. Bob Moses, he thought, seemed to have what Waite called a special charisma with the old folks. They just seemed to trust him. Alberta Barnett admired Block and Peacock for their nerve but also for their intelligence. Indeed, people refer to the intelligence of SNCC workers, to their ability to make other people understand, just about as often as they refer to their courage. Mary Lane remembers Bob Moses as

someone you could sit down and talk with. And really, after talking to him, you would really understand. . . . You'll be a little broader than you were at first. And he was a person that could come to you, ask you to do a thing and you were willing to do it. Whatever it might have been. He had this thing about him like if it was Bob who said it, you know it had to be done.

Mary Boothe remembers Bob as a "straight cat," the person who showed her how to be Black without being ashamed, as a person who didn't care for publicity. "I doubt if ten local people would know him." Will Henry Rogers remembers Guyot as being respected in Greenwood because people could see he "was about something and he wasn't about no bullshit." Similarly, he attributes Willie Peacock's influence to the way he "carried himself" around people; people knew

he was serious.⁹ Phrases attesting to the character of organizers are recurrent—he was straight, he was about something, he carried himself well, he had this thing about him. Local people were duly impressed with the courage of the organizers, but it seems to have been important to them that it was courage embedded in character.

Guyot has commented that "the SNCC workers were no saints," and local people knew that, and it is not true that all the criticisms came from Toms. Those who kept themselves outside the movement, of course, had an investment in believing that the organizers were only in it for the glory, but those in the movement had some misgivings as well. The skirt-chasing of some of the organizers offended some of the older people, and they knew more about some of what was going on than some SNCC workers wanted them to. The SNCC workers and the local young people partied hard when the opportunity arose, and that was offensive to the moral codes of some local people. A number of people didn't like the way they dressed; anybody wearing old work clothes all the time couldn't be about very much. It was disrespectful. Some of the SNCC workers had reputations for being a little pushy, not giving other people time to make up their own minds. If they impressed some people as smart, they impressed others as smart-assed. The very idea of young people coming into a town and trying to tell grownups how to run their business struck some as presumptuous. Keeping one's word didn't always mean as much to the SNCC folk as to some of the local people. Some of the SNCC volunteers who came from the North after the first year struck some local people as truly snobbish. They acted as if Mississippi people were still in slavery, too backwards to do anything for themselves. According to Waite Johnson, his grandmother, Mrs. Holt, had to straighten one or two of them out. As staunch a movement person as Canton's Annie Devine commented on the missionary attitudes. The SNCC workers were seen as having the usual human failings, but the bottom line for many of the local people was that they also had virtues of courage, character, and commitment that more than compensated.

In 1967, Robert Jackall, then a young professor at Georgetown University, spent part of the spring and summer working in Sunflower County. In an essay written years later, he commented on the modern

trivialization of the concept of charisma, adding that he had seen real charisma just once, and it was in Mississippi. It was at a mass meeting that was going poorly, speakers droning on in the heat without reaching the audience. Then Mrs. Hamer stood to speak.

Immediately, an electric atmosphere suffused the entire church. Men and women alike began to stand up, to call out her name, and to urge her on. . . . She went on to speak about the moral evil of racism itself and the grievous harm it was doing to the souls of white people in Mississippi. . . . She did not do so in accusation, but with a kind of redemptive reconciliation, articulating a vision of justice that embraced everyone. She ended by leading the assembly in chorus after chorus of a rousing old Negro spiritual called, appropriately, "This Little Light of Mine." When she finished, the entire assembly was deeply shaken emotionally. People crowded around her to promise they would join the struggle.

Jackall goes on to analyze the specific elements of her charisma:

her unvarnished, earthy forcefulness, devoid of all pretence; her unshakeable conviction in the justness of her cause, proved by her personal physical sufferings and the risks she continued to take; her ennobling vision of racial harmony and of personal redemption for those who seek it; and her ability to articulate her ideas with a powerful religious rhetoric that had deep resonance for her audience but that had no trace of practiced cant.¹⁰

In a less concentrated way, similar characteristics among other local people had a similar effect on SNCC workers. The mere fact that joining the movement entailed so many risks meant that early joiners were likely in disproportionate numbers to be men and women with distinctive strengths of character. Moreover, organizers were self-consciously seeking such people. As local people were drawn to much that they saw in the character of SNCC workers, the workers were in turn drawn by, strengthened by, the force of character of some of the

local people and by their lavish affection. "If I needed a couple of bucks," one organizer said, "or even a ride for a hundred miles or so, there would be people waiting in line. Their feelings would have been hurt if I didn't let them help me. When there's that kind of push behind you, you can keep going."¹¹

The good opinion of others is a form of social control. Having attained it, we tend to conduct ourselves so as to maintain it. Local people set constraints on what organizers could or could not do, in effect operating as a source of moral regulation for the movement. Block, Watkins, Peacock, and the others self-consciously strove to be on their best behavior around local people, best behavior as defined by local people. Organizers tried to present an image of themselves as God-fearing, as respectful to women and the elderly, as men and women of their word, as principled. By demonstrating that they could live up to values that the community respected, organizers legitimated themselves and their program.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Bob Moses was once asked how you organize a town:

"By bouncing a ball," he answered quietly.

