

"Why Didn't They Hit Back?" which we reprint from the July, 1963, issue of REDBOOK, is the moving story of how one young person was influenced by CORE's philosophy and practice of non-violent resistance to segregation and its evils. It is also an account of the liberating impact of an idea on a life that had been shackled by lack of understanding, dullness and frustration.

Our thanks to REDBOOK and the authors.

JAMES FARMER, *National Director, CORE*

"Why Didn't They Hit Back?"

by JHAN and JUNE ROBBINS

On a cold, rainy winter evening in January, 1962, the John Dickerson family of Cambridge, Maryland, had just finished dinner when 20-year-old Joe Dickerson said to his brother Eddie, two years older, "I'm going over to Easton tonight. I hear some Northern nigger-lovers are going to get beat up. Want to come along?"

Eddie Dickerson told us recently in New York. "You have to understand how boring life in a small town is. There ain't much to do and nowhere to go."

Cambridge has a population of 13,500 — 8,800 whites and 4,700 Negroes. It lies along the brackish Choptank River in Dorchester County, on the Eastern Shore, and was once the home of sharpshooter Annie Oakley. On one of its wharves a 72-pound, world-record-breaking drumfish was landed. Otherwise it is undistinguished. Although there are a number of small factories, it is still largely a rural area. There are rolling fields, orchards, salt marshes and sandy shores, deer and wildfowl.

Eddie Dickerson was born and grew up there. He is the eighth of ten children. His father is a bricklayer and is considered a top craftsman in his community. Four of the seven Dickerson boys also are bricklayers. Bill, 39, the oldest served in the regular Army and is now a salesman in Miami. Clem, 27, works for an Oklahoma oil

company. One daughter is married to a mechanic, another to a television repairman. The youngest, Judy, 17, is still in school.

Eddie left school at 16. He began training as a plumber's helper, decided he didn't like the work and for the next four years drifted in and out of a series of odd jobs. He is six feet one, rangy, hard-muscled and restless.

"Sometimes in Cambridge you get to feeling like you're going to explode," Eddie said. "So you pick a fight with somebody. Almost anybody. You slug him. He slugs you. There is some blood and lots of yelling. After it's over you feel better. Nobody ever talked to me none about Saturday-night fighting being right or wrong. It's kind of like exercise. Sometimes you even fight your best friend. But you have to have an excuse. Maybe the person you pick a fight with tried to make time with your girl. Maybe he has a hot rod that tried to pass your car. This time the excuse was that a bunch of white nigger-lovers and some niggers were picketing a restaurant. They were trying to claim that black and white should sit down to eat together. They were outsiders. They were trying to interfere with our Southern way of life. That was enough. I changed my clothes. I put on my new red shirt, my black pegged pants, my three-quarter-legged kicking boots, my leather jacket—and I put a pair of brass knuckles into my pocket. I said, 'Okay, let's go!'"

The demonstration in Easton that night was part of a mid-Atlantic States drive by CORE—Congress of Racial Equality—a nationally organized group that conducts demonstrations against racial discrimination. The group has been active in the lunch-counter sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, and the picketing to call attention to the lack of opportunity for Negroes in radio and television. Two years ago CORE decided to move against restaurants located on and near U.S. Route 40, a main highway on the way to Washington, D.C. Some African delegates to the United Nations had been refused service, and the incidents had called attention to inequities in the whole Washington-Maryland area.

James Farmer, CORE's national director, said, "During the weeks we were thinking about this campaign, CORE representatives stood outside restaurants. They saw white customers go in who were sloppily dressed. The men were often unshaven, wearing sports shirts without ties. The women and girls were wearing shorts, even at dinner. Yet respectably dressed Negroes were turned away.

"We decided we would bring these irrational inequalities to national attention."

Early in January a CORE task force of 10 Negroes and 20 whites moved into Dorchester County in the vicinity of Easton, Maryland. They had 14 restaurants to cover and they knew there might be trouble.

CORE is devoted to nonviolence. Members are pledged and trained not to fight back if attacked. They are duty bound to give opponents advance notice of their intentions. Accordingly they wrote letters to the owners of the Easton restaurants and to the local law authorities stating the time and place of their arrival and what they intended to do.

