

“AIN’T GONNA LET NOBODY TURN ME ROUND:”  
THE SOUTHWEST GEORGIA FREEDOM MOVEMENT  
AND THE  
POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT

by

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### Abstract

In the early 1960s, African-American residents of southwest Georgia cooperated with organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to launch a freedom movement that would attempt to battle white supremacy and bring all Americans closer to their country's democratic ideals. Movement participants tried to overcome the fear ingrained in them by daily life in the Jim Crow South, and to reconstruct American society from within. Working within a tradition of black insurgency, participants attempted to understand the origins of the intimidation and powerlessness that they often felt, and to form a strong community based on mutual respect, equality, and trust. Black women played fundamental roles in shaping this movement and African-American resistance patterns more generally, and struggles such as the southwest Georgia movement reveal the ways in which black people have identified themselves as American citizens, equated citizenship with political participation, and reinterpreted American democratic traditions along more just and inclusive lines.

This thesis begins with a narrative of the movement. It then moves on to discuss SNCC's efforts to build community solidarity and empower African-American residents of southwest Georgia, and to consider the notion that SNCC owed its success to the activism of local women and girls. Next, it proposes that in the southwest Georgia movement there was no clear distinction between public and private space and work, and it suggests that activism in the movement emerged from traditional African-American patterns of family and community organization. Finally, this thesis asserts that the mass jail-ins for which the movement became famous redefined and empowered the movement community.

This analysis reconsiders the analytical categories with which scholars generally study social movements. Instead of employing a linear narrative structure that emphasizes formal political activity and specific tactical victories, this thesis suggests that political participation takes diverse forms and it highlights the cycles of community building and individual empowerment that characterize grassroots organizing. It underscores the sheer difficulty of initiating and sustaining a mass struggle, and argues that the prerequisite to forming an insurgent movement is the ability of individuals to envision alternative social and cultural possibilities.

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## Introduction: An Unfinished Revolution

The Civil Rights Movement was simply a continuance  
Or *more complexly* a continuance...

What Black women did in the Civil Rights Movement was to continue looking  
at what else we had to do in order for there to be another day for our people.

--Bernice Johnson Reagon

When you take a position that I am somebody, and I am as good as the next person, you're not likely to be pressed down. [Mother said] forever keep your head up, don't drop your head to nobody... That's the kind of upbringing I had. That's what my roots were like.

--Janie Culbreth Rambeau<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1960s, African-Americans in Albany and the surrounding counties of southwest Georgia launched a struggle to combat white supremacy and bring all Americans closer to their country's democratic ideals. At the core of this movement were people such as Bernice Johnson Reagon and Janie Culbreth Rambeau, African-American residents of southwest Georgia who recognized their fundamental importance to American society and who believed that they, like all Americans, were entitled to a voice in shaping it.<sup>2</sup> Reagon, Rambeau and many others embraced and nourished a tradition of resistance with deep roots in African-American culture.<sup>3</sup> The movement emerged from longstanding patterns of African-American family and community organization, and drew a diverse group of participants who learned—and taught—that they could make a difference by acting not merely as individuals, but as members of a community. Participants built their movement in spaces including but not limited to the formal political realm, and the struggle emerged from an environment that was almost always politically charged and that fostered the process of personal and collective emancipation.<sup>4</sup> The southwest

<sup>1</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, "My Black Mothers and Sisters or on Beginning a Cultural Autobiography," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Spring 1982): 93-94; Janie Culbreth Rambeau, interview with author, 25/01/01.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 126-7.

<sup>3</sup> The historian and former movement participant Bernice Johnson Reagon suggests that black women played particularly significant roles in the freedom struggle as "culture carriers." In her article about Mississippi organizer Fannie Lou Hamer, Reagon explains that Mrs. Hamer became a "culture carrier" when she "assumed major responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the environment within which those who struggle for freedom lived and worked." See Reagon, "Women as Culture Carriers in the Civil Rights Movement: Fannie Lou Hamer," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990), p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> With regard to turn-of-the-twentieth-century African-American reformers, the historian Glenda Gilmore writes, "Artificially excluded from the electoral realm, African Americans found that the rest of life took on a more political cast." Because whites denied black Americans the right to vote and participate formally in public life, other parts of their lives—including the home, family, recreation, and religion—became avenues for political expression. See

Georgia freedom movement demonstrated that in spite of the obstacles that sometimes hampered overt defiance of racism and oppression, African-American resistance was an ongoing, broad-based journey toward democracy and social justice.

The southern freedom struggles of the 1960s evolved from an African-American tradition of insurgency that began with slave resistance in the Seventeenth Century.<sup>5</sup> Recently, scholars have situated a number of local movements within this tradition.<sup>6</sup> Yet, with only one exception, they have not done this for the movement in the city of Albany and the counties of southwest Georgia. The dominant narrative of the Albany movement suggests that it arose in 1961 out of a void of black accommodation to racism and Jim Crow, and collapsed in 1962 when the visiting leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., turned his attention elsewhere. The story generally follows the trajectory of King's arrival during the first period of mass arrests, his subsequent jailings and negotiations with city officials, and his ultimate decision that he could not lead the Albany movement to a conclusive victory. Most scholars frame the Albany movement as a top-down battle limited to formal, quantifiable civil rights reform.<sup>7</sup> As movement participant Joan Browning puts it, "This is history as keeping score between winners and losers." It is history that privileges those with the most power, and silences those with less. Scholars have considered the movement's history almost exclusively as King's failed fight against Jim Crow in Albany. As a

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Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> James Forman, former Executive Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), writes: "[It] is absolutely essential to see our history as one of resistance... Our ancestors began to resist... the moment they were wrenched from the shores of Africa... We must continue, at every step of the ladder of our liberation, to view those previous rungs as battles which we fought, as battles... which we could not win unless those below were willing to resist, dead though they may be, unknown, unsung, many of them names no one knew..." Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), pp. 512-13.

<sup>6</sup> In the bibliographic essay of his book on the Mississippi Delta freedom movement, Charles Payne identifies some representative community studies, including Robert Norrell's *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Knopf, 1985), William Chafe's *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), and David Colburn's *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). See Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 414.

<sup>7</sup> No full-length study of the Albany movement yet exists. However, several scholars have included detailed accounts of events in Albany within larger studies of the civil rights movement as a whole. The dominant narrative of the Albany movement is best represented by Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986); and Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: WW Norton, 1990). The exception to the dominant narrative can be found in the work of Michael Chalfen. In his articles, Chalfen emphasizes that the movement evolved from "a ferment of many small-scale ad hoc protests" earlier in the Twentieth Century, and lasted at least several years longer than the standard "end" date of July 1962. While the movement may have encountered setbacks at various times, Chalfen writes, "the defining characteristic of the Albany Movement is persistence." See Chalfen, "The Way Out May Lead In: The Albany Movement Beyond

result, they have downplayed the extent of this movement, which spread throughout southwest Georgia, and they have disregarded the goals, aspirations, and needs of the grassroots community.<sup>8</sup>

Movement participants characterize their struggle as an affirmation of a longstanding African-American tradition of insurgency. African-Americans had always resisted oppression, but Albany was one of the first places during the Twentieth Century in which a mass of black Americans launched a sustained, large-scale revolt against systemic racism.<sup>9</sup> Participants fought not only to include African-Americans in American society; rather, they attempted to create a new culture that was fundamentally different from the existing one that flourished by keeping black people on its margins. Grassroots participants were committed to what the historian Charles Payne calls a “politics of empowerment.” Payne explains that organizers in the civil rights movement favoured

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.<sup>10</sup>

Success in the civil rights movement was not simply the achievement of a particular end, but the realization—on the part of individuals as well as entire communities—that people were entitled to live free of intimidation and fear, and to control their own lives. For many participants, the struggle was a process through which individuals learned to use their own personal power and the power that they had as American citizens. Their individual strength, they came to understand, was tied to the strength of the group; people became empowered, and felt free, when they contributed to the community’s struggle and insisted that whites who subscribed to Jim Crow ideology fulfill the country’s putative commitment to democracy and equality.

Participants in the freedom struggle in southwest Georgia therefore shaped a movement that privileged interpersonal commitment and community solidarity. Participants rejected the dominant American values of material acquisition, competitive individualism, and violence, and

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Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79 (1995): 564; and Chalfen, “Rev. Samuel B. Wells and Black Protest in Albany, 1945-65,” *Journal of Southwest Georgia History* 9 (Fall 1994): 38.

<sup>8</sup> Joan C. Browning, “Trends in Feminism and Historiography: Invisible Revolutionaries—White Women in Civil Rights Historiography,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8 (3, Fall 1996): 186; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> In the words of the historian Herbert Gutman, “Resistance to dependence—based upon class, race, or gender—has been a central theme in the nation’s history. Such resistance has been irregular and uneven, but it has been a constant.” Gutman, “Historical Consciousness in Contemporary America,” in *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 404.



instead formed what they called a redemptive community that embodied cooperation, nonviolence, love, and faith. When they recall their experiences today, looking back on the 1960s, participants stress that in southwest Georgia, ordinary people broke down social hierarchies and barriers such as race, class, gender, and age, and united in a cooperative struggle against hatred and oppression. Their movement community demonstrated that it was possible, if difficult, to construct a way of being that was based on equality and did not make the oppression of some individuals and groups necessary to the success of others.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative that follows is based on movement participants' oral histories and on the archives of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).<sup>12</sup> It focuses on the residents of southwest Georgia and SNCC organizers who appear to have been most central to the movement and whose stories demonstrate that individuals can become empowered to change their lives and the shape of their society. My account offers an alternative to the dominant narrative of the southwest Georgia movement—a narrative that subordinates the grassroots struggle to the activities and so-called miscalculations of Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). It describes the range of activities that went on in and around Albany during the most intense periods of resistance, draws attention to episodes that are frequently omitted from the story of the movement, and signals that the events of the 1960s mark only one stage in the evolution of black protest in southwest Georgia. Above all, this narrative stresses the notion that resistance was difficult. Participants resisted from within a society that encouraged deference by denying that there was any problem at all—white supremacy was normal, African-Americans were happy under Jim Crow, and democracy was well-served by white privilege and black subordination—and by attempting to silence those people who might

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<sup>10</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, p. 331 and p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the contradiction between dominant American values and the values held by movement participants, see Forman, p. 236; Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1989), p. 106; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 237; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 71-2; William H. Chafe, "The End of One Struggle, the Beginning of Another," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Charles W. Eagles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> Kim Lacy Rogers writes that, "Oral history is a critical source for scholars attempting to understand the civil rights movement and social movements in general." She argues that oral history sources provide clues as to the "local genesis" of the movement, "changes in individual and collective consciousness," and the "radicalism of the grassroots rural base." Her point that, "Oral history documents mass mobilization at an individual level," is central to the methodology that I have employed in researching this thesis. See Rogers, "Oral History and the History of the Civil Rights Movement" *Journal of American History* 75 (September 1988): 568. See also: Brett Eynon, "Cast Upon the Shore: Oral History and the New Scholarship on Movements of the 1960s" *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996): 560-70; Kathryn Nasstrom, "Beginnings and Endings: Life Stories and the Periodization of the Civil Rights Movement" *Journal of American History* 86 (September 1999): 700-11; and, Kathryn Nasstrom,

offer the most insightful critique of the system. African-American insurgency in southwest Georgia was evidence that something was indeed wrong with democracy in the United States, and that the people who were most vulnerable were prepared, however uncertain they might feel, and despite the serious challenges they might face, to do something to fix it.<sup>13</sup>

In its most formal sense, the southwest Georgia movement began with a sit-in at the Trailways bus station on November 1, 1961. Young SNCC field secretaries had just arrived in town. Along with adult leaders, they encouraged local African-American college students to test the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ruling that prohibited racial segregation in interstate transportation and terminal facilities. Evelyn Toney, Eddie Wilson and Julian Carsell entered the bus station in Albany and bought tickets to Tallahassee, Florida. When they sat down to eat in the station's restaurant, they were arrested and jailed by city police. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) bailed them out of jail within thirty minutes, but their bold defiance of Jim Crow, and insistence that city authorities uphold federal law was a turning point for the black community in the city of Albany. From that day on, according to SNCC's Albany field secretary, Charles Sherrod, "segregation was dead."<sup>14</sup>

But, in some ways, segregation throughout the South had begun to die long before that day. For one, fundamental changes to the southern economy in the years before the Second World War laid some important foundations for the mass struggle that would ensue in the 1960s. The cotton-based political and economic system had begun to decline in the 1930s and 1940s. When cotton planters lost their dominant social position, there was "no politically meaningful class of whites for whom suppression of Blacks was the kind of economic necessity it had been in years past." Racial violence therefore declined from its all-time high earlier in the century, allowing existing rebels to "survive long enough to begin making a difference," and new insurgents to vocalize their objections to Jim Crow. That said, these contextual changes were only relevant because a significant number of African-Americans were prepared to challenge the system that

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"Down To Now: Memory, Narrative, and Women's Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement" *Gender and History* 11 (1999): 113-44.

<sup>13</sup> The historian Lawrence Goodwyn writes that American culture organizes people "not to rebel." He states that "They have, instead, been instructed in deference." In order to build a mass movement, people need to develop a new culture that can offer them confidence and hope, and that will supplant the old one that made them feel powerless. Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. x and passim; Trouillot also writes, "To acknowledge resistance as a mass phenomenon is to acknowledge the possibility that something is wrong with the system" (pp. 83-4). Whites in the 1960s—and scholars since then—have silenced the movement in southwest Georgia by trivializing and denying the significance of the stories of those people who made the movement happen.

they saw cracking.<sup>15</sup> Twentieth-century black Albanians—living in the heart of the cotton belt—had been mounting such challenges at least since veterans had returned from World War One with a bolder commitment to fighting racism and segregation.

Against this backdrop, the Albany movement of the 1960s ought to be seen as an organized mass protest that followed decades of smaller-scale political and community activism. In the first half of the Twentieth Century, African-Americans launched initiatives on their own behalf, and there was evidence that at least some white people in southwest Georgia were also committed to changing the system of racial segregation and discrimination. Following World War One, Albany's black residents founded an active chapter of the NAACP, and then developed a variety of community groups dedicated to improving their neighbourhoods, education, and health care. In the 1940s, black Albanians established a Voters' League and a branch of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in order to increase black political participation and to challenge southwest Georgia's capricious and racist judicial system. In 1942, Clarence and Florence Jordan, a white, Christian couple, founded Koinonia Community Farm on several hundred acres of land in Sumter County outside of Albany. Koinonia would provide black and white farm workers with better-paid jobs, and demonstrate the possibility of integrated living. It would also serve as a major source of support for interracial civil rights organizations in southwest Georgia during the 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

During the 1950s, African-Americans in southwest Georgia became increasingly militant following the landmark Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and the yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. By the end of the decade, we begin to see signs of the direct action protests that would make the Albany movement famous. African-American maids in neighbouring Terrell County launched a successful one-day strike for better pay.<sup>17</sup> Community leaders in Albany began petitioning the city commission in 1957 for better living conditions and an end to segregation. But the mass movement of the 1960s was really born out of the efforts of local black students. Even before the first publicized lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960, students in Albany were holding impromptu sit-

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<sup>14</sup> Newspaper clipping, unidentified source (c. November/December 1961)—SNCC Papers, A:XV:51; Charles Sherrod, as quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, pp. 15-19; p. 203; p. 47; p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Peggy Dammond report (June 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IX:19. For example, in 1961, Gene Singletary, a white man who lived at Koinonia, wrote a letter to Freedom Rider and SNCC volunteer Casey Hayden (née Sandra Cason) inviting civil rights workers to stay at Koinonia "for the duration" of the freedom movement. Hayden, SNCC's designated observer in the December 1961 Freedom Ride, her husband, Tom Hayden, and Joan Browning all stayed at Koinonia for at least one of the nights that Tom Hayden and Browning were in Albany and not in jail. Letter from Gene Singletary to Sandra Hayden (c. December 1961)—Joan Browning papers.

ins at restaurants and movie theatres. They organized formally in 1959 as an NAACP Youth Council chapter; by early 1961 students at Albany State College, a traditionally black institution in the University of Georgia system, were holding rallies and writing letters to the editor of the *Albany Herald* to protest racism and harassment.