"What?"

"You stand on a street and bounce a ball. Soon all the children come around. You keep on bouncing the ball. Before long, it runs under someone's porch and then you meet the adults."

Charles Sherrod, who directed SNCC's work in southwest Georgia, commented that the whole key to organizing is finding one person other than yourself. One of his coworkers described organizing as slow work, respectful work. Most of us would expect more "political" answers, but SNCC's early organizers often portray much of their work as simply building relationships. Thus, SNCC's MacArthur Cotton thought his morning coffee break was significant enough to deserve mention in a report:

8:00 am—I went to get my coffee as every morning. I talk with many people as possible in an informal way—trying to get to know the people that I work with. . . . After working this area for 6 days the same people have [accepted] me as a friend. They have become willing to discuss some of their more personal problems.¹²

A staff newsletter from mid-February 1963 suggests something of what the daily work of an organizer was like at that point, less than a year after COFO entered the Delta in force.¹³ The newsletter's tone is that of an in-house document. Many people are referred to only by nickname, and there are jokes that only insiders can fully appreciate. ("Dorie 'Elephant' Ladner had 'tea' with Tom Gaither [of CORE]. So now we know why Dorie went to Atlanta.") Overall, the document reflects a sense of people being dug into their communities, experimenting with tactics and strategies.

In Indianola in the Delta, the mayor told workers they could canvass door-to-door, but if they tried to pass out literature on the street or tried to get into churches, they were going to find themselves in jail. In Greenville, Curtis Hayes was trying to arrange a meeting with the mayor to see how far he was going to let them go before arresting them. In Coahoma County, the clerk told one group that they had had the last forty or fifty years to register, so why are they bothering him now? At the very end of January, Hayes tried to get something established in Hollandale. Amzie Moore had advised him that the Black professionals there were pretty backward and he would be better off trying to work with small businessmen like café owners. Hayes was staying in a house of prostitution owned by a man who had two such houses. The man—a bisexual, a registered voter, and a bigwig in the Masons—had started carrying people to pay poll taxes as soon as Hayes got there. One never knows where help is to be found. Someone on the Greenville staff noted that Greenville is not the kind of place where canvassing is likely to be productive; more direct action would be needed there.

In Jackson, attorney Bill Higgs filed suit to force the University of Mississippi to admit Dewey Greene, Jr. The next day he was arrested

on a morals charge. In Greenville, three COFO staffers were picked up for investigation of a burglary charge. On the social side, Charlie Cobb and Curtis Hayes had just found out they were both being led on romantically by the same girl. (Her version is not reported.) CORE's Dave Dennis had picked up clothing in Jackson, delivered it to Amzie, and gone over to Ruleville, looking for people who needed commodities, then back to Jackson for more clothing. Work in Washington County was being hampered by the lack of a car.

An organizer had just moved into Leland, forewarned by Amzie Moore that the police were especially bad there and that he should expect trouble soon. One of the prominent Black residents had promised to organize a meeting of other leading citizens. The organizer really did not expect his contact to follow through, "but I have to start somewhere. He may surprise me." The organizer was planning a car pool and a citizenship school.

In Holly Springs, in the northern part of the state, Frank Smith had a lot of things going. He had a system with a contact person in every section of the county, and he had organized a speakers' bureau and a welfare relief committee chaired by a professional social worker. The registrar had recently allowed twenty-five people to register, most of them, interestingly enough, schoolteachers. It seemed that someone had let the air out of the tires of a visiting Justice Department official, and Justice had suddenly gotten around to acting on several affidavits that had been filed earlier. Smith was again hearing rumors, from both Black people and white people, that he was to be killed. The county clerk was jerking people around when they tried to pay poll tax—putting dates on the receipts that invalidated them, charging whites less than Blacks. One of Smith's contacts thought he had located at least one white person who might be willing to testify about the latter.

By the end of the month, the weather had turned so cold that it was hard to get anybody to do anything. Smith continued to have problems with people failing to follow through. One night after visiting the home of one of his contacts, a man who lived "seventeen miles from nowhere," Smith stopped by a café, met some people, bought them a beer, and got them interested in what he had to say about registration. They promised to meet him at the registrar's at ten the

next morning. Next morning, not a soul turned up, so Smith went back to the cafe to wait for them to show up.

The last item in the newsletter reported happily that Mrs. Hamer had finally gotten registered, making a total of six in Ruleville since August. The Ruleville Christian Citizenship Movement had raised \$3.85 for transportation. They were expecting some evictions soon on the plantations and planning to set up a tent city if need be. Workshops were well attended, and they were thinking about spreading out into some nearby towns.

Bob Zellner once compared organizing to a juggling act—how many plates can you keep spinning at once? Organizers had to be morale boosters, teachers, welfare agents, transportation coordinators, canvassers, public speakers, negotiators, lawyers, all while communicating with people ranging from illiterate sharecroppers to well-off professionals and while enduring harassment from the agents of the law and listening with one ear for the threats of violence. Exciting days and major victories are rare. Progress is a few dollars raised, a few more people coming to pay poll tax.