Bill Hansen, a college student from Cincinnati who accompanied the group, said, "It was very simple. We sent in one or two white demonstrators. If they were seated, we sent in a mixed pair—one white and one colored—to the restaurant. If they were seated, we sent two Negroes—or four—within a few minutes. Of the fourteen restaurants we tested, eight—including an exclusive and expensive place called the Tidewater Inn—courteously seated and served us. Six refused us and we established picket lines in front of them.

"As dusk fell kids got out of the local high school and men returned from work. Many of them gathered to jeer, whistle and call us names. Pretty soon they started shoving us around. They knocked the picket signs out of our hands, spit on us or stuck out their legs to trip us.

"Then the rough stuff started. A big fellow wearing a red shirt and a black leather jacket stepped in front of me and slapped me in the face. I staggered sideways a few paces, then resumed my

place in the line and kept on walking.

"A few seconds later this same fellow started punching me, and other guys waded into the rest of the line. It didn't last long. The police moved in. They were state troopers, and although there were no arrests that night, I want to say they did a good job. One of them even apologized, saying, 'They're a bunch of young punks. They're out for a good time. This is their idea of fun!' He offered me a box of adhesive bandages. I managed to laugh and said, 'No thanks—we brought our own.'

Eddie Dickerson told us, "You know, where I grew up it was considered fair sport to catch us a colored boy all alone and slap him or kick him or call him names—anything to scare him and make him run. We'd give him a fair start. Then me and my pals would take after him—down an alley, over a fence, anywhere at all. If we caught him, we'd beat him up. But mostly he got away. It was a kind of a game. Sometimes the bigger colored kids would come over to our territory and challenge us. If you trapped and caught one of those boys, it was something to brag about."

It has been charged that responsible members of the white community in Easton paid some money into a strong-arm fund that was distributed among white delinquents. Eddie Dickerson had been in trouble with the law on a number of occasions—speeding, street brawling, possessing a pistol without a permit, intoxication and punching a police officer, all were on his record. But he firmly denies ever having received any money from anyone in connection with the CORE demonstrations.

"I did hear talk that you could get as much as three hundred dollars for beating up a CORE officer," he told us. "But I thought it was a joke. You don't make three hundred bucks that easy."

Young Dickerson and his brother started for home when they heard police sirens. "We were driving back to Cambridge, talking it up and laughing," Eddie recalls. "I said, 'Boy, I hit this one guy in that line as hard as I ever hit anyone in my whole life. I think I busted my hand doing it! I forgot to use my brass knuckles!'"

It was raining harder as the car speeded and jolted back toward Cambridge. "For some reason I couldn't stop thinking about those men I'd slug-ged," Eddie told us. "Why didn't they hit me back? Were they yellow or something? There were guys just as big as me. And even the little guys looked tough. What was going on? Why the hell didn't they get mad and hit back?"

Dickerson says he brought up the subject once or twice on the ride home and was met with shrugs or unsatisfactory answers. Eight and a half miles out of town, he asked to be let out on the road.

"My brother Joe thought I wanted to relieve myself," he told us. "But instead of going back into the bushes, I started walking along the road the way we'd

come. I told Joe I was going back to Easton to ask those guys why they hadn't hit me back. Joe said I was plain crazy. He gunned up the car and drove away. I knew those CORE guys were staying in a church in Easton. I headed for it."

Bill Hansen, sitting in the church with the other picketers, soaking his bruises and talking about what had happened, recalls Dickerson's entrance. "There was a knock on the door," Hansen says, "and I opened it. There was a young fellow on the doorstep. He was kind of purple-nosed with cold and rain-water was running off his head and neck. He said, 'I reckon you don't know me.'

"I said, 'Yeah, you're the one who beat me up a couple hours ago.' He walked across the sill. I honestly didn't know what to expect. I thought maybe a bunch of guys might charge us when I swung open the door, and wreck the place. But instead there was just this one fellow. He sat down on his heels, like he was squatting at a campfire. He looked up at us, standing around, and he didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, 'I want to know what's going on. I hit you and you didn't hit me. I came back here by myself. You could mob me now and really pound into me, but you don't. Why not?'"