Albany State College students confronted a range of racially motivated abuses in 1961—including physical attacks and cross-burnings on campus—but they were particularly outraged over the school administration's efforts to suppress their activism. The administration's policies were so restrictive, and its interest in the students' problems was so low, that Dean of Students Irene Asbury Wright felt compelled to resign in protest.<sup>18</sup> Among other things, college officials ignored the repeated harassment of female students by white men from town, and they banned SNCC's Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon from setting foot on the campus. The administration's resistance to the students' growing activism became especially clear when Dean Charles Minor suspended students Bertha Gober and Blanton Hall "indefinitely," without a hearing, after they were arrested for testing the ICC ruling on Thanksgiving weekend. These suspensions, and the students' decisions to remain in jail rather than be released on bond, galvanized the black population, and drew parents and children together in protest. Indeed, that same November weekend, the newly formed Albany Movement—the umbrella organization that would coordinate the city's civil rights protests—began to convene community-wide mass meetings, and would soon endorse mass marches and jail-ins.<sup>19</sup>

On December 10, 1961, the world became aware of the struggle in Albany as a group of Freedom Riders arrived from Atlanta at Albany's train station. These individuals—who had simply and legally integrated a Central Georgia Railway car—as well as two African-American residents and a SNCC field secretary, who had come to meet them, were promptly arrested and jailed by city police.<sup>20</sup> Mass demonstrations continued, and by December 13, police were holding over seven hundred protesters in the city and county jails. On December 15, 1961, Dr. William Anderson, the president of the Albany Movement, called his wife's friend, Martin Luther King, to speak at a mass meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church to help build popular support.

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<sup>17</sup> John Perdew, interview with author, 27/10/00.

<sup>18</sup> Annette Jones White, interview with author, 8/11/00; Howard Zinn, *Albany* (Southern Regional Council, 1962), p. 9—SNCC Papers, A:IV:340.

<sup>19</sup> Sherrod report—SNCC Papers, A:XV:31; news clipping—SNCC Papers, A:XV:51.

<sup>20</sup> Albany, Georgia, was the only location in the South that failed to comply with the November ICC ruling. The Freedom Riders were fully within their rights to ride from Atlanta to Albany, and enter the Albany train station as an integrated group. When they arrived in Albany, however, they were arrested by city police, and later convicted on state charges of disturbing the peace and refusal to disperse. For an excellent discussion of the controversial historiography of the Albany Freedom Ride, see Browning, "Trends in Feminism and Historiography..."

King's presence attracted so many people—an estimated 1,500—that the meeting spilled out of Shiloh and into Mt. Zion Baptist Church across the street.<sup>21</sup> Although he was only in Albany a short time, King's charismatic speeches moved and inspired participants, and his presence symbolized the resistance that was brewing in southwest Georgia.

After the December arrests, Martin Luther King and members of the Albany Movement board agreed to postpone any additional marches or demonstrations in return for concessions from the city. However, no figurehead—indeed, no leaders of any kind—could stop people from protesting, especially when it became clear that Albany's legislators would never make good on their promises to release jailed protesters and begin the process of desegregation. In January 1962, students, represented by Miss Albany State, Annette Jones, and parents, represented by Mrs. Emma Barry, protested the expulsion of another forty-two Albany State College students for taking part in the previous month's demonstrations. In addition, the movement broadened its approach and began a successful attack on Albany's white businesses in order to tackle segregation's economic base. Following a tradition of black women's protest against segregation on streetcars and busses, Ola Mae Quarterman, a nineteen-year-old student expelled from Albany State, refused to leave her seat at the front of a city bus. She told the driver, "I paid my damn twenty cents, and I can sit where I want." Quarterman's defiance and subsequent jailing sparked a bus boycott; the boycott then compelled domestic workers to form a carpool that eventually forced the bus company out of business.<sup>22</sup> Simultaneously, the movement launched a selective buying campaign on January 23, which was aimed at stores in the downtown core. The campaign's economic impact was limited since African-Americans tended to avoid shopping downtown and often patronized businesses in the black district of Harlem instead. However, the boycott did cause several downtown shops to close, and deprived the *Albany Herald* of important advertising revenue. It also served as additional evidence of

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<sup>21</sup> An Albany police report by Chief Laurie Pritchett states that 735 people were arrested during December of 1961. Pritchett's coded terminology for civil rights protests is evident when he writes that the fiscal year of 1961-62 saw a total of 1300 arrests for "violations of City Ordinances and state laws" (Albany Police Department Report—SNCC Papers, A:VIII:102). See also Zinn, *Albany*, p. 1—SNCC Papers, A:IV:340. In an informal communication with me, Joan Browning suggested that there were over one thousand protesters jailed in Albany in December 1961; William G. Anderson, "Reflections on the Origins of the Albany Movement," *Journal of Southwest Georgia History* 9 (Fall 1994): 9.

<sup>22</sup> Quarterman's predecessors included Rosa Parks in the Twentieth Century, and Ida B. Wells and Sojourner Truth in the Nineteenth Century; Southwest Georgia Project Report—SNCC Papers, A:IV:341; Charles Jones news report form—SNCC Papers, A:IV:195; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (Toronto and New York: Bantam, 1985), p. 262; Ola Mae Quarterman, as quoted in Fred Powlledge, *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991), p. 373; Donald Harris interview in Stoper, p. 148.

African-American residents' willingness to stand up against segregation in Albany, and their ability to organize the community and effect change.

Whites across southwest Georgia reacted violently to the success of African-American organization and protest, but Albany's nonviolent veneer masked the extent of their attacks. Albany, the seat of Dougherty County, benefited from an image of civility: the city was known amongst black and white residents as a relatively peaceful, 'liberal' place. The Albany movement was in fact noted for its lack of public violence, and Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett secured the approval of the national press and federal government by preventing the kinds of flagrant mob confrontations that characterized civil rights struggles in other parts of the South. But brutality was endemic to the Jim Crow system, which rested on white people's efforts to intimidate and control African-Americans. In the 1960s, whites in southwest Georgia met African-American resistance with concealed violence inside jails and police stations, and with overt attacks in locations throughout the rural counties, including those that African-Americans knew as "Bad" Baker, "Lynching" Lee, and "Terrible" or "Tombstone" Terrell. For example, on July 23, 1962, two sheriffs in Mitchell County beat Marion King, wife of Slater King, the Albany Movement's vice-president, when she went to visit her friends' daughters in jail. Mrs. King was six-months pregnant, and the beating caused her to miscarry several weeks later. Five days after the attack on Mrs. King, an Albany sheriff struck her brother-in-law, the attorney C.B. King, when he went to the police station to inquire about Bill Hansen, a jailed SNCC volunteer. Movement workers understood these kinds of individual attacks, as well as subsequent church burnings and police invasions of mass meetings, as white people's efforts to intimidate the whole black community. They were frustrated by the fact that the federal government condemned such hostility to the movement, but did nothing to protect movement participants' rights.<sup>23</sup>

However, in spite of white brutality, the city's intransigence, and what was at best an ambiguous relationship with the Kennedy administration, Albany's black residents maintained their struggle throughout the year.<sup>24</sup> The movement appeared to win a clear victory in March

<sup>23</sup> For references to Albany as a liberal place, see Anderson, pp. 2-3, and Zinn, *Albany*, p. 3—SNCC Papers, A:IV:340. Also, see Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, for his discussion of "civility" in Greensboro, North Carolina; Scholars and movement participants often refer to the rural counties of southwest Georgia by their nicknames. See, for example, Rambeau, interview with author; Albany Police Department Report—SNCC Papers, A:VIII:102; Sworn affidavits of participants jailed in Albany—SNCC Papers, A:XV:30; Marion King statement—Slater King Papers; Carol King, interview with author, 16/01/01; White, interview; press release (August 1963)—SNCC papers, A:VII:3; "Where was the federal government?"—SNCC Papers, A:VII:1.

<sup>24</sup> The Kennedy administration—specifically Attorney General Robert Kennedy and the Justice Department—displayed a tenuous commitment to the freedom struggle in southwest Georgia. It did contribute funds to SNCC's voter registration campaign through the Voter Education Project, and the Attorney General and the President did request in 1962 that Albany officials meet with movement leaders to discuss their demands. But these were small

1963 when the Albany city commission voted 6-1 to erase all segregation ordinances from the local law books.<sup>25</sup> But this legal victory alone could not resolve racial hostilities in Albany. In many ways, it simply privatized Jim Crow: while the city could no longer officially segregate public facilities, the law did not control those facilities that were privately owned. Individual segregationists, such as James H. Gray, the editor of the city's only daily newspaper, took advantage of this situation. Gray bought Albany's public swimming pool at Tift Park so that it would remain for whites only. Moreover, city officials found other creative ways to subvert their own vote for public desegregation. For example, they removed all chairs from the library and refused to issue new library cards in order to prevent integration from being achieved in practice.<sup>26</sup>

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consolations set against the government's blatant disregard for movement participants' rights and safety. For example, John F. Kennedy appointed the segregationist judge J. Robert Elliott to the U.S. District Court in Georgia. Elliott ruled under the Fourteenth Amendment that black protest marches denied white people their rights to equal protection under the law, and the administration supported his July 1962 injunction that aimed to crush the movement by ordering leaders to desist from further marches. The Kennedy administration failed the black citizens of southwest Georgia repeatedly: it refused to prosecute police officers who beat movement leaders; it failed to enforce the Fourteenth Amendment in a way that would have protected movement participants from police brutality and private attacks; and it actually worked to "water down" the civil rights bill so that states would have more say in the way they handled civil rights protesters. The federal government's position became especially clear when it indicted nine leaders of the Albany Movement in 1963 on false charges of conspiracy and perjury. The government defended the legal action as an attempt to maintain law and order, but as one SNCC statement points out, this claim "rings hollow. The federal government has not found the numerous reported cases of police brutality, constitutional deprivation and violence against Negroes cause for affirmative action. In fact its history of apathy toward the plight of the Negro has led local law enforcement officers to believe they can act with impunity." All of the indictments were ultimately overturned, but movement participants recognized the government's action "as an attempt to cripple the Albany Movement," and the case caused Martin Luther King to proclaim, "...The only instance in which the government has moved with vigor has been against Negro leaders who have been working to remove the evils of the segregation system." "Federal Prosecution and Civil Rights in Albany, Georgia"—SNCC Papers, A:VII:4; "Where was the federal government?"—SNCC Papers, A:VII:1; Faith Holsaert and Elizabeth Holtzman statement (1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:201; "Memorandum on Facts"—SNCC Papers, A:VII:102; Chalfen, "The Way Out:" 584; Report on Federal Prosecution on Civil Rights Workers in Albany, Georgia (Bay Area Friends of SNCC, 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:VIII:102. See Branch, pp. 601-32, and Garrow, especially pp. 210-18, for comprehensive accounts of the Kennedy administration's equivocal stance on racial equality and the freedom movement in southwest Georgia.

<sup>25</sup> Albany Movement and SNCC leaders responded with enthusiasm to the city's decision to repeal segregation ordinances, but the city commission's reasons for taking this action were convoluted, and not necessarily in the best interests of Albany's black citizens. On one level, the decision reflected the success of the Albany Movement's first several years, as the city struck down segregation laws in order to prevent further mass direct action protests. But this indicated the city's frustration with the movement's persistence, and not any kind of support for the movement's goals. As well, Chalfen notes that the decision was a clear effort to make "concessions to maintain the status quo." There was some indication in February 1963 that the previously conservative state courts would soon become less apt to uphold the constitutionality of segregation. Should such an ideological shift occur, Albany officials decided in March to desegregate public facilities, hoping to avoid any threat of "federal intervention in local politics." They knew that segregation would not disappear; it would simply become a private, individual matter outside the city commission's mandate. This attitude compelled Martin Luther King to call desegregation in Albany a "subtle and conniving means to perpetuate discrimination." See Chalfen, "The Way Out:" 571-3; News Release (March 7, 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:VII:3.

<sup>26</sup> Chalfen, "Rev. Samuel B. Wells..." 53.

In response to such steadfast white opposition to the movement, African-American residents and SNCC volunteers renewed their fight against racism and violence, and they stepped up their activism in the most repressive rural areas surrounding the city of Albany. Between the spring of 1963 and the end of 1965, activists throughout southwest Georgia opened and ran freedom schools, fought for workers' rights, made plans for a black savings and loan, held mass meetings and marches, and canvassed for voter registration. They also launched the Freedom Medical and Housing Corps to organize better health care and housing for black Albanians, and the Dougherty County Tutorial Project, which served 3,000 of Albany's children in one summer and helped to integrate the city's public schools. SNCC repeatedly reassessed its strategies and brought in new staff in an effort to remain effective and to stay in touch with the needs of the people it served. Young southwest Georgians formed a new Albany Student Movement, which would operate independently of SNCC, and adults filed and won a school desegregation suit and mounted several campaigns for public office.<sup>27</sup>

Although participants faced considerable obstacles at every stage of their protests, the movement community sustained itself through the mid-1960s. The number of activists eventually decreased and support for the movement became less widespread, but people continued to struggle, even in the face of bogus federal indictments of nine Albany activists and trumped up state charges of "seditious conspiracy" against SNCC workers in 1963. When SNCC left its roots in the rural South and expelled whites and nonviolent blacks in 1966, Sherrod and other organizers launched a range of post-SNCC initiatives for their continuing activism. Sherrod began by incorporating the Southwest Georgia Project (SWGP), which would provide daycare centers, apprenticeship programs, and educational opportunities for African-Americans in the region. In 1967, Sherrod and others from throughout the thirteen counties of southwest Georgia purchased 6,000 acres of farmland and established New Communities, Inc. Financial crisis caused New Communities to fold in 1985; however, its organizers intended for its facilities—including a 2,200-acre farm, a store, and an education center—to be practical sources of support for local black people and symbols of social and economic independence "for

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<sup>27</sup> Freedom Medical and Housing Corps memo (July 19, 1965); Dougherty County Tutorial Project report (July 10, 1965)—Lillian Hamwee Papers; I have found very little documentary evidence of the Albany Student Movement (ASM), beyond a letter from its president, Mamie Ford, to SNCC's Executive Committee, and a brief mention in a January 1964 SNCC field report by Phil Davis. Davis writes that the ASM will "work with, but be independent of, the Albany Movement Board and SCLC and SNCC." He notes that at its outset the ASM involved about eighty young people (SNCC Papers, A:II:8 and A:IV:104). Additional research may shed more light on the impact and organization of this group.



all Black Americans.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), which Sherrod and Albany Freedom Rider Joan Browning helped to organize in 1967, remains “a strong community based movement of organizations steeped in struggle, tested by time, experienced in fighting exploitation and knowledgeable of the tactics, tools and techniques needed to help people build their own property and progress.” Shirley Sherrod, Sherrod’s wife, is now a thirty-year veteran staff member in the FSC’s Georgia field office in Albany. In the formal political realm, Charles Sherrod held a seat on the Albany city commission from 1977 until 1991. And, if a recent conference of current community organizers and former SNCC volunteers is any indication, the freedom struggle—the effort to strengthen the black community, ensure that African-Americans enjoy all of the rights associated with American citizenship, and eradicate racial segregation and discrimination—continues in southwest Georgia today.<sup>29</sup>

The narrative that I have just offered suggests that this persistent movement sought to accomplish a great deal more than we are generally told. SNCC worker Faith Holsaert echoes the civil rights movement organizer Anne Braden when she calls the southwest Georgia movement an “unfinished revolution.” Similarly, participant and historian Bernice Johnson Reagon writes:

When you look at Black American history, you see skirmishes and battles in the war. In between are mending periods, even some slipping back periods...[But] keep in mind the natural flow of things. *Waves go out. When they come in there is always a rock-back. It is not the same wave in the same place and the sands have shifted to never again be the same.*<sup>30</sup>

There is no question that the legacies of both slavery and Jim Crow remain in southwest Georgia, as they do across the United States. But this attests to how deep an investment whites have had in racism and segregation, and not to a lack of effort, misguided tactics, or romantic idealism on the part of participants in civil rights campaigns.