The newsletter reflects the specificity of the organizing experience. Local situations could vary greatly from one another. There were general patterns, but organizers worked with individuals, not generalities. Maybe this was a police chief with whom you could reason, maybe here you could get help from schoolteachers. In general, you knew ministers were unreliable, but not all of them and not everywhere. In Hartiesburg, ministers responded to the movement very early on, which Hollis Watkins attributes to spadework done by Vernon Dahmer and others. People will sometimes surprise you, as the one organizer said, but mostly only if you are open to it. A 1964 handbook for volunteers tells them “No one can give you specific instructions on what to do in your area this summer. . . . There is no set one way. Fake it.” At this stage in its history, SNCC, in the tradition of Septima Clark and Ella Baker, was still taking a let’s-try-it-and-see stance. That stance was institutionalized. According to Willie Peacock, over the winter of 1962–1963, “different projects were taking different approaches to organizing, sort of an experiment and we’d have workshops on a regular basis on the weekends,” allowing experiences to be

sifted and analyzed.¹⁴ Their openness to learning from experience meant they could more fully exploit whatever sources of strength a particular locality offered, whether found in a pulpit or a whorehouse. It was a climate that militated against writing off this or that group in advance on the basis of what “people like that” were *likely* to do.

Their ability to exploit the human resources they found in these various towns was contingent on how well organizers came to know the individuals in them. If you knew your town well enough, even Uncle Toms had their uses. When Frank Smith was called from Holly Springs to Greenwood in response to the Jimmy Travis shooting, he first carefully explained why he was leaving to local movement supporters. Then: “You have got to let the white folks know why you are leaving, so you find a local ‘Tom’ and explain the plan in detail.” As soon as your back was turned, Tom could be counted on to run and tell the white folks everything he knew.¹⁵

By this time, some organizers had been dug into their towns for six months or more, and they had an enormous store of information about who was likely to do what, but their knowledge could hardly compare with that of local people like Amzie Moore or Cleve Jordan. Across the South, VEP’s experience time and again was that registration drives were more successful to the degree they could be locally organized and staffed, which they attributed in part to the importance of “intimate knowledge of [the] conditions, psychology and people” involved.¹⁶

Organizers were particularly exposed when trying to open up some of the smaller Delta towns, especially if they were without local contacts. COFO’s manpower was always stretched thin, so going into a new town often fell on just one or two persons. In the fall of 1963, for example, Ivanhoe Donaldson (he who had organized food caravans into Leflore) and Charlie Cobb (he who had found himself in the midst of a shooting a few days after coming into the state) paid their first visit to a town called Rolling Fork, intending to start by going door to door. A police car watched them for a while and then disappeared. Donaldson was standing on the steps of some man’s house, trying to get him to talk about registering. A pickup with two white men inside pulled up and began taking down the tag number of the rented car Donaldson and Cobb were driving. The driver, a man who

had been sitting in the police car a few minutes earlier, then drove the pickup right over the man's lawn, nearly running Donaldson down. He threw a shotgun into Donaldson's face. "Nigger, we aren't going to have any more of this agitation 'round here. Niggers 'round here don't need to vote, so you and your damned buddy get out of here. Goddamn it, Nigger! I'll give you one minute to get out of town or I'll kill you!!" Then he drove off. The old man they had been talking to disappeared into his home as soon as he saw the shotgun, and no one else would so much as speak to them after the incident with the pickup. They left town and returned that evening after dark.¹⁷

In small towns it was frequently impossible even to place a phone call for help. Local operators might refuse to take the calls, or they might tell the local police where the organizers were calling from. Operators across the state recognized "movement" phone numbers—the COFO or NAACP offices, Amzie Moore's home or Aaron Henry's—and anyone placing a call to one of those numbers from a small town endangered the people whose phone had been used.

Organizers coming into a new town had to confront immediately the complexities of the local stratification system. One SNCC training document makes it clear that SNCC put a great deal of thought into dealing with the problem. It suggests that prospective organizers engage in a role-playing exercise. Assuming that they have just come into a new town, they are instructed to act out how they would solicit the help of a local businessman. Trainees are first instructed to assume that the businessman is a Tom but is pretending to be friendly, then they are to assume that the businessman is unwilling to share power with young upstarts, and finally they are to assume that the businessman is sincerely committed to the movement but thinks SNCC people are working for personal glory.¹⁸ Trainees are encouraged to think about not only overcoming fear but also neutralizing deception, distrust, and arrogance while avoiding pigeonholing people stereotypically.

Identifying informal leaders was often the most efficient way to open up a town. Registration workers

frequently found that the real leaders were not the people in places of position. An elderly woman of no title and with no organiza-

tional support might be highly influential simply because she was noted as a kind of personal problem-solver. Sometimes, such a person, because of her effectiveness in small matters and the trust consequently built, could be a key figure in efforts to persuade people to register to vote in a difficult area.¹⁹

When such people were identified they were often sent to Septima Clark's citizenship training center in Dorchester, Georgia. The trip helped people develop a sense of the larger movement and of themselves as movement people.

