

**The engagement of students from San Francisco Theological Seminary
in solidarity with the students and faculty of the
Camden Academy
in the struggle for Blacks' Voting Rights
Wilcox County, Alabama, March to September 1965**

On March 7, 1965 Richard Dickinson, a graduate student at San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS), was watching television in San Anselmo, California, as Alabama State Troopers attacked non-violent protesters on the Pettus Bridge as they attempted to march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery for black citizens' right to vote. That first of several "Selma" marches was led by John Lewis, chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Rev. Hosea Williams, a leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Dickinson was shocked to see his close friend Lewis – with whom he had joined in the 1960 sit-ins in Nashville, TN – and other marchers severely beaten by armed policemen on what was to become known as "Bloody Sunday."

"I went immediately to see Dr. Theodore ("Ted") Gill to ask him if I could be excused (from classes) and go down to Selma to support John and the others," he said recently. "Dr. Gill gave me permission and told me to let him know if Dr. King wanted any others to go to Selma as well. When I got to Selma I went to Dr. King's to ask him this question. Andrew Young met me at the door and told me, of course, Dr. King would welcome as many as would like to come. So I called Dr. Gill and told him that."

In a special issue of *Chimes*, the Seminary magazine, issued on the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma march, SFTS recalled that Gill and others didn't hesitate. "By Sunday evening, March 14th, three seminary professors, Benjamin A. Reist, Aaron J. Ungersma and Neill Q. Hamilton, were underway across the country to Selma. Seminarian Con Knudsen, just returned from four days among the demonstrators in Selma, reported on his experiences to the gathered seminary community on Monday, March 15th. An "SCLC Committee" comprised of eight students and two faculty members was formed to coordinate community action, and in short order enough money was collected to dispatch a busload of forty-three SFTS students, Academic Dean Edward V. Stein, and two students from the Pacific School of Religion, to Selma to join in the effort. SFTS President Dr. Theodore Gill, Professor Leonard J. Trinterud, and eight more students flew to Selma on March 19th to meet those who had traveled cross-country by bus.

Dickinson recalls his own reception in Selma:

Since I knew all of the students who had been in Nashville with me, John Lewis, Diane Nash, Bernard Lafayette, Marion Barry and others, they insisted that I march all of the way with them to Montgomery. So I marched.

The other SFTS students did not march; instead they were "volunteered" by Gill to serve as the backbone of a contingent that would move ahead of the march to set up and guard the campsites, often in muddy roadside fields, where the marchers would sleep each night. President Gill himself was invited to walk the entire 50 miles in the front ranks of marchers alongside Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, civil rights leaders John Lewis and Ralph David Abernathy, Sr., Dr. Ralph Johnson Bunche, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

None of those who were privileged to be at Selma ever forgot the experience, nor the obligation to continue the struggle for civil rights they assumed by being there. Many of them gathered back at the seminary in San Anselmo this past April (2015) on the 50th anniversary of Selma, to share with one another the various ways they had engaged over the past five decades in the wider struggle for human rights at home and abroad, and very especially for the elimination of racism, "America's original sin."

While most SFTS students and faculty returned home to work after the march, others remained in the South engaged with SNCC and SCLC voter registration campaigns in Alabama, Mississippi and elsewhere. Some decided to stay close by Selma. “After the march,” Dickinson recalled, “Dr. Gill said that the black Presbyterian High School in Camden wanted a white minister type to assist them since they were wanting also to march. So I went to Camden.” Several other seminarians would soon join him there, taking the first steps in what would be a long march.

Why Camden?

As Dickenson was watching the events of “Bloody Sunday” in San Anselmo, Maria Gitin (then known as Joyce Brians), a nineteen-year-old freshman at San Francisco State College, was also watching on a black and white screen at a friend’s house across the Golden Gate Bridge aghast as the police attacked the marchers. She had already joined SNCC and had begun training for participation in SCOPE (the SCLC’s Summer Community Organization and Political Education project). She also was moved now to set out for Atlanta for intensive training with SCLC. SCOPE assigned her to Wilcox County, and soon she found herself in a vacant dormitory room at the Camden Academy. Maria has written a fine, well-researched memoir on her experience and that of other SCLC and SNCC volunteers in Camden and neighboring rural communities during the tense summer of 1965.¹

The seminarians too were responding to the call of the major civil rights organizations when many went to Selma. The “SCLC Committee” formed by students and faculty in mid-March established two liaison groups, one to maintain contact with the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and a second to coordinate with Presbyterian national headquarters. Not everyone at the seminary could go on the March. Those who stayed behind remained active in fund-raising and solidarity efforts. But all were of one mind, “Selma was a beginning, not an end.” Some men and women students participated independently in civil rights activities elsewhere in the South. Some decided to go to Camden in solidarity with the courageous black students and faculty of the Camden Academy threatened by racist violence for having stood up to demand their voting rights.