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<sup>28</sup> Joan C. Browning e-mail to author, 12/05/01; “Something Unique and Important: The Southwest Georgia Project,” booklet on loan from Charles Sherrod to the Albany Mt. Zion Civil Rights Movement Museum.

<sup>29</sup> Federation of Southern Cooperatives website <[www.federationsoutherncoop.com](http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com)> (05/18/01); Many more traces of the organized movement remain evident in southwest Georgia: for example, students at Albany State University (formerly Albany State College) held a march on October 26, 2000, to protest Confederate symbolism on the Georgia state flag; the SNCC Freedom Singers, a group that started in Albany in 1962, still sing every other Saturday at the Albany Mt. Zion Civil Rights Movement Museum; and as part of the October 2000 conference in Albany, “Reviewing Our Past to Chart our Future,” former movement workers and residents of Albany organized a tribute to Charles Sherrod.

<sup>30</sup> Chalfen, “Rev. Samuel B. Wells:” 38; Faith Holsaert, interview with author, 22/11/00. The term “unfinished revolution” has also been attributed to activist A. Phillip Randolph, and to Tom Kahn, a student who published a pamphlet by this name in 1961. “Unfinished Revolution,” in *The Student Voice—Periodical of the SNCC* (February 1961), compiled by the staff of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project (London: Meckler, 1990), p. 33; Reagon, “My Black Mothers:” 82.

Part of the reason that we do not recognize the success of the movement in southwest Georgia is that it defies the analytical categories with which we generally study social insurgency. Conventional analyses are problematic for at least two reasons. For one, they favour a “success-driven” narrative that emphasizes individual achievement and downplays the extent to which resistance in American history has always involved a “tension between individualist (utilitarian) and collective (mutualist) ways of dealing with, and sometimes overcoming, dependence and inequality.”<sup>31</sup> They also confine meaningful activism to the public realm. As a result, standard approaches render the actors who were most important to the struggle historically invisible, and allow essential aspects of the movement—such as day-to-day living and relationships between participants—to remain unexamined.<sup>32</sup>

In order to understand this movement more fully, we need to focus on the process of the struggle and resist trying to enumerate its tactical accomplishments. Although the southwest Georgia movement did help to attain essential civil rights reforms, it was not only about desegregation and securing the right to vote. Formal political maneuvers and public dramas were important but the central elements of the southwest Georgia story lie within the cycles of nurturing and educating that characterize grassroots organizing. The actors in this story are often young SNCC organizers and women, and they built their movement in spaces that we do not conventionally define as political. Yet these people were the core of the movement, and their collective efforts brought the fundamental changes that allowed African-Americans in southwest Georgia to defy white intimidation and attempt to reshape American democratic traditions.

This thesis is an attempt to understand how the movement in southwest Georgia empowered individuals to carve out new spaces for African-American life, culture, and political involvement and to change their own lives by connecting themselves to a larger group. First, it will discuss SNCC’s efforts to build community solidarity in southwest Georgia, and examine the ways in which SNCC workers tried to enable fearful people to resist racism and segregation. It will also consider the notion that SNCC owed its success to the support of local women and girls, and to the tradition of activism that they modeled.

Second, this thesis will propose that in the southwest Georgia movement there was no clear distinction between public and private space and work. The home and the family were in fact highly politicized loci of movement activity. Families were especially key to the structure of this

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<sup>31</sup> Chalfen, “The Way Out,” 561; Gutman, p. 404.

<sup>32</sup> These notions, which are central to my thesis, also follow the lead of Charles Payne’s work on the organizing tradition in the Mississippi Delta. See Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, passim.

movement: they reflected the idea that people were responsible to each other and bound together by participation, and they provided critical support to movement workers.

Finally, it will argue that, perhaps more than anything else, the mass jail-ins in Albany and the rural counties redefined and empowered the movement community. An examination of participants' memories of the jail-ins will illuminate the culture of the movement, and show that for participants, community empowerment, interpersonal bonding and mutual accountability constituted the movement's primary meaning.

The jail-ins, the community effort, and SNCC's campaigns suggest that the movement in southwest Georgia was a process through which African-Americans began to see themselves as free and, to the largest extent possible, to reject the social and cultural conventions that dictated otherwise. Participants could not control the ways that whites responded to them, and at one level they remained constrained by the dominant society: many were threatened, injured or killed as they asserted themselves. However, the white response was of secondary importance because the movement was not a matter of waiting for demands to be met. As the historian William Chafe has written, "the struggle will go on, even if in ambiguity and uncertainty. And although the results remain in doubt, we should at least understand who has carried the fight forward, and how we have come to be where we are." Although participants did seek to dismantle the Jim Crow system, the movement was less an attempt to overthrow anything or anybody than it was a chance for participants to reconstruct their own society from within, heal each other and transform themselves.<sup>33</sup>

Through drawing people together in mass protest and believing in the capabilities of each individual, participants—most of whom were female—built a cohesive, supportive community that helped people begin to live their lives differently.<sup>34</sup> The community of the movement created new opportunities for individuals to experience their own power and the possibilities of American democracy. In their everyday actions participants demonstrated their entitlement to dignity and to their rights as citizens of the United States. In particular, the struggle in and around Albany reflects a longstanding commitment among black women to instilling self-confidence and pride in other members of the community, privileging the group over the

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<sup>33</sup> Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, p. 355. Note that Chafe wrote this with respect to the movement in Greensboro, North Carolina. The sentiment, however, is equally applicable to southwest Georgia; Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Although I am not aware of any conclusive statistics to this effect, many scholars and participants agree that women formed the majority of participants in the civil rights movement. See, for example, Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, p. 266; White, interview; King, interview; and Reagan, "My Black Mothers:" 95. Joan Browning has

individual, and maintaining a strong collective identity. These principles defined the structure of the movement and its participants' understanding of freedom.

Debating whether southwest Georgia was a tactical success or failure therefore obscures the importance of the movement to the people who made it, and to us, as well. The significance of the movement lies less in its concrete accomplishments than in what it suggests about the place of insurgency in American culture and about people's ability to resist oppression and to try to make a difference in their own lives. The movement could not meet all of its goals, and participants could only sustain the momentum of the mass struggle for so long.<sup>35</sup> But participants would never forget the hope they felt, and the ways in which the movement helped them realize and use the power they already possessed. Participants in this movement fought to cast off deference and fear. They tried to create a new environment in which neither race nor any other social category would limit the ways that individuals thought or what each person could do. Most fundamentally, the movement in southwest Georgia declared that white supremacy and competitive individualism—however threatening and entrenched—were open to question. Despite resolute opposition from whites and some participants' ultimate disillusionment, the movement demonstrated the power in cooperative mass organization and suggested that American society never had to be the same again.

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also pointed out to me that photographs indicate that black women comprised the overwhelming majority of participants at marches and mass meetings.

<sup>35</sup> Carson writes: "Social movements ultimately fail, at least in minds [sic] of many committed participants. As radicals and revolutionaries have discovered throughout history, even the most successful movements generate aspirations that cannot be fulfilled." Clayborne Carson, "Civil Rights Reform and the Black Freedom Struggle," in *The Civil Rights Movement in America*, ed. Charles W. Eagles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), p. 19.

**"The first thing you have to do is listen:"<sup>36</sup>**  
**SNCC, Organizing and Empowerment**

For many African-Americans in southwest Georgia in the mid-Twentieth Century, resistance was not a political tactic, but a thread in the fabric of daily life. Some individuals already viewed their culture as one of struggle: Annette Jones White's story is a good example of the ways in which ongoing experiences of racism could strengthen a person's will, and prepare her to help create the mass movement of the 1960s. White remembers that, as an African-American child and teenager in Albany, she was often vulnerable. She recalls the day that she stepped through a door held open by a white man:

I should have known that he was not holding this door for me. But I just saw him holding it and I had an armful of packages and I just walked forward. Normally I would have waited until he went through, until the door stopped swinging, and then I would have turned my back to it and pushed it, and gone through it. But he was holding it, so I was just not thinking, really.

When White walked through the door, the man "turned it loose." The force of the door hitting her in the face caused her nose to bleed.<sup>37</sup>

White's encounter represents one point on a continuum of white hostility toward African-Americans. Of course, the attacks could be much worse: racially motivated murders, for example, were not uncommon in southwest Georgia through the 1960s.<sup>38</sup> But African-Americans also struggled daily against the kind of petty antagonism that White describes. Before the civil rights movement, routine confrontations with racism—however minor in comparison to lynchings, rapes, and other violent crimes—caused African-Americans to "burn on the inside."<sup>39</sup> The organized freedom movement of the 1960s, therefore, did not awaken African-Americans to their oppression or introduce them to the idea of struggle. Rather, the movement evolved from resistance that already existed in people like Annette Jones White, who was out of necessity already battling everyday intimidation and subjugation.

White explains that there was an "unwritten law in Albany" that when walking downtown, African-Americans were to step off the sidewalk if white people were approaching. Her parents taught her "how, if I saw them way ahead I could just move off and window shop before they got close to me. That way it would not look as though I was giving them the sidewalk..." But on one

<sup>36</sup> Charles Sherrod, interview with author, 27/10/00.

<sup>37</sup> White, interview.

<sup>38</sup> For examples of murders and other violent crimes in southwest Georgia, see Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 408 and p. 528.

<sup>39</sup> Rambeau, interview with author.

particular day, White was distracted and she did not notice three white Albany High School boys until it was too late:

...they were too close. And these...fellows were walking...and I just knew, I'm not going to get off the sidewalk. I weighed maybe not ninety pounds, and he was a football player, and...he just stuck his elbow out and hit me as hard as he could. And it knocked me in the air, off the sidewalk, but I didn't fall. And I never looked back, you know. It hurt and I had bruises but I never looked back.<sup>40</sup>

White understood that any act of resistance—even one so quiet and apparently simple as refusing to step off a sidewalk—put her at risk. Yet, taking a personal risk was White's way of questioning and forcing a dialogue about racism and oppression. When the football player hit White with his elbow, he answered her claim to space in downtown Albany. But White steeled herself against intimidation and physical abuse and stayed on the sidewalk; whatever the boy thought of her, however he reacted to her defiance, she took her space and maintained her dignity. In one moment, White's actions told anyone watching that power, even though it was unfairly distributed and exercised, was not one-way.

When White finished telling me about growing up in the Jim Crow South, she observed, "So by the time SNCC came to town I guess I was good and ready." By 1961, many individuals were already articulating their rights to equal treatment and democratic participation, and trying to build a collective identity for the black community in southwest Georgia. Residents and SNCC organizers—volunteers drawn from the North and other parts of the South—thus attracted each other like magnets, as SNCC workers began to circulate and spread their message through schools, recreational facilities and churches. SNCC reflected the religious and collectivist values of the young African-Americans who were beginning to organize resistance to racism throughout the South.<sup>41</sup> The group's Statement of Purpose, adopted at its founding conference in Raleigh, North Carolina, on April 17, 1960, reads:

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance displaces prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supercedes systems of gross social immorality...By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.

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<sup>40</sup> White, interview.

<sup>41</sup> White, interview; The young SNCC workers were themselves influenced by the organizer Ella Baker, then Executive Director of the SCLC. Many SNCC volunteers consider Miss Baker the "midwife" to the student movement. See, for example, Penny Patch, interview with author, 27/10/00.

SNCC activists sought to challenge the forces that constrained them by changing their own responses to the intimidation and subordination that they confronted. They were committed to building a more just society through direct action protesting segregation, willingness to endure redemptive suffering and extending mutual respect. When SNCC volunteers arrived in southwest Georgia, they declared that they were “students with nothing but our bodies,” willing to confront “the monster who killed our mothers and castrated our fathers,” with appeals to moral decency and love.<sup>42</sup>

Yet the SNCC workers who sacrificed their material comfort and impressed residents with their kindness and courage were neither heroes nor martyrs. They were ordinary people who possessed an intense commitment to struggling *with* the local black population and, in the historian and participant Howard Zinn’s words, to “[removing] the barriers that prevent human beings from making contact with one another.”<sup>43</sup> Interpersonal connection was the source of the SNCC workers’ power and a commitment to mutualism underwrote their resistance. By responding to racism as a cooperative group, SNCC workers demonstrated that society did not have to be governed by “relations of domination and subordination.” SNCC workers launched a collective battle against white efforts to dominate black people because they recognized that white supremacy was neither natural nor inevitable. Rather, it was a construction—however forceful and well-defended—and they believed they could take it down and replace it with a more just and compassionate way of being.<sup>44</sup>

For Charles Sherrod, SNCC’s first field secretary, empowering people to exert control over their own lives was the first step in reorganizing social relations in southwest Georgia. When Sherrod and Cordell Reagon, another SNCC organizer, arrived in Albany in October, 1961, to launch a voter registration drive, they sensed that fear of white brutality hindered the black population’s struggle against racism. Fear of violence combined with centuries of social, political and economic subordination limited many residents’ willingness to defy white authority by registering to vote. According to Albanian Janie Culbreth Rambeau, “we are talking about a time when many of our brothers and sisters were laid to rest. Physically dead, dead, dead.” However,

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<sup>42</sup> SNCC Statement of Purpose (April 17, 1960)—SNCC Papers, A:V:9; Sherrod, “Non-Violence,” p. 5—SNCC Papers, A:IV:250. In Jo Freeman’s *Social Movements of the Sixties and Seventies* (New York: Longman, 1983), Emily Stoper explains that SNCC was a redemptive organization in which members embodied the organization’s goals in their own lives (p. 321).

<sup>43</sup> Slade, interview; Zinn, p. 237. Payne writes, “There are heroes and, emphatically, heroines enough in this history. Yielding to the temptation to focus on their courage, however, may miss the point.” He suggests, “of the gifts [grassroots organizers] brought to the making of the movement, courage may have been the least” (*I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, p. 5).

being afraid of white reprisals and recognizing the real obstacles that stood in the way of public participation did not equal being resigned to racist oppression. As one SNCC worker in southwest Georgia put it, "What looks like apathy is really a tension..."<sup>45</sup> Sherrod recognized in 1961 that many residents had learned to survive by deferring to whites or avoiding confrontation. His outline of SNCC's project explains:

In Georgia, the methods used to systematically disenfranchise the Negro have been founded on this hypothesis—the obliteration of motivation toward suffrage...The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee intends to deal with this grand historical strategy on the same level which causes it to be effective. We propose to engage in a battle for minds.

Sherrod observed that residents of southwest Georgia needed the SNCC workers' support if they were going to challenge the entrenched system of white supremacy and violence. He also understood that residents needed the SNCC workers' faith in their desire for freedom. Sherrod trusted that behind some apparent deference were people "seething with unrest," and he believed that SNCC could mobilize the community by maintaining confidence in their struggle, by promising to stand with residents when they challenged Jim Crow, and by enduring any punishment that whites might hand down.<sup>46</sup>

In 1961, SNCC offered black residents of southwest Georgia a protective community and consistent support as they overcame fear and began to take action. A central tenet of SNCC's

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Krause, "The Life and Times of 'Beeswax' Taylor: Origins and Paradoxes of the Gilded-Age Labor Movement," *Labor History* 33 (1, Winter 1992): 53.