It was seldom advisable, though, just to ignore the traditional leadership class. Organizers were encouraged to respect traditional leadership without depending on it. One veteran field worker, described as very experienced, describes how he would go about organizing a new town:

He would go first to the "independents," the undertaker, the grocers, the preachers. Then he would go to the school principal. ("In some cases you can go to the principal, ask who his enemies are, and you have the leaders.") Having made contact with these, he would assume that he had discovered the principal community leaders. He would assume, too, that the Negro church was at the center of the community because "the church belongs to the folks." He would regard the deacons of the churches ("because they're the preachers' men") as very important to anything he undertook. Finally, he would assume that for action, a strong outside stimulus probably would be necessary to break what frequently was a local paralysis.

Another worker, probably also thinking about the problem of paralysis, puts the issue of contacting middle-class traditional leaders in a different light.

I would do this to neutralize them. They do not usually oppose having the job done—they want it done, but they don't want to be embarrassed if someone else does it and they are left out. After seeing

them, I would find people prepared to work hard for recognition. Then I'd try to wed the two together and monitor the group.²⁰

No matter what the response from the established leadership, mobilizing a town ordinarily involved a great deal of canvassing, going door-to-door, trying to draw people in. "There is nothing dramatic about the work. There are no emotional releases. The tension is constant. Every passing car is a threat, every white face a mask for violence, every back road a potential trap."²¹ Many Blacks were less than welcoming. Will Henry Rogers recalls that he and the other canvassers "got thrown out of people's homes, got knocked in the head with skillers, got knives and guns thrown in our faces."²²

In Greenwood as in most places, the volunteer canvassers initially tended to be young people like Rogers. Bob Moses wrote:

We can't count on adults. Very few who "have the time" and are economically independent of the white man are willing to join the struggle, and are not afraid of the tremendous pressure they will face. This leaves the young people to be the organizers, the agents of social and political change. . . . They operate at extreme disadvantages; they suffer from the most backward educational system in the United States; they very seldom are free to work in their own home towns because of the pressures brought to bear on their parents and their relatives. . . . They have little knowledge of procedures and skills involved in writing newsletters, press releases, reports, etc., so their ability to analyze and report on their activities is limited; they do not have a functioning adult structure to provide a framework for their operations. Such structures as exist are usually paper organizations with no active program. . . . It is a sign of hope that we have been able to find young people to shoulder the responsibility for carrying out the voting drive. They are the seeds of change.²³

Among the initial group of youthful canvassers in Greenwood were some, like George, Dewey, and Freddie Greene, who came from families with a history of political activism, and others, like Al Garner, who had been involved in founding the NAACP Youth Council. Others

were drawn in gradually by the SNCC workers. SNCC workers simply hung out wherever young people did. In the fall of 1962 Waite Johnson, Lula Belle's son, was a high school sophomore. His first contact with the movement was in the person of Sam Block, who made it a practice in the afternoons to hang out in the poolroom frequented by Waite and some of his friends. Waite found Sam interesting, captivated; he talked about things that Waite had not heard of before, and he told Sam and the other boys that they were going to be a part of the movement whether they wanted to be or not. The boys laughed at that, but they kept listening, and a number of them did eventually begin canvassing, which did not mean that they had bought the whole message that Block, Peacock, and the others were preaching. When Waite first started canvassing, he still believed that even if blacks were allowed to vote, their votes wouldn't be counted. Again, SNCC workers knew that participation could precede ideological commitment as well as follow it.

When Waite Johnson describes his initial reaction to Block and Peacock, he uses the word "skeptical" a lot, but the word he uses most is "curious." They were just interesting to listen to. They were equally interesting to some young women. The SNCC workers, in their late teens or early twenties, were marketable items romantically. They were from out of town, they were courageous, they were intelligent, everybody in town was talking about them, and some of them were "soft talkers."

At least some young women, then, began hanging out at the SNCC office for reasons that were not entirely political, and young men followed them. Indeed, there were at least a few arguments among SNCC staff over whether some of them were keeping the right balance between the social and the political. In any case, some young people initially drawn to the movement partly for social reasons became a part of the initial cadre of canvassers. The movement also offered opportunities for travel that were unusual for Black youth growing up in small Delta towns. Alberta Barnett, who was in her early twenties when SNCC came to Greenwood, remembers traveling to other parts of Mississippi, to Georgia, Ohio, Indiana, New York, and to the 1964 National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City.