Hansen told us, "I didn't know just what we had hold of. He could have been a White Citizens Council plant, a stool pigeon. In that case it was a great chance to show him that we are not a conspiratorial group and have nothing to hide. Or he could have been some kind of pathetic nut, in which case he needed any kindness and charity we could show him. But we decided he was just a fairly decent, naive sort of person who wanted some simple answers. So I said to him, 'Well, you're here. That's the reason. We want to reach people and make them understand.'"

Dickerson asked curiously, "Why should colored and white eat together? We don't want it and they don't want it. Who in hell do you guys think you are, coming down to force it on us? You come down here and ask for trouble and boy, you get it!"

Hansen said, "We didn't hit you back because we aren't angry with you. We don't believe in violence. Fists and knives and guns have never really solved any human problem. We honestly think that love can overcome hate. It's a stupid drawback to this country to have ten per cent of the population denied equality of opportunity. It's a drag on all the rest of us—prejudice costs us money." . . .

"Finally I wound up," says Hansen, "by pointing out that most of the world is colored—that whites are really the minority. Supreme today, yes—but how about tomorrow?"

"When he got up to leave, it was nearly three A.M. We were all exhausted, but it was our impression that

Dickerson was a completely sincere person—uneducated, certainly, but with a good mind and lots of curiosity. We told him we were going to Cambridge to spend the night with the St. Clairs, a Negro family. We offered him a ride home and he took it."

Ed Dickerson recalls that he didn't do much more thinking that night. "As soon as I hit the sack I fell asleep," he says. "But in the morning my brother Joe shook me awake and asked me what happened. I said, 'They ain't such bad guys.' And he said, 'You're nuts! You really are crazy!'"

"A lot of times my brothers have said I am crazy. It hurts my feelings, but I try not to think about it. I know they mean well. We fight a lot, but we are a pretty close kind of family. My father and mother are real decent people in lots of ways and they did the best they knew to make us kids good. In some ways they were strict, but not all the time. They taught us to stand by each other and Pop would show us how to take on some guy who was getting ornery. He always said to us, "Boys, remember that if you're bigger than the other guy, hit him! If he's bigger than you are, run like hell!" I'll say this for my father—he could take care of himself. He was plenty strong."

"I guess I had a pretty good time when I was growing up. I don't think I ever had a real enemy, even though I prided myself on being so tough. I'm only afraid of two things—heights and bumblebees."

"A week after the Easton rumble those CORE people started in on Cambridge. They threw up picket lines in front of some restaurants down on Race Street, our main drag. I didn't go right away down to see them, but I heard there was a man-size fight and a lot of arrests."

"The next day I got up, dressed nice and went down to the courthouse to see what was going to happen. There must have been twenty of them picketers charged with disturbing the peace, loitering and obstructing traffic. The judge fined some and sent some to jail. It made me mad because I knew who must have really started the fight. If there's anything I don't like, it's a phony pinch. I walked over and shook hands with one of the CORE people. He was colored. A deputy or somebody moved up behind me and grabbed my arm. He broke the grip—he damn near broke my elbow—and he yelled, 'Let go! You're nuts, shaking hands with a nigger.'

"I don't like nobody to push me around. I don't really know what got into me, but I said, 'So what? He's my friend.' I could hear people around me start talking. I got out of the courthouse and I walked around outside of town for a couple of hours. I kept thinking real hard. I asked myself how come white people ever got the idea they owned the whole world and how whites got to be boss of everything? Was it



Eddie Dickerson

somewhere in the Bible? I didn't think so.

"When I got home my father was waiting for me and with him was three of my brothers. I kind of knew the news would have spread to them. They said I was a plain disgrace to the whole family. Then they pushed me through the door into the yard."

"Somebody yelled, 'Get out and stay out!'"

"I hollered back, 'I want my clothes and all the other stuff I own!' A couple of minutes later a suitcase came flying out. They had put in some shirts and underwear and my boots, but they kept my Sunday suit and my hunting rifle. I sure hated to leave that rifle behind."

"I hung around a little while longer. I was hoping to see my mother. I knew she was somewhere in the house. But finally I picked up the suitcase and walked on down the street. I was so mad I couldn't see straight."