<sup>45</sup> Rambeau, interview with author; Phil Davis, as quoted in "Flash: Albany, Georgia—City on the Edge of Racial Violence" (c. 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IX:55. In an October 1963 report to the SNCC office in Atlanta, Joyce Barrett wrote, "This fall has been of [sic] the most painful and frustrating low points in the movement's history, but the movement is far from dead." She explains that her own sense of failure "has been greater than the actual situation warrants." In spite of clashes amongst staff members, and difficulty mobilizing the community, Barrett states that mass meetings still have a "tremendous feeling of strength and unity," and that "the movement is continuing to grow." SNCC Papers, A:IV:39.

<sup>46</sup> Southwest Georgia Voter-Registration Project report—SNCC Papers, A:IV:292; Sherrod, "Non-Violence," pp. 1-2—SNCC Papers, A:IV:250. Sherrod would bear substantial criticism in later years for his strategy of battling for minds: some SNCC staff members viewed it as ultimately ineffective because it did not seem to offer a concrete base from which to mount a campaign against segregation. See, for example, the letter of September 25, 1963, from Ruby Doris Smith Robinson (Assistant Staff Coordinator) to field worker Miriam Cohen. Robinson writes: "At least everyone agrees on one thing...that tactics presently being used in Albany are ineffective or at least inefficient." It is not clear, however, to whom 'everyone' refers. It seems likely that Robinson speaks primarily for staff in the Atlanta office, and not for all of the volunteers working in southwest Georgia at that time—SNCC Papers, A:IV:82; see also Jean Wheeler, "A Criticism," (August 20, 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IX:19; and Courtland Cox, as quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 101. Moreover, while it is true that Sherrod's approach did not always translate into immediate, quantifiable gains for the black community, SNCC's project in southwest Georgia was not only about making segregation illegal or including African-Americans in the existing political process. While it did seek these and other practical reforms, it also sought much more essential social and cultural changes, and Sherrod was one among many SNCC organizers in southwest Georgia who expressed a commitment to the goal of "freeing minds." See also, for example: Robert Mants, Jr., Report from Americus (September 30-October 5, 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:VII:20; Kathleen Conwell, Lee County Voter Registration Project Report (July 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:215; Peggy Dammond, Lee County Project Report (July 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:215.



strategy was that no person could be expected to resist alone. SNCC workers went to communities throughout the South in order to act as role models and to provide the regular assistance that people needed as they struggled to build the movement. According to Cordell Reagon, residents “were welcome to our bodies, and they could use our bodies the best way they saw fit.” SNCC workers offered themselves as targets for white hostility toward the movement, and they subordinated their health and safety to the needs of the movement and the indigenous black population. As Albany Freedom Rider and SNCC staff member Casey Hayden puts it, “We embodied, not as an abstraction, but actually, the struggle and the stress...of creating new social realities...”<sup>47</sup> SNCC formed a “Beloved Community” in which nothing counted “except the willingness to act out your beliefs.” SNCC workers strove to make identity and social status irrelevant: organizers would support and encourage activism in any person who wished to participate, and every participant’s contribution was of equal value. The Beloved Community, therefore, offered the possibility of an environment in which each person—regardless of race, class or gender—might have the same opportunities for self-fulfillment, justice and dignity. Hayden explains that the Beloved Community “was freedom as an inside job, not as external to myself, but as created, on the spot and in the moment, by our actions.”<sup>48</sup> SNCC workers opened their Beloved Community to the residents of southwest Georgia, and wove themselves into the local struggle.

It was through forming the Beloved Community in the early days of the movement that SNCC gained people’s trust, and became able to launch its campaign for voter registration. Canvassing for voter registration was a crucial part of SNCC’s reason for being in southwest Georgia. For many SNCC workers, however, canvassing offered much more to the freedom struggle than boosting the number of registered black voters. For example, in a report to the Voter Education Project (VEP), a federal programme that funded some of SNCC’s efforts, field worker Elizabeth Wyckoff wrote:

Some people may wonder whether the meager statistical results of the registration figures, and the very notable improvement of morale of a small portion of the Negro population is worth the dangers and in many cases the suffering of the SNCC workers and of the local people who are active in the registration effort. Our presence here is *our* answer. On the strictly pragmatic level it is true that a greatly enlarged Negro electorate is the key to the

<sup>47</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, p. 237; Reagon, as quoted in Watters, p. 154; Casey Hayden, in Constance Curry, et al, *Deep in our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 374. In addition to facing white violence, SNCC workers frequently went without sufficient food, and they refer frequently—in field reports, interviews, and published sources—to illness caused by overwork, poor diet, and unsanitary conditions. See, for example, Barrett report (October 4, 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:39.

<sup>48</sup> Mary King, as quoted in Greenberg, p. 25; Hayden, in Curry, et al, *Deep in Our Hearts*, p. 342.

solution of those problems which bedevil the South. But no urban Northerner like myself can be under the illusion that unhampered Negro suffrage brings the day of Freedom. It is a prerequisite, and no more...[To] move from the pragmatic level, many of the Negroes with whom we have been in touch in Southwest Georgia have moved into freedom of the mind, and it is now theirs for life, even if they should never succeed in their efforts to persuade a semi-literate, hostile registrar to put their names on a roll which gives them the option of voting for the less unpleasant of two repulsive candidates.<sup>49</sup>

According to Wyckoff, increasing the number of African-American voters was necessary but it was not the key to bringing "the day of Freedom." By gaining the suffrage, African-Americans would include themselves in a flawed political system. Inclusion might be a significant improvement in the sense that participation in electoral politics would allow African-Americans to challenge policy makers to consider their needs and their rights as citizens. But in Wyckoff's view, the freedom to vote was only one step toward the greater goal of "freedom of the mind." In order to fight successfully against racism and Jim Crow, black residents of southwest Georgia needed to be able to conceive of new ways of living beyond the conventions that the dominant system imposed. Only once people gained the ability to formulate an alternative social vision would they be willing to risk participation in a coordinated effort to transform society and culture.

Canvassing for voter registration, which entailed walking door-to-door, entering people's homes and getting to know residents on a personal level, offered movement workers an opportunity to alter the ways in which people related to one another and thought about their place in society. Canvassers with SNCC's campaign held that if each person could see his or her individual value to the workings of politics and public life then as a group, people could effect fundamental change. As they knocked on doors to register voters, canvassers provided evidence that an alternative, supportive community existed for those people who were willing to join in resistance to white domination. Canvassers suggested that people did not have to live in fear, silence and disillusionment; they could trust each other, make their views known, and together alter the system that oppressed them. The movement was in this sense revolutionary in a society

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<sup>49</sup> Wyckoff report (December 7, 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:387. The Kennedy administration began funding voter registration through the VEP in 1962, having embraced the view that canvassing was less radical than direct action (Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, pp. 108-9). Canvassing was certainly less spectacular than sitting-in and marching in the streets. What the government failed to recognize, however, was that canvassing provided SNCC workers with a direct line into the community and an opportunity to encourage people to question the values at the heart of American culture, society and politics.

that celebrated deference, and that was predicated upon isolating African-Americans and denying them collective power.<sup>50</sup>

Participation in SNCC offered a viable alternative to living in mainstream society, which seemed committed to competition and divisiveness. Moreover, SNCC's anti-authoritarian, cooperative structure provided participants with unprecedented opportunities for a new kind of leadership. In SNCC, traditional badges of power such as titled positions and formal portfolios were virtually meaningless. A titled position usually meant that a person occupied a desk job and did not perform the more dangerous, and therefore more prestigious, fieldwork. The SNCC staff derived power from their actions in the field, and their work was always voluntary: one had as much power as one took. Carson explains that in SNCC, "The organizational structure did not hold the staff together; rather, they were drawn together by their conviction that SNCC's structure should be subordinate to their common goals." Indeed, SNCC staff worked for the movement, and not for the organization; this set them apart from the members of other civil rights groups that were active in Albany, such as the NAACP and SCLC.<sup>51</sup> Several scholars—including Carson, and the sociologist Belinda Robnett—have commented that SNCC's decentralized structure was what made the organization particularly effective in the grassroots communities that it served.<sup>52</sup> In SNCC, people who had often found themselves at the bottom of the power structure—poor people, people of colour, and women—had new opportunities to mount a struggle on their own behalf, and get support as they took action in their own lives. In

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<sup>50</sup> See Goodwyn (passim), who emphasizes the sheer difficulty of envisioning and working toward alternative social and cultural possibilities.

<sup>51</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 110-14; Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 45; Minutes of SNCC Regional Meeting: Atlanta, Georgia (March 26, 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:III:1. SNCC field worker Charles Jones noted at this meeting that groups like SCLC and NAACP differed from SNCC in that they were concerned with establishing a permanent leadership base in the region. SNCC organizers intended to stay only as long as it took to build self-sufficient local leaders. SNCC was not organized to be permanent. Its second chairman, Charles McDew, had thought SNCC might last three or four years, and certainly not more than five.

<sup>52</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 45; Robnett, p. 170. Of course, the lack of bureaucracy did have its downside. SNCC's records indicate that there was almost always a degree of chaos surrounding the administration of local projects: there are countless letters from field workers begging the central office in Atlanta for more consistent attention, and complaining that a particular project was being ignored or forgotten. A lack of formal organization meant that SNCC's projects in Albany and rural southwest Georgia often seemed inefficient. For example, workers appear to have spent as much time trying to fix the dilapidated cars that were supposed to carry them from project to project, as they did actually canvassing for voter registration. Money that should have been spent on transportation or on paying utility bills sometimes went into the pockets of SNCC workers whose subsistence cheques had not arrived from Atlanta on schedule. However, such apparent inefficiency emphasized to the SNCC workers and to the local population the difficulty of being a full-time civil rights activist. Living hand-to-mouth, with constant insecurity and threats of danger heightened participants' feelings of being together in an "in-group," and participants bonded with one another as they struggled to fulfill their basic needs. See, for example, Willie Ricks, Field Report (March 15, 1964)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:215; Dammond report (July 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:214; Holsaert, interview.

the early 1960s, therefore, SNCC defied and offered a corrective to the oppressive relationships that shaped dominant American social conventions.

SNCC organizers in southwest Georgia also changed the face of the civil rights movement itself, and developed structures for organizing that would help make future liberation struggles possible.<sup>53</sup> The southwest Georgia project had particularly important implications for white women, as it was the first SNCC project to count them as staff members in each of its urban and rural campaigns.<sup>54</sup> SNCC reports indicate that just like black and white men, white women were involved in every aspect of the movement, from the most confrontational direct action protests, to voter registration, to office work. Participation in the project was, therefore, an especially empowering experience for individuals such as Penny Patch, the first white woman to work full-time with SNCC in a rural community project in the Deep South. Patch states unequivocally, "I did reams of things that were not available to women of my generation." While she cautions against calling SNCC a feminist organization per se, it seems clear that SNCC's southwest Georgia project provided white women with the equal access to work and opportunities for self-fulfillment that the women's liberation movement of the 1970s would seek.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps even more significantly, the southwest Georgia project was the only SNCC campaign before the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer to recruit any white civil rights workers. Integrating the project was Sherrod's idea, and his decision to include white people reflected both practical and ideological concerns. Sherrod explains that white volunteers—most of who came from northern, liberal families—brought the money and media attention that the project needed to maintain itself. White people's presence alongside black workers also sent important messages to both segregationists and the movement participants themselves. First, the integrated project demonstrated to local whites that segregation was not a foregone conclusion: white and

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<sup>53</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon has thus called the civil rights movement, "the burning struggle." According to Reagon, "...the civil rights movement burned not just the Black power and Black revolutionary movements but every progressive struggle that has occurred in this country since that time." Reagon, as quoted in Dick Cluster, "The Burning Struggle: The Civil Rights Movement, an interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon," *Radical America* 12 (6, November-December 1978): 10.

<sup>54</sup> Nine white women—including Constance Curry, Joan Browning, Penny Patch, and Casey Hayden—have recently published an anthology of personal narratives of their experiences in the civil rights movement. Browning and Patch's narratives pay significant attention to aspects of the movement in southwest Georgia. See Curry, et al, *Deep in Our Hearts*. SNCC's first staff person was a white woman, Jane Stembridge, who served as Executive Secretary and worked in a corner of the Auburn Avenue office in Atlanta, supplied by Ella Baker of SCLC.

<sup>55</sup> Patch, interview with author; In his study of SNCC's 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer—the next project after southwest Georgia to employ racially and gender integrated teams of volunteers—the sociologist Doug McAdam found that, compared with men, women "attributed the greatest personal significance to the project." McAdam suggests that women found the project particularly empowering, and "remember the project for the good it did their self-confidence and sense of self-worth." Doug McAdam, "Gender as a Mediator of the Activist Experience: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (5, March 1992): 1211 and 1224.

black people were willing to cooperate to contest Jim Crow, and they would not wait for racist whites to give integration the go-ahead. Patch wrote from Lee County in December 1962 that SNCC workers took integration into their own hands:

Here, for the first time, all southerners are able to see Negroes and whites working side by side as equals and as friends... We are confronting the community with what should be and what will be. We are *showing* here and now, rather than talking about black and white together, that a dream can be a reality, and that words can mean something...all of us are, in our own individual ways, fighting for a new community.<sup>56</sup>

By living in southwest Georgia for extended periods of time and being seen as “black and white together,” SNCC workers posed a head-on, daily challenge to segregation and those who supported the system.

Second, black and white cooperation within the project was central to SNCC’s attempt to empower black residents of southwest Georgia. Living in the white supremacist South had conditioned many African-Americans to act submissive toward whites or else face potentially grave consequences. SNCC’s integrated project demonstrated that not all white people actually wanted deferential treatment. In subtle but significant ways, white SNCC workers encouraged black people to develop their confidence and demand respect. In July, 1962, for example, field worker Peggy Dammond reported to SNCC’s Atlanta office that nineteen-year old Patch declined the seat that an elderly black woman offered her: “imagine an elderly lady offering her a seat...we later all realized the value that had occurred by Penny’s refusal. This perhaps is one small bit of progress. That lady will not forget.” Over time, participants in the movement—SNCC workers and residents of southwest Georgia—began to question the significance of both race and gender in their daily lives, and began to believe that perhaps identity should not determine who sat and who stood, or who performed what type of work.<sup>57</sup>

Sherrod explains rather succinctly that in the movement, “nobody cares what color you are, what gender you are...if you’re going to take a few of these blows off my head. If I am still alive because you’re here...then what the hell do I care about who you are?” Sherrod invited white people with deeply held beliefs into the project for pragmatic reasons and because it was an opportunity to model the ideal of integration that SNCC was working toward in its formal

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<sup>56</sup> Sherrod first called for white volunteers to join African-Americans as full-time activists in SNCC’s project in southwest Georgia; however, James Forman, SNCC’s Executive Chairman, also recognized the value in integrated protest. Forman organized the December 1961 Freedom Ride that brought some of the first white SNCC volunteers—Joan Browning, Tom and Casey Hayden, Per Lausen and Bob Zellner—to Albany. Browning, in Curry, et al, *Deep in Our Hearts*, p. 67; Sherrod, interview; Penny Patch report to Wiley Branton, VEP (December 8, 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:296.