Field reports are filled with stories of spending day after day drag-

ging from house to house without a single positive response to show for it. Most people were simply afraid and confused but reluctant to admit it. Some of the excuses people gave were repeated so often that some workers simply developed a checklist:

Feel votes of Negroes not counted.
Thinks politics are un-Christian.
Just not interested.
Don't have the time to discuss voting.
Feel the politicians are going to do whatever they want, regardless of votes cast.
Too busy, engaged in personal affairs.
Feels Negroes should not become involved.
Must consult with someone else.
Fear of being embarrassed at the registrar's office.
Wants time to think it over.
Feel poll tax should be abolished.
Don't like the way things are carried out.
Been advised not to register.
Satisfied with things as they are.²⁴

One young worker commented on the same problem with inventive syntax and unintentional irony:

I canvassed, while I was canvassing we discussed that the problems of some of the Negro race are afraid and do not understand their rights as citizens simply because all their lives they have been taught that the Negro race isn't as good as any other race in the South which in most cases that's true.²⁵

Producing one warm body at the courthouse took a great deal of knocking on doors. Luvaughn Brown reported that on one day in August of 1962, a hundred people were contacted, ten agreed to go register, three actually showed up, and those three were frightened away from the courthouse by the sheriff.²⁶ The yield probably varied a great deal from community to community. At about the same time

Block went to Greenwood, Frank Smith went to Holly Springs in the northern part of the state, an area where economic reprisals were quite severe but reputedly somewhat less violent than Leflore and other counties near the heart of the Delta. After his first meeting, he was able to get adult volunteer workers, unlike the experience in Greenwood. After contacting over one thousand people, they got about one hundred fifty actually to take the test.²⁷

Some COFO workers in Greenwood developed reputations as being especially successful canvassers, and no one style of work characterizes them. When I interviewed George Greene, he impressed me as a man who genuinely enjoyed talking with people and particularly enjoyed a friendly argument. According to Waite Johnson, Greene was a remarkably patient and persistent organizer, with a response for every excuse:

I have seen people slam doors in his face, but he said I'm going to be back. . . . he'd go every day, every hour, every week. Like he would knock on that person's door, they would see him at least 3 or 4 times a week. He'd say, "This is something you should do. It's free and won't cost you nothing. I got the gas, I got a ride—you ain't got to walk. I've got the paper here. . . . I'll hold your hand." He took time with them.

Canvassers had to be patient. Silas McGhee remarked that people, especially on the plantations, had only known one way of life, and you couldn't expect them to change overnight. Guyot, talking about how one might approach a potential local leader, said, "Don't speed him up too much, dialogue with him, find out what his tempo is, what his objectives are. Then you might alter them a little bit, but . . . be careful."²⁸ Willie Peacock recalled that canvassers were instructed not to worry about numbers; the idea was to reach individuals, and you did that by returning over and over to the same people. Eventually, he said, people would start telling you some of the negative things they heard about you. As that suggests, returning repeatedly to people who had rejected you was partly a matter of developing trust. Repeated visits also meant that canvassers could gradually get a feel for

what line of argument might best move a particular individual. Alberta Barnett recalled that among older residents who had little or no conception of electoral politics, you could sometimes get their attention by talking about Franklin Roosevelt and explaining that if they wanted to see programs like those Roosevelt started, they would have to vote. Older canvassers who were residents of Greenwood had the advantage, of course, of frequently talking to people they had known all their lives. In such cases, Alberta Barnett said, you would pretty much know in advance what kind of argument the person might listen to and you had the important advantage that "he already has a little trust and confidence in you—just from the way that you live." Guyot noted that when you got a door slammed in your face, "It just takes a day or two of talking to people to find out whose face the door won't be slammed in."²⁹ Thus, getting even a few reliable adult volunteers was a significant turning point in the development of each local movement.

Sam Block's effectiveness as a canvasser seemed to be related to his "preacher's air," according to Waite Johnson. He was especially good with older people. "He was always saying my grandfather told me this, my grandmother told me this and the Bible says so and so. . . . Once people got to know him naturally they thought he was Jesus. They would sit down and I heard them say 'I'll go down with you, Block. Go ahead, my boy!'"

The handbook that COFO prepared for the volunteers for the 1964 summer program summarizes what the organization had learned about canvassing from nearly three years in the field. It starts by warning volunteers to be careful how they present themselves; you have to make people want to talk to you. Everybody can be approached, but some people will require a lot of time. If a person seems reluctant, come back later, try to soften them up through repeated exposure. Try to build a relationship. If a person asks you in but doesn't really seem to be listening, try asking questions to focus their attention. If a person shows any interest, try to give them something to do right away, perhaps helping you contact others. If a person already knows what you are telling them, try to find out how they learned. Do not over-

whelm people. Give them a single idea—attending a mass meeting or helping with a workshop.³⁰

In the city of Greenwood itself, canvassing might only be a matter of taking a group to a section of town and assigning a different street to each person, or it might be a matter of going to the basketball court to see who was willing to canvass that day. "Out in the rural" was a different matter. The plantations were white-owned, and civil rights workers were trespassing. They had to either sneak past the landlord or lie their way past ("I'm just going to visit my cousin.") There was always the possibility that someone would tell the owner what was really going on, and if plantation workers were even suspected of talking to civil rights workers, they would be fired and evicted. When people did decide to register, civil rights workers might slip onto the plantations at night and help them move before the landlords got wind of what was happening. Sometimes it was better to wait until people came to town on the weekend. Even then, there remained the problem of what civil rights workers called the "plantation mentality," an ingrained sense of helplessness and dependence on whites.

George Greene, who for all of his long career in the movement seemed to wind up in the hardest and most dangerous places to work, was among those who spent the most time canvassing on the plantations. So did Silas McGhee. Silas, who lived on a farm himself, knew a great many of the people on the plantations and was able to build on that, translating their personal regard for him and his family into political capital.