Eddie's first thought was to thumb a ride to Baltimore, where he had friends who might give him a job. "By the time I got a few blocks from the house, I cooled down some," he recalls. "The idea that I had been thrown out of my own house and might never see my family again was pretty awful. Maybe if I went away for a while and then came back, they would forget all about it. But why did I do it in the first place? Just for the fun of stirring up trouble? All that stuff Hansen said to me in the church that night suddenly seemed to come back to me, and it sounded right. If this segregation stuff was wrong, there was an awful lot of work to do before it was going to end. I'd show my family a thing or two, and anyway, these guys needed all the help they could get. Suddenly from feeling miserable I felt pretty good. For the first time in my life I had a hold of an idea that seemed important. I knew I just had to find out more about it."

Dickerson walked to the house of the

St. Clairs, the Negro family who, he knew, had offered hospitality to CORE. He told them that he was experiencing a change of heart and a change of conscience on the race question and he asked them to let him stay with them while he did some more thinking about it.

He told us simply, "They didn't ask me for board money. They didn't quiz me. They just took a chance on me."

Herbert St. Clair is a 59-year-old undertaker, respected and prosperous. He and his wife Ruth and a married son who lives with them welcomed Dickerson. All, however, were apprehensive.

Within a few hours there were annoying telephone calls that threatened the St. Clair family with time bombs and lynch mobs.

Eddie said, "I knew there were two kinds of law in the county—one for white and one for colored. When I was a kid there was lynch law in rural Maryland. Once my father took me and my brothers to a spot where there had been a lynching the night before. They had cut down the body, but the rope was still swinging. Pop said, 'Well, you see, that's what happens.' Nowadays nobody gets lynched. Colored people who make trouble just disappear in thin air. People say they went North. But everybody knows what really happens—they get taken out and drowned. There is a strong tide in the bay."

Herbert St. Clair is vice-president of the local chapter of the NAACP, but he is not completely committed to the non-violent viewpoint of CORE. He and his son and half a dozen neighbors stood round-the-clock guard duty with loaded shotguns. At their insistence, police watched the house for ten days. One evening a car drove slowly past and a single rifle shot was fired at the windows.

Dickerson occasionally ventured out to do odd jobs in the segregated neighborhood. Once he went to a roller-skating rink, hoping to see some old friends.

"I saw them," he recalls. "I was tripped, pushed and they spit on me. I doubled up my fists and got ready to slug it out, and then I thought, Oh, what's the use? and I left."

A few days later Eddie heard rumors that a movement was under way to have him committed to a state mental institution.

"I bet they damn well could do it, too," he told us wryly. "I was the dumbest kid in my class. I had a hard time getting through ninth grade. And I guess what I was doing seemed crazy enough to most people in Cambridge. I decided to leave town. I didn't want to get buried in no snake pit."

He went to Baltimore, obtained an interview with CORE organizers and was assigned to distribute literature to qualified Negro voters and encourage them to register.

He said, "Again I was housed by a

colored family. But by this time, you know, I hardly paid attention to who was colored and who wasn't. It didn't seem to matter so much. I was working pretty hard. I had a part-time job as a dishwasher in a local diner. I came home late at night to a nice, peaceful household—the people were more religious and more polite than any white family I knew—and there was a clean house and a clean bed.

"There was a lot of books in the house, and I started to read. I read pretty slow, but I wanted to know more about what I was mixed up in. I read a pamphlet on anthropology. I'd never even heard the word before. I read a biography of Ghandi. I tried to read a book on economics but I didn't know what most of the words meant."

Eddie learned that two men were making inquiries about him, with particular regard to his mental health. He told us, "I got scared. I decided I better get out of the State of Maryland pronto . . ."

A few weeks later the CORE campaign in Albany, Georgia, began. It was an ambitious undertaking, broader in scope than the Freedom Rides and lunch-counter sit-ins that preceded it. The organization aimed to negotiate with town authorities an across-the-board agreement to desegregate all public facilities on a planned time schedule over a period of years. The mayor and other law-enforcement officials refused to discuss the matter, and failed even to reply to repeated letters requesting a conference. CORE set up placard-carrying, hymn-singing picket lines all over town and asked for volunteers to man them. Eddie Dickerson responded.