<sup>57</sup> Dammond report (July 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:215.

campaign. However, the exigencies of the situation meant that SNCC's ideal of blindness to race and gender was not always possible. For instance, everyone was acutely aware of the danger that the presence of white women brought to the movement. White women were themselves at some risk when they ventured south as volunteers because their participation in the movement challenged deeply ingrained race and gender conventions. Most problematically, white women angered the white men who felt it was their right and duty to control women's public behaviour; the men in turn tried to exert power over the women whenever possible. In a December, 1961, letter, Joan Browning, a young white woman from Milledgeville, Georgia, wrote of the personal danger she faced as one of two white female volunteers involved with the Freedom Ride: "Rumor has it that I am a special mark. The white men feel that they should take steps to save me from myself and these people I'm with. They can't get over my All-American, innocent look." On May 21, 1963, guards strip-searched SNCC field worker Joni Rabinowitz in full view of male prisoners in the Albany city jail. Faith Holsaert reported being molested by police in the jail the following day. Penny Patch remembers being singled out and threatened by guards in the courthouse in Smithville, outside of Albany, and she was questioned by police on more than one occasion when riding in a car at night with black people.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the risks they faced as they participated in the freedom movement, both Holsaert and Patch stress that they were less concerned about their own safety than they were about the safety of the African-American people with whom they worked. Sherrod states that "nothing boiled [white people's] blood quicker than a black man holding the hand of a white woman." SNCC workers were careful not to be seen having any kind of intimate contact with one another—Sherrod says they were careful to "not be quickly killed"—and white women did not canvass alone with black men. SNCC organizers were aware that white women's mere presence as volunteers in a black-led organization and as residents in the African-American community was subversive: SNCC incited the white community's anger because it contravened a basic premise of segregation, which was that white women were to be kept separate from black men at any price.<sup>59</sup>

When SNCC brought black men and white women together, it destabilized a system that privileged white men's control of both female bodies and bodies belonging to people of colour.

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<sup>58</sup> Sherrod, interview; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals (December 27, 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:341; Letter to Faye Powell (12/12/61)—Joan Browning papers; News release (May 24, 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:VII:3; Patch, interview with author; Joan Maxwell, sworn affidavit to the U.S. Justice Department (July 29, 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:VIII:114; Dammond report (July 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:215.

<sup>59</sup> Patch, in Curry, et al, *Deep in our Hearts*, p. 152; Patch, interview with author; Holsaert, interview; Sherrod, interview.

As W.E.B. Du Bois put it long before the movement of the 1960s, "the race question at bottom is simply a matter of ownership of women; white men want the right to use all women, colored and white, and they resent the intrusion of colored men in this domain." Similarly, Browning suggests that the need to separate white women from black men stemmed from "the universal 'bottom line' of racism's justification," which was,

the reproductive capacity of white women. Racial segregation had to be maintained at any cost so that white women's wombs delivered babies endowed with an alleged "racial purity"... White women were the non-negotiable element in segregation's argument. All white women, regardless of class or personal character, were placed on race/gender pedestals, verboten to black men widely believed to be bent on "race mixing."

Gender conventions, sexual stereotypes and notions of "racial purity" intertwined, reinforced one another, and constituted the racist and sexist ideology at the core of white supremacy. Staffing a project with black men and white women, therefore, posed a serious challenge to white supremacist culture. Field worker Prathia Hall reported in February 1963 that bringing white men into Terrell County "was havoc for the white power structure. Now, we are moving in a white girl...[and] as soon as the white community learns that a white girl is living with us, they [will] no doubt respond in some way." According to Hall, Faith Holsaert's presence created "a potentially explosive situation," which SNCC organizers worked hard to control. They refused to compromise their principles and keep Holsaert in the city of Albany, which would have been slightly less dangerous. But for the first week after her move into Terrell County, she and Hall stayed within a one-block radius of the home in which they were living and maintained a heightened awareness of white reactions to their activities.<sup>60</sup>

In spite of the dangers that surrounded white women's participation, the southwest Georgia project afforded the women leadership opportunities that they could not have gotten elsewhere in the movement or in wider American society at that time. Patch and Holsaert agree that it was partly Sherrod's interracial vision that allowed white women so much freedom. But they also note that more than Sherrod's vision or SNCC's egalitarian structure supported women's activism in southwest Georgia.<sup>61</sup> More importantly, SNCC's approach dovetailed with the reality that it was often African-American women and girls who were most willing and able to

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<sup>60</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, as quoted in Giddings, p. 61; Joan C. Browning, "A Quiet and Sinister Tyranny: Public Scrutiny of White Women Who Transgressed Jim Crow in Atlanta, Georgia, 1940-1968," unpublished paper presented at Mid-America Conference on History (September 18, 1997); Hall report (February-March 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:155.

<sup>61</sup> Patch, interview with author; Holsaert, interview. In addition, Cheryl Greenberg documents a heated discussion amongst former SNCC staff at a 1988 conference, in which they take issue with the notion that SNCC was in any way, at any time a sexist organization. See Greenberg, pp. 127-151.

become movement activists. Whereas white women's participation in the movement broke social taboos about what was appropriate female work and conduct, in the black community, women's activism was usual and even expected. As SNCC organizer Cynthia Washington explains, economic and social realities meant that for better or for worse, black women had always worked both inside and outside of their homes and were raised to "function independently...[and] learn to do all of the things required to survive." However, while black women benefited from a sense of independence that white women generally did not have, those who were coming of age during the civil rights era also struggled to define their gender roles in relation to the position of their race. In the mid-Twentieth Century, "young African-American women...were told that they could and should do it all." Their schools and their families socialized them to be middle class 'ladies' who could contradict the notion—left over from slavery—that black women were genderless workers, and challenge the negative implication that black women had achieved independence at the expense of black men. At the same time, African-American women were uniquely situated to take on public leadership positions. Because women were paid less than men for their work, African-American families tended to educate their daughters more than their sons, whose labour was also in higher demand. This allowed black women access to professions that were amenable to social leadership, such as teaching and social work. In addition, the women's lower salaries meant that they were more likely to risk participating in civil rights protests as their families relied less on their paycheques. The women who worked for the civil rights movement, therefore, took up leadership roles that were in some sense familiar to them, and juggled their own desires and aptitudes for action with shifting conventions of race and gender.<sup>62</sup>

The black women living in the communities where SNCC worked served as positive examples of female strength and authority. In the counties of southwest Georgia, Annie Raines and Carolyn Daniels stood as examples of people whose leadership was tied to their understanding of their rights as American citizens and to their desire to support SNCC activists, protect and influence their families, and resist the oppression that they faced in their own lives. Mrs. Raines and Mrs. Daniels also each had a degree of personal and economic independence that made leading the movement possible. When SNCC organizers moved into the rural counties

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<sup>62</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: the Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 78; Cynthia Griggs Fleming, "Black Women Activists and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: the Case of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson," *Journal of Women's History* 4 (3, Winter 1993): 68; Cynthia Washington, "We Started from Different Ends of the Spectrum," *Southern Exposure* 4 (4, Winter 1977): 14; Fleming, "Black Women..." 69; Giddings, p. 7.



in the spring of 1962, both were self-employed, single women who owned their own homes. They were not answerable to husbands or bosses, and it appears that their general self-sufficiency provided them with the confidence to stand up to harassment and ridicule from local whites. The mass movement in southwest Georgia took shape because people such as Mrs. Raines and Mrs. Daniels volunteered to share their personal confidence and material security with others in the community. These two women housed and fed the SNCC workers, nursed them when they were sick, and allowed them to use their cars as needed. They also canvassed for voter registration and ran freedom schools from their homes in order to encourage political participation by teaching people how to read and write.<sup>63</sup> Mrs. Raines and Mrs. Daniels helped SNCC achieve tangible results in the counties and even more importantly, these women and their network of friends and relatives were also evidence that SNCC workers “were not the beginning of resistance and protest” in southwest Georgia.<sup>64</sup>

Both Mrs. Raines and Mrs. Daniels were known in their communities as militant women willing to seize their rights, and defend themselves against intimidation. Mrs. Raines’ granddaughter, Veronise Christian, recalls that Annie Raines was quick to defend SNCC workers and her family against the regular bomb threats that came from the Lee County police department. When police threatened to attack the SNCC workers who stayed with her, Christian says that she told her guests, “y’all go to bed, y’all go to sleep, don’t worry about it,” and spent the night guarding her home, Winchester rifle in hand. Christian looked up to her grandmother because Mrs. Raines made sure that whites knew “she didn’t play...She did not quit.” Indeed, Annie Raines refused to bow to white violence or racism, and she made every effort to level the inequities between whites and blacks. A nurse and a midwife, she acquired the nickname Mama Dolly—short for Mama Dollar—from a family who chided her because she delivered black babies for free, but charged white people for her services. A SNCC worker reported in 1962 that

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<sup>63</sup> Movement participants throughout the South organized freedom schools, which were meetings of people who wished to learn the basic skills necessary for economic and political independence. Facilitators stressed literacy and citizenship education (i.e. knowledge of the Constitution and the electoral political process) in order to make it possible for individuals to pass the voter registration exams. The schools were also a fundamental effort to unite members of the community and provide them with a venue to share information, aspirations and fears as they participated in the movement. SCLC organizers such as Septima Clark and Ella Baker were instrumental in setting up many of the freedom schools, as were organizers at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and freedom schools became an essential part of SNCC’s campaigns. See, for example, Septima Clark, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Cynthia Stokes Brown (Navarro, CA: Wild Trees Press, 1986), especially pp. 48-53 and 62-70.

<sup>64</sup> Holsaert, interview.

Mrs. Raines was quiet and gentle in her approach to black residents of Lee County, but her activities suggest that she was far from meek in her dealings with whites.<sup>65</sup>

SNCC's project in Lee County relied on Mrs. Raines' support. Mrs. Raines endorsed SNCC because its programme mirrored her own efforts to counter racism, and encourage African-Americans to register to vote. Although SNCC workers were usually easy to identify in a community, a month into her stay in Lee County Penny Patch reported that black people seemed to have underestimated the significance of SNCC's presence there until the group became associated with Mrs. Raines. Local whites were also slow to attribute the voter registration drive to SNCC. At least one white person began with the assumption that it was Mrs. Raines' brainchild: when a Lee County resident tried to register to vote in July 1962, the registrar asked him, "Did old Dolly Raines send you down here?" African-Americans and white people alike recognized Mrs. Raines' strength, and viewed her as a force to be reckoned with.<sup>66</sup>

Whites in Terrell County were similarly wary of Carolyn Daniels' power within the community. A self-employed hairdresser, Mrs. Daniels was drawn into the formal movement in anger, after white officials harassed her teenaged son, Roychester Patterson. Faith Holsaert, who lived with Mrs. Daniels in 1963, says, "She came at this from...[the perspective that] she was an American and, by God...[they] shouldn't push her kid around...She was a business woman and she should be respected." SNCC attracted Mrs. Daniels' son into its voter registration campaign, but Mrs. Daniels was already an important figure in her community; from early on in their relationship with her, SNCC workers viewed Mrs. Daniels as "*the* leader in Terrell County." Mrs. Daniels' professional status meant that she was independent and well connected with both whites and blacks in the area. Moreover, SNCC's arrival exacerbated, but did not create, the antagonistic relationship between her and some local whites. Although whites shot into, and then bombed Mrs. Daniels' house because she allowed movement workers to live there, Holsaert suggests that Mrs. Daniels had a longstanding reputation for militancy. Holsaert explains: "if we lived at her house that clearly identified us as being pretty defiant of authority and willing to take risks." Together, Mrs. Daniels and Mrs. Raines helped establish SNCC as a radical force in southwest Georgia, brought the group to the people's attention, and informed SNCC organizers about the community. The women's confidence and their commitment to activism predated

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<sup>65</sup> Veronise Christian, in *The Discussion Continues: The Civil Rights Movement in Southwest Georgia*, video (Albany, Georgia: 4/21/1994); Johnnie Jinks Campbell, interview with Angela Whitmal, 12/05/97. Like Christian, Campbell is one of Mrs. Raines' granddaughters; Lee County Report (June 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:215.

<sup>66</sup> Patch report (July 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:296; Conwell report (July 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:215.

SNCC's arrival in the counties, and indicated that the struggle would outlast the organization's efforts there.<sup>67</sup>

Younger African-American women and girls also distinguished themselves in SNCC's campaign in southwest Georgia, and their commitment to the movement was unparalleled. They were tireless workers who helped ground SNCC in the community by bringing groups of siblings and friends into the movement, and by welcoming the SNCC organizers into their families. According to SNCC reports, the most militant participants were actually among the youngest: the power of elementary and high school girls was absolutely critical to the struggle in Albany and the rural counties. Albany police told twelve-year-old LaVette Christian's mother, Odessa Mae Christian, that the girl was "crazy and should be watched carefully" because she was so defiant of their authority. When a police officer stopped her one afternoon in downtown Albany—an area that was conventionally for whites only—and asked if she had ventured out to stir up trouble on Sherrod's request, LaVette told SNCC workers that she had replied as follows:

No...I went downtown because I wanted to get a soda and I want my freedom. He tried to get me to say something about Sherrod and I just got him off [that topic] and started talking about the schools. I said the reason my Daddy can't read as good as him is that when we go to school, they give us the old books that the white school has already used, all tore up and pages missing...Then he said, if you [don't] remember one thing about what Sherrod told you, I'll put you back in [jail]. So I told him I didn't remember nothing that Sherrod told me, but I KNEW ONE THING, and that one thing is that I want my freedom.<sup>68</sup>

LaVette Christian's sisters were equally bold, and all of the girls reflected their parents' emphasis on participation in the movement. In Albany in 1963, nine-year-old James Zenna Christian, and her seven-year-old sister, Deloris, led two hundred adults in song at a mass meeting. As Faith Holsaert reported, "Couldn't even see Deloris behind the rostrum but you sure could hear her. Ain't gonna let NOBODY turn ME round." Holsaert also documented one of fifteen-year-old "ball of fire" JoAnne Christian's run-ins with police chief Laurie Pritchett. Holsaert wrote that Christian stood firm with her hands on her hips, glared at Pritchett, and commanded LaVette, "Sing, Dear, sing!" The young Christian girls staved off Pritchett with a chorus of "We Shall Overcome."<sup>69</sup>

The Gaines girls—Shirley, Patricia, Marion, and Norma—represented another active movement family. Marion Gaines was only eleven-years old when Charles Sherrod stood her on

<sup>67</sup> Holsaert, interview; Dammond report (June 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IX:19; Holsaert, interview.

<sup>68</sup> Holsaert report (March 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:177.

<sup>69</sup> Holsaert report (February 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:177; "A Tribute to SNCC on its Fifth Birthday," (c. 1965), p. 12—SNCC Papers, A:VIII:282. From oldest to youngest, the daughters of James and Odessa Mae Christian were: JoAnne, LaVette Marie (also known as Dear), James Zenna, and Deloris.

a chair at a mass meeting in Sumter County and told the audience, "This is Albany." As a child, Gaines led songs at mass meetings, canvassed, and went to jail for the movement as often as she could. SNCC worker Jack Chatfield noted a conversation he had with Gaines about jail: "I asked Marion Gaines when she was going to jail (demonstrations began today in Albany; six were jailed)... 'Tomorrow,' she said. 'I couldn't go today on account of I had to go to music.' ...The ceremony of innocence has not been entirely drowned in Albany." For Gaines and her older sisters, the movement was as much a part of life as the familiar childhood pastimes of homework and music lessons.<sup>70</sup>

Daily life for many children in southwest Georgia, including the Gaineses and the Christians, revolved around standing up to those people who tried to hold power over them and facing the challenges that went along with participation in the movement. During their summer vacation in 1963, forty-two girls aged eleven through fifteen were jailed in the Lee County Stockade under deplorable conditions. The jail was infested with cockroaches and bed bugs and it was "so filthy that the little ones begged for...a broom to sweep the floor," which was covered in sewage and waste material.<sup>71</sup> Patricia Gaines Slade, who was fifteen at the time, went to jail in Albany at least fourteen times and she remembers that even outside of jail, it was difficult to cope with the ongoing intimidation of beatings and police surveillance.<sup>72</sup> She also notes the strain of balancing schoolwork with participation in the movement, and fending off classmates who ridiculed her as a "movement mama." But Slade, her sisters, and their friends—the Christians, sisters Shirley and Eunice Lawrence, Margaret Sanders, Eddie Maude McKendrick, Carol Price and Mamie Ford—knew that they were central to the success of the movement. They were the "largely female cadre of youngsters" who formed the core of SNCC's organizing team, and spent all of their afternoons, summers, and school vacations canvassing and protesting segregation.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Holsaert, Sumter County report (November 8, 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:177; Jack Chatfield report (March 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:78.