Some people left no doubt that they didn't want to be bothered. Arance Morgan and Dot Johnson were canvassing together once, when a lady pulled a gun on them. The girls got out of there quick. The first time Jake and Silas McGhee visited the Willard home, Mr. Willard pulled a gun on them. They went back anyway, though, eventually convincing him to register. It was a pyrrhic victory. Mr. Willard was thrown off the plantation he lived on and eventually left the area.

Maybe canvassing is the prototypical organizing act. It is the initial reaching out to the community, the first step toward building relationships outside the circle of those favorably predisposed to the

movement. Mass meetings were another step in that process. If canvassers could awaken an initial curiosity in people, mass meetings could weld curiosity into commitment.

MASS MEETINGS: LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS

"It is said that these people accumulate into crowds and then by their speeches are exhorted into frenzy and then seek to march in a body to register."

GREENWOOD COMMONWEALTH

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I once heard a journalist who had covered the movement remark that two decades after its height the civil rights movement had inspired no great works of art—no great novels or films, no great plays. He rather missed the point. The movement was its own work of art, and mass meetings were among the places where that might most easily be seen. Mass meetings, which had the overall tone and structure of a church service, were grounded in the religious traditions and the esthetic sensibilities of the Black South. If the drudgery of canvassing accounted for much of an organizer's time on a day-to-day basis, mass meetings, when they were good, were a part of the pay-off, emotionally and politically.

The Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955 is one of the turning points of the modern movement. According to Ralph Abernathy, the first song at the first mass meeting there was "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms": What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms. What have I to fear, what have I to dread, leaning on the everlasting arms? It was an appropriate choice. Emile Durkheim wrote:

The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence or to conquer them.³¹

The religious traditions of the Black South were an important part of what empowered members of the movement, especially the older members, allowing them to endure and conquer. In bending Afro-American Christianity toward emancipatory ends the movement took it back to its origins. For much of the twentieth century, the Black church, especially in rural areas, turned people away from this-worldly concerns.³² The preacherocracy, as one critic termed it, urged patience in the face of suffering. "They saw the church as a way to escape the pains of the world, not as a moral force that could help heal them."³³ This view was a far cry from the Christianity of the slaves. As described by Lawrence Levine among others, slave Christianity was a liberation theology. It is true that those slavemasters who pushed Christianity generally hoped it would make slaves more manageable, but as Herbert Gutman points out, the important question is not just what masters did to slaves but what slaves did with what was done to them. In this case, they were to take what was intended to be a theology of accommodation and fashion from it a theology of liberation.

If masters were fond of the Bible verse that urges, "Servants, obey thy masters," slaves tended to be fonder of the verse that held the laborer is worthy of his hire. Levine notes that slaves identified more strongly with the Old Testament than the New, and within the Old Testament they identified themselves with the Hebrew children held in bondage by Egypt. Their sacred music referred more frequently to Moses than to Christ, and their Moses was the Deliverer, more than the Lawgiver. They seem to have preferred slave preachers to white ones, in part because white ones were too likely to present an ordering interpretation of the Bible. Similarly, Du Bois argues that in the world view of the slaves, emancipation, when it finally came, was seen as fulfillment of prophecy. "My Lord delivered Daniel, Daniel, Daniel. My Lord delivered Daniel, then why not every man?"³⁴

SNCC had deliberately made a policy of recruiting Mississippi field secretaries from within the state, so many of them were steeped in the religious traditions of the South. Sam Block could slip into his "preacher's air" at will. Many people in Greenwood thought Hollis Watkins was the Reverend Hollis Watkins, and he did not try to dis-

courage them from thinking so. Willie Peacock grew up in a family that was very involved in the AME church and was able to use his knowledge of its politics to prod reluctant ministers. All of them took pride in their knowledge of the Bible and their ability to find the verses and the parables that made the points they needed to make.

Meetings in Greenwood were frequently opened with a prayer by Cleve Jordan, who had an enviable reputation as a prayer leader. His prayers were part-chant, part-song, with the audience murmuring assent and agreement at the end of every line.

Oh Father, Oh Lord,
 Now, now, now, Lordie, Oh Lord
 When we get through drinking tears for water
 When we get through eatin' at the unwelcome table
 When we get through shakin' unwelcome hands
 We've got to meet Death somewhere
 Don't let us be afraid to die. . . .
 Father, I stretch my hand to thee
 No other help I know.³⁵

Fannie Lou Hamer was such a powerful public speaker that Lyndon Johnson once called a news conference solely to stop television coverage of her. One of the most popular speakers at mass meetings in Greenwood, she stressed that God walks with the courageous. A meeting taped at Tougaloo is a good example of her style.³⁶ The meeting began with Hollis Watkins leading a vigorous rendition of "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free." Mrs. Hamer follows the singing, giving a history of her involvement in the movement, including the kinds of harassment she was subjected to. Lately, the cops in her hometown have taken to coming by late at night with their dogs, letting the dogs bark so she will know she's being watched. They have done it so much she has gotten used to it. "Look like now the dogs help me get to sleep." She then pointed out the need for people to be serious about their religion. There are plenty of people, she says, always talking about "Sure, I'm a Christian," but if you're not doing anything about being a

Christian, if you can't stand some kind of test, you need to stop shouting because the 17th chapter of Acts, 26th verse, says that the Lord made of one blood all nations. After giving some examples of how some people in the movement were making their faith concrete, she ends by leading the meeting in a freedom song: "I'm on my way to the freedom land / If you don't go, don't hinder me / I'm on my way, praise God, I'm on my way / If you don't go, let the children go."