He said, "I'd earned about forty dollars cutting lawns, painting, and hauling trash. I figured it was enough to pay my bus fare to Albany and keep me in food and smokes for a week or so. I needn't have worried. I was in Albany only thirteen hours when they arrested our whole picket line and tossed us in jail.

"The cops handled me pretty rough and they made me mad. They shoved me in a cell and practically slammed the door on my hands. I doubled up my fist and pounded on the bars and cussed all the swear words I ever knew.

"A voice behind me said, 'Okay, now you feel better. Sit down and take it easy.' I turned around and saw a thin, dark-haired guy with glasses, a dirty beard, and a bruise under his right eye. It was Marvin Rich, a CORE director. I sat down next to him on a filthy bunk bed. There were four other guys in the cell. One of them was also a CORE member — Fred Gardiner, a student from Iowa. The other three were drunks or local stumblebums. . . ."

On the morning of the third day Marvin Rich was released. Eddie appeared to be ill. He sat on his bunk, saying few words.

"I guess maybe I had the flu," he told us. "I felt awful. I couldn't eat. I

think I was running a high fever. Gardiner kept saying I should ask for a doctor, but I said, 'No, I ain't going to ask them for anything!'"

"The parade of drunks and bums went in and out of our cell and the cops kept making remarks to egg them on to beat us up. They even kind of said the judge might go soft on them if they did.

"Finally one beefy, bleary-eyed guy took them up on it. He tripped me. I got up and automatically pushed him. He fell down. I turned my back. He jumped me from behind. He really worked me over good. I stayed non-violent, but I had to jam my fists in my pockets to do it. Another of the prisoners joined in. They kicked me in the kidneys, and it hurt so much I cursed at them at the top of my voice, but nobody came to see what was happening.

"Later I learned that Bill Hansen, who was put across the street in another jailhouse, was beaten up at almost the same time. They broke three of his ribs and fractured his jaw."

Imprisoned across the aisle from Dickerson was another cell load of prisoners, all Negro. Among them were the Reverend Ralph Abernathy. Dickerson remembers that the Negroes sang and had vigorous prayer services.

"The Reverend Abernathy seemed to do most of the prayer-leading," Dickerson told us. "You know, I never remember hearing Martin Luther King's voice. I was disappointed. I thought he would be a powerful preacher. But maybe he was just sick and tired like I was . . ."

"I tried to memorize the songs. I knew most of the tunes. I've always liked music. Sometimes I'd sing along. There was one to the tune of 'Hallelujah, I'm a Bum.' It went 'Hallelujah, I'm travelin', hallelujah, ain't it fine? Hallelujah, I'm travelin', down freedom's main line!' . . ."

At the end of six days Dickerson was let out. He was referred to the home of a local CORE sympathizer, and, he says, spent an hour submerged in a tub of hot water, scrubbing himself with a floor brush and yellow soap. The following day he took a bus for New York and there told James Farmer that he wanted to work full time for the organization.

Farmer, a well-educated, articulate man, says, "I wanted to help Eddie. I knew that people in his community regarded him as a moron or worse. But I felt that there was a lot more to him than anyone had yet seen. The fellowship and acceptance he had experienced in CORE—even the jail term—had been psychologically good for him. He was beginning to realize that there are important ideas loose in the world and that working to make this country a better place to live in is exciting—more so than just beating up somebody on Saturday night."

Farmer gave Dickerson a tiresome, undramatic job in New York CORE

headquarters. He changed typewriter ribbons, sharpened pencils, sorted and filed letters and pamphlets. He was paid \$25 per week. It enabled him to live at the Y.M.C.A., with almost nothing left over for social recreation. He said it didn't matter. He read a great deal.

"I never saw nothing like the New York public libraries," he says almost reverently. "There was a book about everything I ever heard of. I was reading modern political and economic history, and I can tell you it was slow going. I went to night lectures in non-violent techniques.

"When I heard that a CORE task force was getting ready to go to Durham, North Carolina, I asked if I could be counted in. Mr. Farmer talked to me about five hours and then he said I could go.