<sup>71</sup> "An Appeal to All Citizens of Americus and Sumter County," (September 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:VIII:105.

<sup>72</sup> Patricia Gaines Slade, her sisters, and the Christians were often targets of white hostility to the movement, and their youth did not protect them from violence or intimidation. For example, detectives followed them throughout the city of Albany; Shirley Gaines and JoAnne Christian each received brutal police beatings; and one SNCC report depicts Jack Chatfield hugging a hysterical Marion Gaines in the backseat of a car, as another car driven by a group of whites rammed them from behind. Holsaert report (December 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:177; Southwest Georgia Project: Report and Proposals (December 27, 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:341; Zinn, p. 135; and Chatfield report (April 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:78.

<sup>73</sup> When we spoke about her experiences in the movement, Slade recalled the stress of missing exams at school to testify in the 1963 federal case against the Albany Movement, and the difficulties she confronted when she integrated Albany High School after *Gaines v. Dougherty County Board of Education*, the 1965 suit filed in Shirley Gaines' name. Slade, interview; Chalfen, "The Way Out:" 588, 576.

These “foot soldiers” did the work for the movement “that a lot of people did not want to do.” They also linked SNCC workers—many of whom were themselves very young, and away from home for the first time—to the adults in the community who could provide them with food, shelter, and surrogate families. Slade explains that the girls bonded with each other and with the SNCC volunteers in a close-knit group dedicated to making a change in the community. The camaraderie of the movement thus strengthened her commitment to the struggle: as she puts it, “Kids would tease [me] but [I could] still hold [my] head up. I knew that I was somebody...I couldn’t see why they were not out doing what I was doing.”<sup>74</sup>

Participation in the movement helped people like Patricia Gaines Slade define their individual strength in relation to a growing, changing community. Participation in the movement equaled participation in American democratic culture. Together, African-American residents of southwest Georgia and visiting SNCC workers challenged the customs that constrained them and tried to reshape their society along more just lines. SNCC succeeded in the region—helped empower and enfranchise residents, and built a long-term presence—because field workers respected and made themselves a part of the community they served. Local women and girls were particularly crucial to SNCC’s success, and their participation reflects the ways in which SNCC grounded its campaign in the resident population’s needs, its history of resistance, and its capacity for militancy.

The SNCC workers who arrived in southwest Georgia in the early 1960s knew that they did not have to create a struggle. Rather, they had to notice the struggles in which residents were already engaged, and that were in some sense built-in to a social system that pitted people against one another.<sup>75</sup> They also had to identify the barriers that sometimes prevented people from defying oppression openly. The SNCC workers, therefore, set out to help build a community that could combat fear and intimidation, and in which individuals could bring previously isolated struggles together. In cooperation with residents, SNCC workers nurtured the sense of togetherness and hope that fueled the movement and made it possible for participants to launch a sustained mass struggle.

The movement in southwest Georgia was characterized by intense group solidarity. However, participants also remained aware that white residents of southwest Georgia, to say nothing of politicians in Washington, opposed the changes they sought and would use all of their power to crush the movement. SNCC workers and grassroots organizers understood that the

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<sup>74</sup> Slade, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Gutman, p. 408.

daily grind of canvassing, going to the courthouse to register to vote, convening meetings, marching, sharing information, and struggling together through poverty and hostility was indeed their best defense against racism and intimidation. But the movement was also a target of white people's hostile and relentless opposition. It was within this reality that participants in the southwest Georgia project struggled to maintain their commitment to political participation, a sense of family within the movement, and a faith in the possibility that their vision of justice and democracy might one day win out.

**"Eyes were opened, people were united:"<sup>76</sup>**  
**Women, Family and Community Activism**

As we have seen, many women in and around the city of Albany resisted racism before SNCC's arrival, and continued to be active independent of the organization. Local women facilitated and participated in SNCC's project, but their leadership efforts were not always tied to formal civil rights organizations, or even to the most obviously public aspects of the movement. African-American women's leadership has thus remained relatively invisible in scholarly analyses of southwest Georgia because it is incompatible with the dominant vision of the movement as a traditionally public, 'political' affair.<sup>77</sup> The southwest Georgia movement in fact collapses the notion of separate public and private spheres: activists in the movement redefined and revalued women's work and domestic space as they grounded the freedom struggle in the home and within the structure of the family.

In a certain sense, insurgency within the 'private' sphere began long before the organized movement of the 1960s. African-American homes and families have been centers of political activity and community development since slavery. A history of disenfranchisement and oppression has meant that African-Americans across the centuries have not been able to rely only on standard avenues of political power for their voice in public affairs. They have thus sought alternative means of empowering their communities, and this search has in turn generated unique leadership opportunities for black women. The traditionally feminine spaces of the home and school have been two of the primary places in which African-Americans have developed strategies to defy institutionalized racism by embracing their history of oppression, endurance and resistance.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Slade, interview.

<sup>77</sup> Some important scholarship does exist on black women in national civil rights organizations, though much of this literature is sociological and not historical. See, for example, Cynthia Griggs Fleming's *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); Vicki Crawford, ed., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990); Giddings; and Robnett. Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom* remains the best historical treatment of grassroots women organizers, though Payne's empirical data is limited to the Mississippi Delta. There remains much work to be done to understand the full scope of women's participation in local movements across the South, and particularly the movement in southwest Georgia.

<sup>78</sup> Gilmore, p. 148. For analyses of the historical roots of black women's leadership from slavery through the Twentieth Century, see Giddings; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994* (New York: WW Norton, 1999).

Carol King's story is a case in point. Mrs. King moved to Albany from Cleveland, Ohio, in 1953. She had married C.B. King in 1951, who had come to Cleveland from Albany to study law at Case Western Reserve University. C.B. King would later become the primary attorney for the southwest Georgia movement, and as his bride, Carol King joined a prominent family with a long history of social and political activism. Before the Albany movement began, Mrs. King worked as an early childhood educator and community organizer. In 1952, her mother-in-law had influenced the Semper Fidelis Club, an African-American women's federated club in Albany, to start a day nursery for black children. Mrs. King explains, "the tradition was [that] black mothers had to go and take care of white children. Even girls fourteen-years old were working taking care of white children, and the black babies and toddlers were all left home alone, maybe with an eight-year old. The mothers, if they weren't working in someone's kitchen, were out in the fields picking cotton, shaking peanuts." The nursery was to remedy this situation by providing schooling and health care for black children. Carol King used her station wagon to carpool children to and from the nursery, and she served as the school's director from 1954 to 1957.<sup>79</sup> After she left her post at the nursery, Mrs. King initiated a new group in impoverished East Albany to help clothe and care for children in the neighbourhood. In 1959, she returned to the public school system to teach first grade and concentrate on raising her five children.

But Mrs. King continued to organize and plan for her community. By 1965, along with Frances Pauley of the Georgia Council on Human Relations, she secured \$15,475 from Head Start to incorporate the Harambee Child Development Council in Albany, which would organize a nursery school, and help black women pursue college degrees and teacher training.<sup>80</sup> Harambee provided educational programs that were rooted in the larger struggle against racism, and were designed to strengthen the black community. From the beginning, Harambee's organizers were explicit about their political intentions. The outline for Harambee's pilot project, the Albany, Georgia, Nursery School, states: "From [the] initial involvement [of parents] created out of concern for their children a deeper involvement in the community is possible." The nursery would "act as a forum for discussion about the problems of the community as they relate to children." Organizers stressed that Harambee's nursery would encourage activism among black parents in Albany, and help black children "gain feelings of confidence, pride, and worth in themselves." Mrs. King's husband had given his own children small mirrors to carry with them

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<sup>79</sup> King, interview.

<sup>80</sup> King, interview.



so that they would always remember their African-American identity. Carol King placed mirrors in the doll corner at Harambee to help students develop a positive self-image, and she ensured that the school's bookshelves contained no stories about "Dick and Sallie, those plump, pink and blonde cherubs who have marvelous adventures in the big house in the country." Mrs. King worked at Harambee for thirty-two years. When she left in 1997, the organization reached over six hundred children each year, employed a staff of ninety-one, and its annual budget totaled \$3.6 million.<sup>81</sup>

Although Mrs. King established long-term projects in Albany and made a name for herself as an effective community organizer, she was not a public figure during the Albany movement. During the most intense years of the freedom movement Mrs. King based her community work in her home and she neither marched nor went to jail. She explains: "My husband said one [public activist] in the family was enough...and so my role was to answer the phone, take all the messages," and to care for the children. Mrs. King notes that she was "the at-home secretary" and "the cook" for her husband, and the lawyers who visited frequently from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in New York. She also struggled to insulate her children from the abuses her husband suffered as he worked for the movement. Janie Culbreth Rambeau stresses that there were many such women in Albany "who didn't actually march and go to jail, per se, but who made contributions that you would not believe." Moreover, movement participants felt a strong sense of responsibility to these women and sought opportunities to connect with them. Mrs. Katie B. Harris, for example, opened her home to any movement participant who needed a place to sleep, and Rambeau says, "People would come in and they would sleep on a pallet on the floor, just to be with Mama Katie B."<sup>82</sup> Women in Albany made their homes gathering places for the movement, and their work for the movement was often an extension of their traditional position in the community as teachers and caregivers.

Our tendency to view the world in terms of a dichotomous relationship between the public and the domestic spheres—where the domestic sphere is a romanticized getaway from the pressures of public life—is one of the many ways in which we misjudge women's activities, and obscure the full scope of southwest Georgia's freedom struggle. Many women, including Carol King, knew that neither their nurturing presence, nor indeed the home itself, could guarantee

<sup>81</sup> "Albany, Georgia, Nursery School (A Pilot Program for Southern Nursery Schools)" (c. 1965)—SNCC Papers, A:XV:34; King, interview.

<sup>82</sup> King, interview; Rambeau, interview with author. Among Mrs. Harris' children were Rutha Harris, one of the original SNCC Freedom Singers, Emory Harris and McCree Harris, all of whom were extremely active in the movement; Joan Browning, interview with author, 27/10/00.

respite from the movement's demands or shelter from harm. Although African-American families like the Kings tried to make their homes a source of love and comfort, their domestic space was often no less frenetic and no safer than the public space of the protest march. Mrs. King remembers sneaking out of her sister- and brother-in-law's house, away from police and FBI wiretaps, and crawling on her stomach across the backyard so that she and her family members could have whispered discussions about movement strategy. In her house and in the houses of other movement participants, she says, "the walls had ears," and activity was constant.<sup>83</sup>

Activity within the home was constant partly because segregation limited where African-Americans could meet to convene gatherings of movement participants: black churches and private homes were two of the only spaces available. One of the most important strategy sessions between SCLC and SNCC workers in Albany took place in July 1962 in the backyard of Carol King's brother-in-law, Albany Movement vice president Slater King. Whites intuited the fact that African-American homes were sites of social and political insurgency, and the home was often a target of reprisals against the movement. We need only recall that whites shot into and bombed Carolyn Daniels' home because she dared to participate, and there were nights when Annie Raines felt threatened enough that she stood guard outside her home with a loaded shotgun. The home did not separate African-Americans in southwest Georgia from the civil rights struggle, and it was not a safe haven: rather, it was a politically charged centre of civil rights activity, and sometimes even a battle zone.

Yet the home did more than attract attention to the movement or provide the movement with a physical space; it symbolized what the freedom struggle was all about. Taken together, the home and family were the roots of an African-American community that whites had worked long and hard to suppress. In order to maintain slavery and then Jim Crow, whites attempted to fragment the black population and deny African-Americans any kind of collective bond or power. During slavery, for example, the law did not recognize slave marriages or protect their kinship networks, and many African-Americans who grew up during the first half of the Twentieth Century were conditioned to believe that black people were not capable of meaningful group activity. But as slaves had resisted by forming what the historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has called "subhouseholds," or semi-autonomous family units within the dominant white plantation household, southern African-Americans in the 1960s also recognized that

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<sup>83</sup> King, interview.

strengthening the bonds of “the black family” and “maintaining a deep sense of community” were themselves potent acts of defiance.<sup>84</sup>

As traditional centers of home and family life, women were crucial to the process of nurturing the community and thus encouraging the struggle. SNCC volunteers in southwest Georgia certainly recognized this. In a 1962 report, Sherrod asserted that African-American women were the foundation of the movement in Albany and throughout the rural counties, and he hinted at the centrality of mothering to building insurgency in the black community.<sup>85</sup> Sherrod referred to Carolyn Daniels when he wrote: “There is always a ‘mama’...She is usually a militant woman in the community, outspoken, understanding, and willing to catch hell, having already caught her share.” As mothers raising black children in a white supremacist society, many African-American women were accustomed to instilling dignity and self-confidence in other people, and to developing other people’s ability to resist domination.<sup>86</sup> Annette Jones White states that women “were the first ones to go to the [civil rights movement] meetings and to really get involved because a lot of things that SNCC said involved them more...When you talk about wanting something better for children...mothers just take that more to heart.” Whether or not women actually have greater sensitivity than men to the needs of children, women’s experiences as mothers and caretakers may help to explain why they organized a movement that emphasized cooperation, nonviolence and community—“behavior patterns” which, Payne says, are “socially coded as feminine.”<sup>87</sup> The movement offered Americans a glimpse of a society that rejected the masculine values of competitive individualism and violence, and suggested that women might be the ones who were most willing to nurture and lead it.

<sup>84</sup> Greenberg, pp. 118-19; Rambeau, interview with author; Fox-Genovese, p. 95; Rambeau, interview with author; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, p. 405.

<sup>85</sup> Nancy Naples suggests that it is especially crucial to recognize the importance of black women’s “motherwork” to community activism and empowerment, since their labour in the home and family “has often been ignored or pathologized in sociological analyses.” Nancy A. Naples, “Activist Mothering: Cross-Generational Continuity in the Community Work of Women from Low-Income Neighborhoods,” *Gender and Society* 6 (3 September 1992): 446.

<sup>86</sup> Sherrod, as quoted in Forman, p. 276; In her study of urban African-American and Latina activists, Naples found that the women “whose lives were shaped by experiences of racism, sexism, and poverty learn to mother as activists fighting in their homes and communities against the debilitating and demoralizing effects of oppression” (p. 457).

<sup>87</sup> White, interview; Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, p. 426. The sociologist Martha Ackelsburg argues that this kind of communitarian vision is inherently feminine. She asserts that women’s activism often counters the “liberal democratic” assertion of “the priority of the individual.” Women do not seek freedom for people “to be let alone,” but for people to make connections, and “to link the concerns, visions, and perspectives they share with their neighbors and coworkers to the ‘political system’ that stands apart from them...” Martha A. Ackelsburg, “Communities, Resistance, and Women’s Activism: Some Implications for a Democratic Polity,” in *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, edited by Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 302-3.

The structure of the movement reflected more than only a feminine style of interaction and leadership, however: it also stemmed from methods of organizing grounded in African-American culture. According to Bernice Johnson Reagon, feminine qualities such as the ones Payne identifies mirror the traditional ways in which groups of African-Americans might defend themselves and organize for change. Reagon asserts that "African-derived communities" will sometimes support "a mothering generation, meaning the entire community and the way it organizes itself to nurture, during a womb stage and newborn stage, the community and future communities that have to follow it if the people are to continue." The civil rights movement was an intense period during which African-American people pushed for their own survival, and insisted on their right to occupy space in the United States: Reagon understands it as a birthing process, or "life extending itself."<sup>88</sup> In southwest Georgia, this process involved not just mothers but entire families. What appear in the context of the freedom movement to be feminine activities and styles of leadership might also be viewed as African-American modes of leadership and resistance with roots in black traditions of family and community organization.