The mixture of spirituality and music had a special impact on some of those raised outside the traditions of Afro-Christianity. Jean Wheeler Smith had never so much as heard gospel music before she went to Howard. When she got to Mississippi,

the religious, the spiritual was like an explosion to me, an emotional explosion. I didn't have that available to me [before]. It just lit up my mind. . . . The music and the religion provided a contact between our logic and our feelings . . . and gave the logic of what we were doing emotional and human power to make us go forward.

Mass meetings partook of the mundane as well as of the sacred. New workers in town might be introduced, internal problems ironed out, tactics debated and explained.³⁷ They were also educational. At one meeting in February 1963, James Bevel gave what amounted to a lecture on political economy, talking about the separation of Negroes from the land, outmigration to the North, the implications of automation, Negro self-hatred, and the broader purposes of education. Speakers brought news of what was going on in other places. Medgar Evers, for example, a frequent and popular speaker in Greenwood, might bring word of what was happening in Jackson or at the NAACP national office. Meetings broke down the debilitating sense of isolation by bringing local people out so they could see that growing numbers of their neighbors were with them. At the same time, the news from other places reinforced their sense of being part of something larger and more potent than just what was going on in Greenwood.

In some respects, mass meetings resembled meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers. Groups like these try to change the behavior of their members by offering a supportive social environ-

ment, public recognition for living up to group norms, and public pressure to continue doing so. They create an environment in which you feel that if you stumble, you are letting down not only yourself but all of your friends. One might be afraid to go to a particular demonstration or be tired of demonstrations, period, but not going would mean disappointing those people who were counting on you.

From its inception, SNCC was sensitive to the need to motivate people by giving them public recognition. Ella Baker often stressed the point. At mass meetings in Greenwood, local activists might find themselves sharing a platform with heroes like Medgar Evers or Dick Gregory, or later with Harry Belafonte or Sidney Poitier, or perhaps even with Martin Luther King himself. On one of his trips to Greenwood, King asked to meet Dewey Greene, about whom he had heard so much.³⁸ Within the movement, the traditional status system was relatively inoperative. Belle Johnson belonged to Strangers Home Baptist Church, which thought itself a high-class church. Not everyone thought she was the kind of person who belonged there. The “dicty” attitude of the church toward her angered her daughter June.³⁹ In the movement, Belle Johnson was respected for her dedication; her income and education did not matter.

Pressure at mass meetings could be overt or friendly. At one, Hollis Watkins asked for a show of hands from people who had tried to register. Then he asked how they felt about what they had done. People shouted back that they felt good about it. He asked to see the hands of those who had not yet been down (“Don’t fool us now”) and, after a short pep talk on the importance of what they were trying to do, urged them all to meet him at 8:30 in the morning so they could all go to the courthouse together.

A part of the meeting might be devoted to having people simply recite their life histories, histories inevitably full of deprivation and injustice. At one Greenwood meeting, Cleve Jordan, who had been born near the turn of the century, spoke of how he had spent forty years sawing and hauling logs for a dollar and a quarter a day, working such long days that he only saw his children on Sundays, making forty bales of cotton in a year and having nothing to show for it except the dubious satisfaction of having made some more white people rich.

Other speakers continued in the same vein.⁴⁰ In his analysis of the Chinese revolution, William Hinton argues that an important element in reconstructing the consciousness of peasants was simply having them publicly recite their biographies. Doing so helped turn private and individual grievances into a collective consciousness of systematic oppression. Mass meetings seem to have served a similar function. They also created a context in which individuals created a public face for themselves, which they then had to try to live up to. In his heart, Reverend Such-and-Such may not feel nearly as militant as the speech he gives at the mass meeting, but once he gives it, he has created an image of himself that he will not want contradicted. After playing the role he has defined for himself for a while—and getting patted on the back for it—he may find that the role becomes natural. Before you know it, he may be shaking his head at how rabbit-hearted these other ministers are. What God can cowards know?

Depending on the situation at a given moment, it might be very easy or very difficult to get people to come to mass meetings. When necessary, canvassers went door to door, passing out handbills. Most people seem to have come initially out of sheer curiosity. The meetings were something new, the regular speakers, including Mrs. Hamer, Medgar Evers, Dick Gregory, and Aaron Henry, could hold an audience, and sometimes the speakers were nationally known celebrities.