Presbyterians had a long historical connection with Camden Academy. It was established in 1920 as a residential school for black students by the Freedmen’s Department of the Woman’s Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church of North America, based in Pittsburgh. When that church was reunited with the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (UPCUSA) in 1958, its Board of National Missions assumed responsibility for the continuing support of the Academy. The national Presbyterian Church actually still held title to the buildings and the property of the Academy in the mid-1960s and thus bore considerable legal as well as moral responsibility for it, its staff and its students. The Rev. Thomas Threadgill, the Academy’s chaplain, a native of Wilcox County, a WWII combat veteran, and honors graduate of Morehouse College in Atlanta and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (UPCUSA), maintained especially close ties with the national church.

The threats to the safety of those at Academy grew more intense after the Selma march when Threadgill and the Academy principal agreed to provide housing there for white “outsiders” (including seminarians) who had come to support the local black community. When they signaled the need for help, the Board of National Missions responded promptly in cooperation with SFTS students and faculty.

The SFTS response

¹ *This Bright Light of Ours*, University of Alabama Press, 2015.

The Rev. **Richard (Dick) Dickinson** was the perfect person to lead the way in Camden. He recalls,

... when I was a senior at Vanderbilt Divinity School I joined SNCC – I was originally from California – and when black students were being arrested for trying to order a sandwich in stores in downtown Nashville, I began attending the trials. After a few days, John Lewis and Diane Nash asked me if I would be interested in joining their movement to help them while they were planning sit-ins. I told them I was white and would not be much help to them but they told me I could interpret how the white community was reacting to the sit-ins and help them that way. So I joined the movement at that time... met with them almost every night and attended all the mass meetings at black churches. The sit-ins were very successful and the downtown businesses were losing a great deal of money since none of the black people were shopping in downtown Nashville. You could walk downtown and not see a single black person downtown. The sit-ins and the mass meetings were very successful.

The movement asked me and a black student to try and make an appointment with Mr. Sloan, the head of the Merchant's Association and the owner of Cain-Sloan Department Store. We did, and at the meeting Mr. Sloan showed us all the letters from white customers of his department store (saying) that they would not shop at his store if he allowed blacks to eat at the restaurant in his store. We calmly ignored that and told him that he was losing money by not having any black customers at his store. So we offered an opportunity for him to save face and to open things up. We suggested that he allow middle-aged black women to come into his store at ten in the morning and at three in the afternoon and order only coffee, and after being served coffee, they would leave the store. This would take place from Monday until Thursday. On Friday, if everything went smoothly on the other four days, these same women would come in and order lunch at noon, and be served and then leave after calmly eating. If that worked then the lunch counters would be opened forever. This would take place at every lunch counter in downtown Nashville. After that week all of the lunch counters were opened.

That was the beginning of the end of segregation in Nashville. Companies began hiring truck drivers and other black workers and there were no riots or disturbance downtown.

At Vanderbilt I was studying with Jim Lawson, who (had just returned from three years as a missionary) in India where he had studied about Gandhi and non-violence. Jim was, of course, black, and he and I played intramural football for the Divinity School team. He was a quarterback and I was an end. The chancellor of Vanderbilt University was very upset to hear that a black person was playing football with whites. When we heard that the Chancellor was not going to allow Jim to graduate from the Divinity School, I went to see the Dean and asked him if that were so and was assured that Jim would be able to graduate with us. When we went through graduation and Jim was not there and would not be able to graduate, two other students and I called the press, went to the Chancellor's office and returned our diplomas in protest. The Dean of the seminary and most of the faculty also resigned.

In August of that year, I left for Japan as a missionary with the Disciples of Christ mission board. I appreciated the studies I had had at the Divinity School but I could not accept its diploma, so I was looking for a seminary where I could get another diploma that I would recognize and

accept. In 1964, having heard that under Dr. Gill, the seminary had changed to a liberal school with a great faculty I decided to attend seminary at San Anselmo on my furlough.²

Dickinson went to Camden shortly after the Selma marchers arrived on the steps of the state capitol in Montgomery on March 25th, 1965, and was housed in a vacant Academy dormitory. He began his projected two-month stay with an orientation by the Academy's Principal, Dr. James Hobbs and its Chaplain, the Rev. Thomas Threadgill and followed their advice. His presence was appreciated. It held out the promise of some welcome protection from racist radicals and local authorities, and of informing the wider public of their plight through national church offices and the press.