The movement in southwest Georgia, as elsewhere in the South, was in fact "a refined, codified version" of a resistance tradition that black southerners had been cultivating since slavery. Participants in the movement viewed the process of forming a collective identity and establishing group solidarity—a process that involved drawing people into the movement, protecting them, helping them take action, and perhaps seeing them become organizers themselves—as the realization of freedom. Freedom, from this perspective, was a function of participation in the struggle, whether one chose to participate within the home, outside the home, in formal politics or in the politics of relationships and daily living. Individuals could create freedom by drawing on their own will to struggle and sharing it with the community. One of the ways in which African-Americans responded to white oppression, which often revealed itself as generalized disrespect, intimidation and humiliation, was by emphasizing courtesy and mutual regard between black people. Participants in the organized movement of the 1960s thus affirmed each individual's basic humanity and dignity by embracing an ongoing African-American tradition of mutualism. Participants formed a nurturing community that recognized and assisted individual resistance and helped people "give back to one another some of the self-respect the racial system was trying to squeeze out of them..."<sup>89</sup> As the freedom struggle evolved during the Twentieth Century, residents of southwest Georgia, and in particular the King family, built

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<sup>88</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, "African Diaspora Women: The Making of Cultural Workers," *Feminist Studies* 8 (1, Spring 1986): 88.

relationships that reflected the longstanding centrality of cooperation and community to African-American insurgency.

Carol King explains that as SNCC staff organized a movement based on community solidarity, interpersonal commitment and trust, they were doing what her husband's family "had been talking about all along."<sup>90</sup> Her in-laws, C.W. and Margaret King, were prominent black business people in Albany and had a large family of seven sons. Carol King remembers the Sunday ritual of sitting on her in-laws' front porch with her husband and extended family, "talking about all of the issues that had to do with civil rights, before there was any formal civil rights movement." C.W. King was a civil rights pioneer in Albany: he had been the first president of the city's NAACP chapter, and he had founded Albany's black Voter's League in 1947. Before every election, the Kings' phone would ring off the hook with Albanians calling to ask advice about whom to vote for. C.W., Margaret, Carol, or which ever other family members were in the house at the time would field the calls, and report the League's strategies to Albany's black voters. Beyond this kind of practical political assistance, Mr. King also organized the Independent Fraternal Union, a burial society that arranged funerals for poor black people; a Boys' Club; and the Criterion Club, a men's group that worked to improve living conditions in black neighbourhoods.<sup>91</sup>

By 1961, the senior Kings already had a reputation for generosity and compassion. In Carol King's words, "everybody [in southwest Georgia] knew that if you had a problem with white folks you were to get in touch with C.W. King because he would handle it." Margaret King was known for her willingness to feed, clothe, and give money to black Albanians in need. Charles Jones, who worked in Albany with SNCC, has called Margaret King, "the finest embodiment of motherhood. Universal motherhood." SNCC workers noted her genuine concern for their welfare, and her dedication to the cause of freedom. Field worker Joyce Barrett wrote of "Mama" King: "She is really wonderful—and has been so kind to me. She said that SNCC was the *only* group in town doing anything in Albany. She wants to have a Bingo party to raise money for us—and she'll do all the work." The King family's moral and practical support of SNCC was crucial, especially in the early years when press reports exaggerated the rifts between SNCC, the SCLC, and the NAACP in Albany, and SNCC workers themselves felt somewhat threatened by the directive attitudes displayed by members of these established organizations.

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<sup>89</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, pp. 404-5.

<sup>90</sup> King, interview.

<sup>91</sup> King, interview.

C.W. King gave SNCC space for its first office in Albany, and the Kings were one of at least a dozen families to which poor SNCC workers could go for assistance.<sup>92</sup>

The Kings and other supportive families were a critical element of the movement in southwest Georgia. It is important to note that during this era black people could not eat at most restaurants or sleep in most hotels, and students from all over the United States came to the South as civil rights workers whom SNCC paid a subsistence salary of less than ten dollars per week. Housing and cooking for movement volunteers were thus major and important undertakings. Although many residents had small homes—Patch recalls sharing one room of Goldie and Bo Jackson's house in Albany with seven other volunteers—they gave SNCC workers the space they had. The SNCC workers appear to have felt comfortable sharing people's homes, and benefiting from their generosity: for example, Barrett reports casually that she ran after Marion King, Slater King's wife, on the street one night to ask her for a ride to her house so she could take a bath.<sup>93</sup>

Sharing their homes, food and possessions with the SNCC workers were some of the ways in which black residents of southwest Georgia drew on the tradition of mutualism that underwrote the freedom struggle of the 1960s. The movement, and the generosity of the families involved, disrupted dominant social conventions that favoured material acquisition and competition. What was important in the movement was not how much one had but how much one gave: whatever one had was offered for use by anybody in the movement who needed it. Families in southwest Georgia expected SNCC workers to ask for their help, and the SNCC workers remained penniless partly because the movement itself lacked sufficient funding, but also as a matter of strategy: if they lived hand-to-mouth and relied on the local population for shelter and food, no one could accuse the workers of being in the movement for personal material gain. This basic survival support by the community validated the SNCC activists as local and not 'outside' agitators. Reliance upon residents also helped include white, middle-class SNCC workers in the largely poor black community. SNCC volunteer John Perdew, a white Harvard student who had come to Albany from an upper-middle class family in Colorado, remembers sitting down one night at the home of sisters Jewel and Gloria Wise to a meal of possum. Their father had brought the possum home for his family's dinner after accidentally hitting it with his truck. Though he had never encountered it on the dinner table before, Perdew ate the possum without complaint, and the Wises shared what little they had with him without

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<sup>92</sup> King, interview; Jones, as quoted in Powledge, p. 346; Joyce Barrett report (March 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:39; Zinn, *Albany*, p. 21—SNCC Papers, A:IV:340; King, interview.

reservation. Families took pride in serving and supporting the SNCC workers: even at eleven-thirty at night, after a long day of work, the SNCC staff could count on the Christians for a complete supper, and Patricia Gaines Slade states that no matter what, if you were a volunteer with the movement, “when you came to Albany, you could always get a good meal at my mother’s house.”<sup>94</sup>

Families fed the SNCC workers and they also tried to offer them protection, even at the expense of their own security. Anyone who participated in the movement risked frequent violent attacks. On October 22, 1962, Holsaert and Patch arrived at SNCC’s office, where they were living, to find that it had been burglarized. When the *Albany Herald* reported the burglary, it also reported the office’s address, and commented that SNCC was known for “race-mixing.” It was no surprise, then, that another burglary was attempted at one-thirty in the morning on October 27, and Albany Movement leader Reverend Samuel Wells was close at hand to transport Holsaert and Patch to safety at the Jacksons’ house. In the coming weeks, Wells, the Jacksons, and others rescued SNCC workers from repeated middle-of-the-night threats.<sup>95</sup> Providing support of any kind to civil rights workers was risky: families who did so invited both police reprisals, and the wrath of their white employers. Bo Jackson, for example, lost his job because of his involvement with SNCC workers. But families opened their homes to workers as places of refuge.

Their dependence on one another—the SNCC workers for shelter and food, the local population for SNCC’s manpower and encouragement of its struggle—often led SNCC volunteers and residents of southwest Georgia to form close, familial relationships. In one report, Sherrod recommended that when interacting with residents, SNCC volunteers should “promote the adoption of each of us as their children—we call them mother, mom, pop—that’s home.” Although Sherrod’s statement seems uncharacteristically calculated, residents of southwest Georgia did begin to feel as though the volunteers were members of their families, and they responded well to SNCC’s view of them as parents and siblings. Lucius Holloway was only thirty-years old when he housed up to nine workers at a time in the two-bedroom Terrell County house that he shared with his wife and children. However, he says, “I looked at [the SNCC volunteers] as being young kids and they looked at me in kind of a daddy fashion.” For their part, the SNCC volunteers felt genuinely close to the families with whom they lived and worked.

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<sup>93</sup> Perdew, interview; Patch, interview with author; Barrett report (March 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:39.

<sup>94</sup> Sherrod, “Non-Violence,” p. 4—SNCC Papers, A:IV:250; Perdew, interview; Barrett report (March 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:39; Slade, interview.

<sup>95</sup> Patch and Holsaert report (October 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:177.

Patch explains that by connecting with residents in the community, she achieved the ultimate goal of the movement in southwest Georgia. She says, simply, "I felt loved...and I loved in return."<sup>96</sup> The SNCC workers and the residents of southwest Georgia who participated in the movement recognized and valued each other's humanity. Any person willing to work for the freedom movement could access a community in which people viewed each other as family, shared their material possessions and offered each other unconditional moral support.

By forming bonds of love and respect between people, the family structure did not simply support the southwest Georgia movement; in many ways, it created it. In recalling their experiences with the movement, participants refer as often to movement families as they do to individuals when they identify who held the most influence, and who was most active. Families such as the Kings, the Gainses, and the Christians were the centers of the Albany movement. Their homes were the wellspring of the insurgent community, and these families—led by women with a commitment to educating people and nurturing their self-confidence—mothered the struggle. When participants grounded the southwest Georgia movement in their personal lives and their homes, they facilitated the bonding and cooperation that constituted their vision of freedom and allowed the movement community to grow.

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<sup>96</sup> Sherrod, "Non-Violence," p. 6—SNCC Papers, A:IV:250; Holloway, as quoted in Powledge, p. 400; Patch, interview with author.



## **“When mama went to jail—time out! It’s time we go to jail.” Building Family, Redefining Space**

African-Americans in southwest Georgia took up a tradition of politicizing the home and family when they located the movement in their domestic space. But during the movement of the 1960s they also created new sites for black insurgency. When jailed Albany State College students followed SNCC’s suggestion and refused bond in November 1961, African-Americans in southwest Georgia began to transform jail from the space that black people feared most into a venue for effective protest, personal fulfillment, and community empowerment.<sup>97</sup>

Prior to the movement, jail represented only oppression, vulnerability and brutality. Janie Culbreth Rambeau says that jail was the white population’s “weapon” against African-Americans in southwest Georgia. It was “the hammer they always held over our heads...As long as you’re black you’re going to jail.” During the civil rights struggle, however, African-Americans faced their own fears of violence and mistreatment and told whites, “We will go to your jail but we are still coming out asking for freedom, demanding freedom, we are entitled to it, we earned it, we served well.”<sup>98</sup> Then a student at Albany State College, Rambeau was one of over seven hundred people who went to jail in Albany in December 1961. The mass jail-ins in which Rambeau participated that month were the first of their kind anywhere in the civil rights movement, and they reflected SNCC’s immediate impact on the black community in southwest Georgia.

SNCC workers tried to embody the notion that action was possible in spite of fear, and early in the movement they encouraged local students to challenge Jim Crow by going to “jail without bail.” While the NAACP—the most active civil rights organization in Albany prior to SNCC’s arrival—might send people as test cases to be arrested for breaking segregation ordinances, they did not see the benefit in keeping those people in jail. The key point for the NAACP was the legal challenge. When three members of the NAACP Youth Council tested the ICC ruling on November 1, 1961, for example, the NAACP paid for them to be released on bond. SNCC, however, considered legal challenges to be of limited value when black people were still too frightened to look whites straight in the eye. At Sherrod and Reagon’s encouragement, Bertha Gober and Blanton Hall were the first students to refuse bond; they spent Thanksgiving weekend of 1961 in the city jail in Albany. By initiating the jail-ins, Gober and

<sup>97</sup> Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement 1950s-80s* (New York: Bantam, 1990), p. 102.

<sup>98</sup> Janie Culbreth Rambeau, interview with Angela Whitmal, 06/07/98.

Hall gave individuals in southwest Georgia a powerful means of protesting racism and developed a common focus around which the mass movement would coalesce. When residents went to jail en masse in December they began to create a new space for African-American culture in the southern United States and demonstrate to whites that old scare tactics would not prevent them from fighting for freedom.

The protesters' resolve, however, could only partially alleviate their fear of hostile white police officers and prison guards. Although the national press never picked up the story of police brutality in Albany and the counties, participants remember seeing their friends assaulted in jail and while being arrested, and each one of them felt vulnerable. The fact that one might escape a beating was a matter of luck and each attack spoke volumes to the protesters about how far officials were willing to go to prevent African-Americans from realizing their goals. Police beat protesters in order to punish and subdue individuals, but also to warn the masses not to get out of hand. In 1961, prison guards in Camilla, Georgia, slapped sixteen-year-old Annie Sue Herring Whitney and told her that the slap was "just a sample of what you're going to get." In the summer of 1963, Veronise Christian watched police beat and arrest John Perdew, a new SNCC recruit in Albany: "I was scared to death, because I thought if they were going to beat a white man like that, you know they're going to kill me. As a matter of fact, that's what the police told me, they said, 'Nigger, you next.'"<sup>99</sup>

But if participants were understandably frightened by the violence they experienced, they were still not easy to scare off. Even early on in the movement, residents of southwest Georgia had the sense that participation was their destiny: they were called by God to "witness for freedom," and they marched and protested with the support of their community. After a mass march in December 1961, Rambeau recalls being corralled in what participants called Freedom Alley—a gravel passageway between the jail and the police station in downtown Albany—and watching police drag a teenaged girl up the steps into jail. "I remember the blood running down her face," Rambeau states. "And I said, I don't know what's going on, so Lord, just take care of us, because there's no turning back at this point—it's forward or die. And at that point I resolved that if it meant dying, I was willing to die for what I was feeling." As Rambeau joined a crowd of black Albanians singing "We Shall Overcome" outside the courthouse and waited to be booked

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<sup>99</sup> Slade, interview; Annie Sue Herring Whitney sworn statement (December 1961)—SNCC Papers, A:XV:30; Christian, in *The Discussion Continues*, 4/21/94.

into jail she felt something “move way down deep on the inside.” As she puts it, after years of sensing injustice and resisting alone as best she could, she was “called up” into the movement.<sup>100</sup>

Religious faith—long a sustaining force for African-Americans struggling against racist oppression—motivated people like Rambeau to participate and also nourished their struggle. Albanian Mattie L. Williams states, “Everybody was praying then... The movement will never die because God is not dead, and He was in it.” Many participants felt an intense spiritual connection to the movement, and going to jail in defiance of Jim Crow was a measure of their faith. In overcrowded, hot, unsanitary cells, either hungry or sick from eating spoiled food, the ties between participants’ religious convictions and their dedication to the mass struggle became extraordinarily clear. At 19-years old, Bernice Johnson Reagon testified after leaving jail in Albany for the first time, “I feel closer to God than at any other time in my life, I am none the worse for wear, and I would be willing to go through the whole thing again if necessary.” Albanian Willie Mae Thomas remembers the contradictory sense of hating jail yet feeling compelled by religious belief and personal connections to remain there. She says that when she and her friends stayed in jail together, “We prayed. We suffered. We had fun.”<sup>101</sup> Suffering together in jail united the group at the same time as it provided individuals with a sense of personal and moral fulfillment. Jail-ins often became pray-ins that provided opportunities for individuals to get to know each other and to engage in a conscious effort to combat the fragmentation of the group.

The police undoubtedly recognized the ways in which the jail-ins united the movement community. Participants remember that during the mass jail-ins of 1961 officials tried to splinter the movement by transferring protesters from the jail in Albany to remote facilities in the counties. Albany police claimed that the transfers were pragmatic: the city jail was simply too small to hold all of the protesters. While the transfers may indeed have been motivated by utility, police actions suggest that the transfers were also a shrewd effort to divide the community and thus attack the movement at its core. When family members inquired at the Albany jail as to the whereabouts of their spouses and children, guards refused to tell them where they were. On December 12, 1961, Browning wrote, “The people who were housed in such inhumane conditions [in the Albany jail] have been separated and placed in jails in the county and in two

<sup>100</sup> Rambeau, interview with Angela Whitmal; Rambeau, interview with author.