Then, too, there was the music. It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the music of the movement. The changing fortunes of the movement and the morale of its participants could have been gauged by the intensity of the singing at the meetings. Music has always been a central part of the Black religious experience. Ministers knew that a good choir was a good recruiting device. In the same fashion, many who came to meetings came just to hear the singing. Bernice Reagon calls the freedom songs “the language that focused the energy of the people who filled the streets.” She tells of an incident in Georgia in which a sheriff and his deputies tried to intimidate a mass meeting by their presence. “A song began. And the song made sure that the sheriff and his deputies knew we were there. We became visible, our image was enlarged, when the sounds of the freedom

songs filled all the space in that church."⁴¹ When things were hopping in Greenwood, SNCC's Worth Long sometimes brought people over from Little Rock or Pine Bluff to help on the weekends. The mass meetings he saw in Greenwood were different from the ones in Arkansas. Greenwood had more of a singing movement, and the meetings had more of an emotional tone; it was like comparing a Holiness church to a Methodist church. He tried to take some of that feeling back to Arkansas with him.⁴²

People in Greenwood were similarly enlarged by the singing and the emotional intensity of the meetings. Among their other talents, Hollis Watkins, Willie Peacock, and Sam Block were all songleaders. Arance Brooks, recalling the period when meetings were always packed, says, "I loved it. I just felt so much better when everybody would go. Looked like I slept better. The singing and everything. I just loved it." In spite of threats to his life, the Reverend Aaron Johnson, during a particularly tense period, opened his church for a meeting after the church that was supposed to have it backed down. People were afraid to come in at first, but when they did "We rocked the church. We rocked that church that night. Ha, Ha, Ha. I said, 'Well, if I die, I had a good time tonight. I had a *good* time tonight.'"

The music operated as a kind of litany against fear. Mass meeting offered a context in which the mystique of fear could be chipped away. At one Greenwood meeting, a speaker noted with satisfaction that at a recent demonstration where it looked as though things might get out of hand, Police Chief Lary was visibly scared; Lary's voice had trembled as he asked demonstrators to break it up. Even the police chief is human. At another meeting a boy who had spent thirty-nine days in jail with Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes talked about how jail was not as terrible as most people thought. He had kind of enjoyed it, actually. The community sent them baked chickens and pies and cakes and things, so they just sent the jail food on back.⁴³

Much of the humor at mass meetings was an attack on fear. A song could bring the Citizens' Council down to size. To the tune of "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," they might sing:

Jesus loves me cause I'm white.
Lynch me a nigger every night. Hate the Jews and I hate the Pope,
Jes' me and my rope.
Jesus loves me, The Citizens' Council told me so.

"We Shall Overcome" could become:

Deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall keep the niggers down
They will never be free—eee—eee
They will never be registered,
We shall keep the niggers down.⁴⁴

Mixtures of the sacred and the profane, the mass meetings could be a very powerful social ritual. They attracted people to the movement and then helped them develop a sense of involvement and solidarity. By ritually acting out new definitions of their individual and collective selves, people helped make those selves become real. Informed and challenged by the speakers, pumped up by the singing and the laughing and the sense of community, many of those who only meant to go once out of curiosity left that first meeting thinking they might come once more, just to see.

By late 1963, women like Lula Belle Johnson and Susie Morgan and Lou Emma Allen often stopped by the SNCC office just to sit around and visit with one another and the staff and maybe do a little sewing. Old men stopped by to listen to the ballgames or just to argue with one another. For a segment of Greenwood's Black population, the movement had become as integrated into their lives as the barbershop or beauty parlor. It was not the least significant of the movement's achievements. Most of the people we are talking about we would have called apolitical twelve months earlier. Within a year, a radical political movement had become woven into their personal and communal patterns.

Of Nate Shaw, a Black Alabama sharecropper who joined a

communist-led attempt to create a sharecroppers' union in the 1930s, Theodore Rosengarten says "Shaw admits he learned little about the origins of the union. He was less concerned with where it came from than with its spirit, which he recognized as his own."⁴⁵ Similarly, local people in Greenwood recognized something of their own best spirit reflected in the early COFO cadre.

Courage was only the most visible part of what accounts for the dynamism of this period. We also have to consider the depth and richness of the personal relationships between organizers and local people, the flexibility of the organizers, their willingness to experiment, their ability to project themselves as men and women of character and the well-honed ability of the local people to read character, to recognize "fullness" when it was there. We also have to consider simple persistence. Our collective imagery of the movement does not include George Greene returning to talk to some frightened farmer for the tenth time or a Mary Lane, taking the registration test eleven times before she is allowed to pass, or Donaldson and Cobb returning at night to a town they were run out of that day. Overemphasizing the movement's more dramatic features, we undervalue the patient and sustained effort, the slow, respectful work, that made the dramatic moments possible.

"Spadework" was a pet phrase of Ella Baker's, popping up with regularity in the reports she filed while traveling the South in the 1940s:

I must leave now for one of those small church night meetings which are usually more exhausting than the immediate returns seem to warrant but it's a part of the spade work, so let it be.

Yes, Madison seems to have done a good job in N.C. He is to be congratulated because it was mostly spade work.⁴⁶

Ironically, later in the decade, as the struggle became, in some ways, more sophisticated, activists seemed less and less willing to engage in the kind of spadework that had made Greenwood possible.