"I was in Durham three days. I got very nervous waiting for something to happen. It would have been kind of a relief if it did. Meanwhile we kept on with the nonviolent drill.

"In one drill session they asked me, 'If someone puts a lighted cigarette against your neck, will you remain non-violent in your body and spirit?' I said I thought I could. Then they said, 'What if you're with a woman and someone sets fire to her hair like they did to the Greensboro sit-ins? What will you do?'"

"Up in New York I had one answer. But down South I began to feel different. I realized I didn't really dig this non-violence thing yet. If you're a Southern boy, you learn early to fight to protect women. Once my father and my brothers and me jumped out of our car and stopped a man from beating up a colored woman. It seemed to me that if CORE is an army, they should keep women out of the front lines.

"I couldn't be sure that I wouldn't hit back to protect a woman, so I apologized to all the members of the Durham group and went back to New York."

CORE directors did not reproach him. They put him back to work at his office-boy job. A few weeks later he was put in charge of a picket line in New York City that was demonstrating against a national restaurant chain. There, Eddie told us, he fell in love with a pretty college girl who volunteered to help.

"Her family was poor, like mine," he said. "She was good-looking, she had a good shape and she was very smart. I never dated a college girl before. And I realized she admired me. I kind of liked myself. I was a full-time CORE worker, a captain on the picket line."

Dickerson wrote a poem for his new girl. . . . He said ruefully, "She read it and she started to correct the spelling. I knew then we'd never make it. After a while I stopped seeing her."

Just before Christmas, Eddie received a letter from his mother asking reproachfully why he had stayed away so long. She told him about the 50 relatives who had gathered for Thanksgiving, and, he said, it made him home-

sick. He went back to Cambridge for the weekend.

"My father and my brothers let me in the door, but it wasn't exactly a happy reunion," he reported. "I spent the whole time arguing. My father said he'd rather see his family dead than see Negroes and whites mixing in Maryland. They all wanted to know how much I was getting paid and they thought I was lying when I told them it was only twenty-five dollars. Lots of Southerners think CORE and the NAACP are financed by Catholic and Jewish millionaires."

There were no physical fights.

"I could easily have got into a scrap or two," he said, "but I didn't. I realized that I caused a lot of those rows—I had talked back to my father just to prove I was big enough to get away with it. Now I suddenly felt big enough not to have to do it. I spent a lot of time talking to Judy, my sister. I told her I felt the work I was in was the most important thing in the world and I was educating myself so I could make it my lifework. She didn't say much, but she listened."

Eddie Dickerson had talked to us in New York. After we heard his story we told him that we would like to visit Cambridge. We wanted to talk to relatives and neighbors who had witnessed his abrupt change of heart.

"You don't think I'm conning you, do you?" he asked anxiously. We assured him that we did not. We said it seemed important to understand all the emotional and intellectual factors that had influenced him. He agreed.

"I don't understand myself how it all happened," he said. "I know that something must have prepared the way, because when these ideas were explained to me, it was like I'd been waiting to hear them all my life. Well, good luck. Take care."

Certainly the town where a child is born and grows to manhood helps make him whatever he becomes. Cambridge, however, is unsuited to pave the way for radical changes. In 1960, 15.2 percent of the labor force was unemployed, compared to 4.8 per cent in the state as a whole. Only 3 per cent of the population of the age of 25 or over is college-trained, and only 28.7 per cent has completed high school, contrasted with the state-wide figure of 41.7 per cent. School integration is spoken of as "successful," but at present only two Negroes attend a formerly all-white school.

The town appears to lack both economic strength and intellectual leadership—a dual handicap that may help to explain the fact that the median family income in the area for the year 1959 was \$3,233, compared to a state-wide figure of \$5,417.

We visited the offices of the Cambridge *Daily Banner*, and viewed on microfilm the news coverage of the CORE picketing and arrests. It appeared to us that events were fully and impartially reported. Maurice Rimpo,

a *Banner* newswriter, drew our attention to two editorials that, he said, represented the viewpoints of the influential town moderates. They were as follows:

"Perhaps Cambridge has not been making fast enough strides to satisfy the wishes of those outsiders who have no real or lasting interest in the community's welfare. But this community has made measurable progress in bi-racial matters in the past decades, progress CORE and the others may not be aware of. . . ."