<sup>101</sup> Mattie L. Williams, in *The Discussion Continues* (4/21/94); Sworn statements regarding conditions in prison (December 1961)—SNCC Papers, A:XV:30; Excerpts from statements of Americus Negro students jailed during protest demonstrations there (August-September 1963)—SNCC Papers, A:VIII:103; Bernice Johnson Reagon sworn statement (December 13, 1961)—SNCC Papers, A:XV:30; Willie Mae Thomas, in *The Discussion Continues: The Civil Rights Movement in Southwest Georgia*, video (Albany, Georgia: 3/21/94).

surrounding counties. These persons in jail are now going simply on the faith that we and others are still fighting. They are allowed no communication. Mr. [Slater] King's wife [Marion] is in somewhere; he has yet to be allowed to see her." Carol and C.B. King made every effort to reunite family members with one another: one of Mrs. King's most important jobs during the movement was to stay home and answer phone calls from people trying to locate family members who had been transferred out of the city jail. But as much as the transfers and separations were a struggle for both the prisoners and their families, they also proved to be a blessing in disguise. In need of comfort and support, protesters redefined the isolation of the jail cells. The cells became a place where people "could get an audience" in order to "sit out and discuss issues." As protesters shared information and experiences, they fortified themselves and strengthened the movement.<sup>102</sup>

In this sense, the black community bonded in the jails of southwest Georgia and the jail-ins came to symbolize the familial unity that was a key component of freedom. As one elderly woman put it, "My daughter-in-law's in jail, and my grandson's in jail. Hallelujah, we're going to be free." Going to "jail without bail" became a mass phenomenon in southwest Georgia because individuals—some related by marriage or blood, others related by a common history of oppression—shared the responsibility of protesting and made it possible for people to give their time to the movement. Some married couples, for example, agreed that wives would go to jail while husbands remained on the outside to work and care for the children. Monroe Gaines, the father of the Gaines girls who were active with SNCC, worked at the Marine base in Albany. He refrained from participating in direct action protests in order to protect his job but he took his children to mass meetings every Monday night and encouraged them and his wife, Lorenza, to participate as fully as possible. Lorenza Gaines went to jail for three weeks in 1961; the day she was incarcerated, she took her two-year-old daughter, Norma, with her. Patricia Gaines Slade remembers trying to stay out of jail to make up for her mother's absence and to help look after her younger sisters after prison officials released Norma into their father's custody. Staying out of jail was a struggle—Penny Patch writes that families such as the Gaineses sometimes had to draw lots to decide who would go to jail on a given day—but it was important for Slade to support her mother's turn in prison as well as to help maintain her family's life at home.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>102</sup> White, interview; Rambeau, interview with author; Letter (13/12/61)—Joan Browning papers; King, interview; Rev. H.C. Boyd, in *The Discussion Continues* (3/21/94).

<sup>103</sup> *Southern Patriot* article (October 1962)—SNCC Papers, A:IV:339; Holsaert, interview; Slade, interview; Patch, in Curry, et al, *Deep in our Hearts*, p. 149.

Conversely, other participants were inspired to join the jail-ins by mothers and grandmothers who volunteered their time for these and other protests. Veronise Christian says of her mother, Cora Jinks, when “mama went to jail—time out! It’s time we go to jail.” If Christian’s mother and her grandmother, Annie Raines, were willing to put their faith in the movement and sacrifice for the struggle, then so was she. In part, black residents of southwest Georgia recognized the simple importance of numbers: the more people protesting, the better. But more centrally, they knew that when whole families participated it sent a message to segregationists that threats and hostility notwithstanding, families were together. Men supported their children and wives’ decisions to go to jail even though mere support could get them fired from their jobs. For their part, women and children tried to protect the men when they went to jail: in some cases, they used false names so that officials could not trace them back to their husbands or fathers.<sup>104</sup> Families did what they could to minimize the harm that participation might bring and cooperated to make each member’s participation possible; going to jail for the movement came to define their relationships and shape the way they lived their lives.

Perhaps most importantly, people without formal kinship ties became attached to one another in jail. The exigencies of the jail environment erased the social labels of class, age and gender that usually set people apart from one another. Norma Anderson, the wife of the president of the Albany Movement, remembers sharing a mayonnaise jar of “not quite cold water” with black women of all classes in jail during the movement. Herself a middle-class doctor’s wife, she remarked, “I have never been to a church service or communion that moved me more deeply than the experience in that jail cell.” Annette Jones White recounts how young women would give their coats and mattresses to the elderly women with whom they shared cells. Rambeau recalls that Miss Corinne Watkins, an older woman, admonished the young women in jail to eat, no matter how bad the food was. And Johnnie Jinks Campbell remembers that when she was in jail, male protesters in the cell knew to turn their heads when the women held hands and encircled an individual who desired some privacy as she used the unenclosed toilet. Small gestures—such as women showing each other how to pad their bras with toothbrushes, candy, and other personal items and teaching each other how to play the card games that were forbidden in their strict Christian homes—led to strong friendships between protesters in jail, whether rich or poor, old or young, educated or not. Even the racially segregated jail cells did not keep black and white civil rights activists from caring for each other and trying to lift each other’s spirits. In

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<sup>104</sup> Christian, in *The Discussion Continues* (4/21/94); McCree Harris, introduction to *The Discussion Continues* (3/21/94); Browning, interview; Special Report on Americus, p. 4 (no date)—SNCC Papers, A:VII:4.

December 1961, Browning kept up correspondence with Lenora Taitt and Norma Collins, two African-American women imprisoned in nearby cells, as well as black and white male volunteers, on scraps of paper towel and toilet paper carried back and forth by a secret messenger.<sup>105</sup>

Away from their homes, uncomfortable, and under the surveillance of hostile guards, jailed protesters cooperated to sustain each other in a harsh environment and maintain the sense of purpose that drove them to join the jail-ins in the first place. Sherrod states that when people went to jail on civil rights demonstrations, "Right away we recognize[d] each other. People like yourself, getting out of the past... You learn truth in prison, you learn wholeness. You find out the difference between being dead and alive." When they went to jail, members of the community became morally and practically obligated to help one another and jail thus created an expanded movement family. Mary Jones explains, "We were very closely knitted. I had friends who...saw about my children when I went to jail...and the rest of the family... The Albany movement did that."<sup>106</sup>

Jail was also where participants developed new tools with which to fight their battle for dignity and human rights. The Albany movement would become famous for its music, and participants there gave the rest of the civil rights struggle the gift of new freedom songs adapted during the first mass jail-ins. By singing, jailed activists transformed the cells from a space of punishment to a space of protest. One could argue that sitting in jail and suffering under unforgiving conditions was a passive form of resistance. But when participants sang out to guards and to each other, their agency and the strength of their claims for freedom were unmistakable. On December 14, 1961, Browning wrote from the Dougherty County jail, "We're now all engaged in sending messages to each other, serenading each other and in general making merry. Can you imagine me, of all people, doing a solo? I can't even sing and I am always among the quieter voices in a group sing. There ain't room here for many inhibitions, and besides these folk accept me for what I am, just as I am." Rambeau remembers one day in Albany when guards begged jailed protesters to stop singing. She says that they were singing "real loud and everything. And then the man came beating down on the bars, telling us to shut up that fuss in there. And somebody hollered out, 'well what are you going to do, arrest us?'"

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<sup>105</sup> Anderson, as quoted in Vincent Harding, "Community as a Liberating Theme in Civil Rights History," in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, eds. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), p. 22; White, interview; Rambeau, interview with author; Campbell, interview with Angela Whitmal; Slade, interview; Rambeau, interview with author; Letters from Dougherty County jail (December 1961)—Joan Browning papers.

<sup>106</sup> Sherrod, as quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, p. 33; Mary Jones, interview with Angela Whitmal, 21/09/98.

And everybody fell out laughing. He turned red and left.”<sup>107</sup> By singing, protesters took power away from guards and police officers and made the space of the jail their own.

The freedom songs reflect the individual and collective sense of “somebodiness” that movement participants asserted as they organized, prayed, and protested in jail. Reverend H.C. Boyd of Albany’s Shiloh Baptist Church says, “I ain’t gonna let nobody turn me round. And they would start naming these fellows...And people’d call your name in song when they can’t do it no other way...From way back, a lot of times, when people become oppressed they can sing about things they can’t even say in word or dialogue.” In plaintive words set to traditional melodies protesters reminded themselves that suffering in jail connected them to their history of resistance and oppression, and brought them closer to God and to each other. When they sang, “Oh Pritchett, oh Kelley, oh Pritchett, open them cells,” they encouraged all whites—government officials and ordinary people—to recognize their humanity and faith.<sup>108</sup> Even in jail, however, freedom for participants in the southwest Georgia movement did not depend on the mercy of whites but rather on the ability of each individual to use his or her power to strengthen and protect the community. All the same, the community in southwest Georgia would not be complete and all the goals of the movement could not be realized until all white and black people—within the movement and beyond—cooperated to replace antagonism and contempt with mutual respect and love.

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<sup>107</sup> Letter to Faye Powell (14/12/61)—Joan Browning papers; Rambeau, interview with author.

<sup>108</sup> H.C. Boyd, in *The Discussion Continues* (03/21/94); Protesters directed the freedom song, “Oh Pritchett, Oh Kelley” to Albany’s Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett and Mayor Asa Kelley.

## Conclusion: "Where I am is not where I am staying..."

[Things in southwest Georgia] were changing. Not so much in the external lives of black people, the way they existed from day to day, as in their minds. And the white man knew it, saw it as the greatest of threats, moved to crush it.

--James Forman

We stand together, black and white. Southwest Georgia is unknown now, but one day somebody will do as Mama Dolly said one day in Lee County: "Now, boy, you go to writing and write up a new day."

--Charles Sherrod<sup>109</sup>

Despite a sustained, mass struggle on the part of African-American residents and outside volunteers, as well as the legal desegregation of public facilities across the United States, white people in southwest Georgia remained committed to white supremacy and racial separatism. The writer Fred Powledge points out, "Albany proved that there was a form of white resistance that would withstand attack and that...would actually win praise from segments of the American population that thought of themselves as enlightened and liberal." Albany's police chief has gone down in history as "nonviolent Chief Pritchett," the Albany movement is remembered as Martin Luther King's "Waterloo," and the effort in the rural counties has been almost completely forgotten.<sup>110</sup>

Despite the silencing of the movement in southwest Georgia, this thesis has proposed that if we reconsider who actually launched the struggle and whom it served, we might come up with a markedly different sense of its goals and its impact. It has also suggested that analyzing struggles such as the movement in southwest Georgia can enhance our understanding of American society and culture. The movement reflected deep-rooted American democratic traditions and notions of social justice: participants tried to create a society in which all people were free to exert their independence and establish connections with one another. Participants were marginalized by Jim Crow laws and culture, and the movement was a radical shift away from the white supremacist conventions that dominated life in southwest Georgia. However, the people who launched the movement in the 1960s were in many ways ideologically closer to the American ideals of liberty, equality and justice than those apparently 'mainstream' Americans who opposed and tried to crush them.

Our tendency to view people like Charles Sherrod, Bernice Johnson Reagon and Annie Raines as extraordinary, and to see their belief in mutualism and community as idealistic or

<sup>109</sup> Forman, p. 344; Sherrod, as quoted in Zinn, p. 146.

<sup>110</sup> Powledge, p. 384; Hampton and Fayer, p. 106; Rambeau, interview with author; Slade, interview.



merely impossible reveals the degree to which we have accepted deference, oppression and indeed white supremacy as natural. As the former SNCC worker Martha Prescod Norman warns, "there is something wrong with a history that makes Charles Sherrod's actions in Albany so difficult to understand that he has to constantly explain them and at the same time glorifie[s] Laurie Pritchett's actions as being not just reasonable, but smart and precocious." Reagon concurs and adds, "When I read about the Albany Movement, as people have written about it, I don't recognize it. They add up stuff that was not central to what happened." What was central, Reagon says, was that the movement "gave me power to challenge *any* line that limits me. I got that power during the Albany Movement, and that is what it meant to me, just really gave me a real chance to fight and to struggle and not respect any boundaries that put me down."<sup>111</sup>

Participants in campaigns like the movement in southwest Georgia embraced an ethic of individual empowerment through mutual respect and commitment and possessed a profound faith in the possibilities of American democracy. They dedicated their movement to the premise that all people, regardless of race and other social labels, deserved the right and had the ability to influence their communities and direct their own lives.

African-Americans in the movement found power in participation, and participation was not limited to any specific activity. Resistance in southwest Georgia was not simply a matter of achieving particular tactical goals such as voting or desegregating public facilities. According to Reagon, "Behind [any specific tactical victories] are people who have greater responsibility, for who and where they are—and slightly more chance to fight for difference in their lives."

Rambeau explains, "The movement gave me the stamina to stand...Once you learn to stand on one thing you can always stand on something else." Participants built a unified movement in which individuals came into their own power. Individuals took up the struggle in unique and personal ways; however, they shared the sense that freedom was the result of overcoming the deference and silence imposed by the dominant culture, actively reshaping society, and creating a strong community. Above all, participants knew that collective action and group cohesion were the core of the movement. According to Veronise Christian, the movement "brought you closer together—that was the most important part."<sup>112</sup>

In the 1960s, African-Americans in southwest Georgia selected elements from an ongoing protest tradition, developed new methods with which to continue fighting and built a community

<sup>111</sup> Martha Prescod Norman, as quoted in Greenberg, p. 186; Reagon, as quoted in Cluster: 21.

<sup>112</sup> Reagon, as quoted in Cluster: 22; Rambeau, interview with author; Tom Dent, *Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William and Morrow, 1997), p. 217; Hampton and Fayer, p. 105; Veronise Christian, in *The Discussion Continues...* (04/21/94).

that was the antithesis of the society that constrained them. In the movement, there was innovation and hope. The historian and participant Vincent Harding notes, "We sometimes tend now to be ashamed that we were once filled with such powerful hope, but without such memories there is no understanding of the best power of the movement." To borrow the historian Glenda Gilmore's words, participants in the southwest Georgia movement maintained faith in "progressive visions" that "if realized, would have ended white supremacy. These were lives on the cusp of change." Participants believed that in spite of a legacy of support for racism and divisiveness Americans had at their disposal the tools with which to build a humanistic, liberating society. Their struggle was an attempt to demonstrate how, in the words of Frederick Douglass, black people believed the democratic ideals set out in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence "ought to be interpreted." Participants in the freedom movement in southwest Georgia offered what they saw as a corrective to the ways that many whites had, historically, misinterpreted American democracy to justify oppressing black people. Participants struggled against white supremacy, and they did so from within the American culture that nourished it. Part of their struggle, therefore, involved confronting their own fears and trying to understand the origins of the intimidation and powerlessness that they often felt.<sup>113</sup>

In a sense, participants found freedom—or at least began to move toward it—the moment they realized that action was possible. In spite of social and cultural conventions that told them otherwise, they could try to change their own lives and make their society a less oppressive, more just place. As they struggled together, African-Americans in Albany and the surrounding counties did not know for certain where they would end up; instead, they viewed their struggle as an evolving process and declared, "where I am is not where I am staying..."<sup>114</sup> For Reagon and other participants, the movement in southwest Georgia was about empowerment and possibilities: change was possible, it might come from any direction, and it might be effected in myriad ways, by people from all facets of society. Participants could not necessarily solve the puzzle of American democracy; but they learned that they could risk questioning the oppression that was so deeply embedded in their social, cultural and political landscape. Their actions in the movement signaled to other Americans—and to the world—that problems were indeed there, and that there was at least one group of people willing to go against considerable odds in order to try to work through and past them.

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<sup>113</sup> Harding, p. 20; Note that Gilmore writes about African-American reformers in a very different context. At the same time, the ideas she advances are an apt description of the people who organized the civil rights struggle in southwest Georgia. Gilmore, p. 1; Genovese, pp. 132-7; Krause: 54.

<sup>114</sup> Harding, p. 18; Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, p. 141; Reagon, as quoted in Cluster: 18.

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