"The good will of the people of Dorchester County is under severe test as a result of the efforts of Baltimore-based integrationists to try to force overnight integration of Cambridge. . . . Dorchester-men are proud and independent. They resent coercion, ultimatums and the threats of a boycott. . . ."

Herbert St. Clair, the Negro undertaker who sheltered Eddie Dickerson when he first left home, told us he disagrees strongly with both editorials.

"What do you mean by the moderate viewpoint?" he asked. "You mean the white man's moderate viewpoint. We colored people are one third of the population down here, but our point of view means nothing."

"We don't kid ourselves. It's hard to believe that Washington, D.C., is only seventy-five miles away—we live like the Deep South. There are parts of the Eastern Shore where Negroes still get off the sidewalk and stand in the gutter when a white person walks past. I can't see that things are any better here in Cambridge today than they were for my father fifty years ago." . . .

We had no difficulty finding the Dickerson home, an unpainted cinder-block house decorated by two red brick columns at the front. It is well cared for and comfortably furnished. We found Eddie's father and his brothers Joe and Jim and his sister Judy watching a television Western in the family living room.

John Dickerson sat in a rocking chair. Thin strands of gray hair fell over his lined face. His shoulders slumped, yet the muscles in his arms and chest still looked powerful. When he spoke, his breath came in weary gasps. When we began asking questions about Eddie, his face twisted, his eyes grew narrow and his voice sounded irritated.

"I don't want to talk about him. We don't agree with anything he is doing. . . ."

Eddie's father rose from his rocker and firmly showed us to the door. "What Eddie did was terrible," he said. "I'd like to think that someday he'll get his senses back. Colored and white living side by side as equals just isn't right. They aren't my equals. I'm dead sure of that."

John T. Comer, supervisor of pupil services for Cambridge schools, said, "Eddie was a very poor student. He was in a special class for slow pupils. He spent two years in first grade and

two years in second grade. He quit school in ninth grade."

He added, "He was well liked, however, by both classmates and teachers. He never caused any trouble. If you scolded him, he'd never answer back. Often, on the playground, he'd stick up for some younger boy who was being pushed around. . . ."

We talked to a number of young men and women who had known Eddie as friend and schoolmate.

A pretty young matron pushing a baby carriage smiled and blushed as she recalled her high-school friendship with Eddie.

"We girls considered him a good date," she said. "He was attractive and a lot of fun. He was always willing to go places, and if he had money, he wouldn't hold it back. The way things turned out, I'm sure glad I didn't marry him, but I might have if he'd asked me. . . ."

A younger boy who told us he was still in high school recalled, "Eddie used to be a hero to me. A couple of bigger boys started knocking me around once and he chased them off. He was always sticking up for somebody. I remember I heard about how Eddie and another boy were fooling around in some rich lady's greenhouse and the other boy stripped all the flowers off some rare, expensive plant—a rare orchid, I think it was. The other kid was already in some kind of jam, so when the lady that owned the plant started to yell, Eddie took the blame for it."

"And the other kid wasn't even grateful. Later he stole Eddie's knife and sold it."

"Eddie was determined that his sister Judy was going to stay good. She's not the kind that would go bad anyway, but Eddie was taking no chances. He wouldn't even let her have any dates. Once a fellow came to call on her and Eddie and one of his brothers opened the door, picked him up and threw him in the river. I sure miss Eddie. I just don't understand what got into him. . . ."

Cambridge Police Chief Bruce Kinnaman, however, takes a less charitable view of Eddie. Kinnaman, a vigorous, sharp-eyed police officer, spoke freely of the tension and difficulties stirred up by the CORE demonstrators.

"They are lawbreakers," he said angrily. "They come in here and defy our laws, and when we arrest them, they get down on their knees and start to sing hymns. Or else they stand up and sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' It riles me! . . . As to Eddie, I've known him a long time. I don't see how any group of people with their heads screwed on straight could make a saint out of him. He's the kind of simple-minded nincompoop who will do anything anybody tells him. Tell him to carry a picket sign, he'll carry a sign. Tell him to stick a knife in someone, maybe he'll do that too. I feel sorry for his folks, but as far as this town is

concerned—good riddance.”

The Reverend Albert Medlock, former minister of Cambridge's Grace Methodist Church, sharply disagreed with the conclusions of other local authorities.

“I know a lot of people in Cambridge looked down on Eddie as lazy and shiftless because he never settled down to one job. But I think all those years he was trying to find himself. I considered him very bright in many areas. It's true he didn't have a conventional mind, but he was totally honest—everyone knows he never lied. His parents aren't regular churchgoers, but Eddie came voluntarily to Sunday school and when he got old enough he joined the church. He was always interested in moral questions — what the church teaches about the relationship of man to man.

“He was different from his family. Yet he was willing to sacrifice himself, perhaps to an absurd degree. I married Eddie and his wife and I baptized their baby—I know what I'm talking about.”

We were startled. We said that Dickerson had never mentioned the fact that he was married.

“I can scarcely blame him; it was not a happy situation,” the minister replied. “Eddie and his brother were both deeply involved with the same girl. It was Eddie who married her. I know he has sent money to support the child. His wife is an intelligent girl and comes from a very decent family, but it was not a spiritually healthy union — although I hoped it might grow to be. I understand that she has gone out of

town to establish residence for a divorce.

“My view of Eddie is that he never had the chance to develop himself properly. If he was slow and lazy or occasionally violent and dissolute, it was because his environment did not provide the proper encouragement for him to become something better.”

We returned to New York and asked Dickerson why he had not told us about his marriage and his 14-month-old son.

“I don't know,” he said dejectedly, “I knew you'd find out when you went down home, but I guess maybe I hoped that by not mentioning it, it would go away and seem like it never happened. We never really wanted to be man and wife. We had agreed to get a divorce before I even left town. The little boy is healthy and strong and a good kid—but I just don't feel like his father. His mother is a nice person and she is young and pretty enough to start her life over. I wish her the best of luck. I guess I was wrong to date other girls while I was still married.”

He asked anxiously what people in Cambridge had said about him. We told him that nearly everyone seemed fond of him but many believed him to be irresponsible.

“I know,” he said. “Up North here, people who hear what I've done think I'm the greatest. . . . And down home they think I belong in the booby hatch. But I'm going to show them that I can amount to something. I'm going to night school.

“The CORE people are the only ones I've ever known who treat me with dignity, as if I'm as good as anybody. Even after I slugged them, they believed I was a good guy. And when I chickened out in Durham, they were ready to trust me again. I appreciate that. I want to prove myself to them. I don't have any doubts no more. I feel pretty strong that everyone—no matter what color skin he has—should have equal opportunities. God meant it that way. And it don't make sense to beat them up so they'll believe it. It has to be done by nonviolence if it's going to work. . . .”

Marvin Rich, the CORE official who shared a jail cell with Eddie in Albany, had the final comment:

“I think Eddie was lost before he came to us. He had no sense of identity. He didn't know where he was going. Nobody had much use for him, so of course he didn't have much use for himself. If you don't respect yourself, you hate the world or any handy target. That's what made him so fast with his fists. When CORE showed him that a man's strength can be used for spiritual and moral purposes, it straightened him out . . .

“The tragedy is that there are so many Eddie Dickersons—thousands of young men and women whose lives are wasted. Maybe that's what produces our bigots. But if we can reach Eddie, I guess we can hope in time to reach them all.”

THE END

An Epilogue

From Redbook, September, 1963

“Why didn't they hit back?” was the question that puzzled Eddie Dickerson when he slugged those Freedom Riders. It was also the title of an article in the July REDBOOK that told how young Dickerson later regretted his action so deeply he joined CORE to help the cause of racial equality. While that story was still on the newsstands Eddie returned to his home town, Cambridge, Maryland, for the acid test of his conversion. In a press photo, which appeared in papers across the country July 9th, he is shown kneeling with others in front of a restaurant in protest of segregation just as the proprietor slapped a raw egg in his face. The youth bore that and other indignities without striking back, and now it is the restaurant owner who feels regret. “I'm ashamed,” he said afterward. “I'll never forget it. It makes me feel very little, less than a man.”

CORE

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