In Camden, he applied his experience in non-violent action acquired in Nashville, taking a visible role amidst protesters when that was appropriate, but also engaging the white community, including its power structures – the Sheriff and his deputies, the mayor and business leaders – in constructive dialogue. He kept the Board of National Missions apprised of the situation in Wilcox County and offered advice with respect to the continued national church presence.

Two weeks after he arrived, he was surprised to receive an invitation to meet with the local Board of Education. He reported on the encounter in his diary.

I was introduced at the beginning of the meeting as a minister staying at the local Presbyterian school and a missionary on furlough from Japan. The sole agenda for the day was apparently to meet and talk with me. The superintendent began, "Mr. Dickinson, you have been in our community for a couple of weeks now and you've seen our problem. We want to live peaceably with all our citizens, but we don't like our community being disrupted like this. These demonstrations by these 'nigras' seem very unfair. We've tried to make our community a good and safe place to be for all people. We've prided ourselves on being fair to our 'nigrah' citizens. All of us have been very close to black people all our lives. What can we do? What do they want anyway?"

I replied, "You men have lived here all your lives. I'm originally from California and have been in Japan the last four years. I don't know the answer to your problem. I have heard the black community has tried to present a list of grievances to the white community. I wonder if you've seen them?"

"Yes, we did get a copy of something from the mayor's office, but well, I don't know."

"I think it might be helpful to read over what they have written and maybe discuss them to see whether any changes might be made." I handed the Superintendent my list.

The Superintendent asked his secretary to make some copies, and they were passed around for all to read. After a few moments, another Board member addressed me courteously: "Mr. Dickinson, you've got to understand something about us. Most of us were raised by black nannies. We are very close to black people. We love many of them. I remember as a child playing with my nannie's son. Every year we gave her a gift. Just last year I gave our maid, Bertha, a new Bible. She is part of our family. We've tried to do what's right by our help."

For the next three hours, I sat there listening to these men go over the list. They tried to explain to me what they were feeling. When they got to the item about calling black principals, [Hobbs

² Text slightly edited from Dickinson's original.

had told me early on that all the black school principals in Camden had PhDs, but were always addressed by their first names] and ministers by their titles and last names they were surprised. "We've never thought anything about that. That's the way we've done things for years and years. Blacks have their place; whites have theirs. They're different than we are. We don't want to cross the line between us."

...That afternoon I went back to campus drained. The meeting had gone on and on with the white men going over the list of grievances and explaining to me their position. They seemed honestly puzzled by the black unrest. I felt glad for the meeting. I felt I had accomplished something by just sitting and listening for so long a time. I had had no answers for them, but I had accomplished something that had not happened before. They actually looked at the grievances and studied them carefully and openly. They began, if only dimly to sense some of the concerns of the black community.

On the other hand, he recognized the need for the pressure to be kept up. Dickinson's diary goes on to say:

In a few days the students planned to demonstrate again with a march downtown. I sat in with the leaders as they made their plans, but I offered nothing other than to emphasize the nonviolent nature of the marches that had taken place so far throughout the south. I hoped that they would march quietly in a dignified manner, for if they did so, their march would have a far greater impact on the white community of Camden and the world outside. If they were seen as victims of a terrible injustice, then changes might be forthcoming. I was going to march with them. The leaders explained to the student body their plans and told them to march orderly, two by two from the school to the downtown square. There they hoped to confront the mayor with the list of grievances from the black community. If they were met by the sheriff and his newly deputized posse of men, they would proceed quietly without paying attention to the taunts and jeers of any white people along the way. If the sheriff and his men shot them with tear gas they were not to disperse but maintain an orderly line.

We began the march with the student body president, Ralph [Eggleston], at the head of the line. I marched about ten rows back. As we were ascending a slight incline into the town center we could see a line of the sheriff's men at the top of the hill. It looked ominous. We began to sing "We shall Overcome" as we continued our march. As we came close to the sheriff we heard a loud command followed by a series of shots. Tear gas canisters landed all around us and began filling the air with the acrid gas. Our eyes burned so badly we could see only with difficulty the smoke and the people around us. In spite of the warnings to the contrary, most of the marchers scattered in all directions. At the head of the line, Ralph maintained his position and was still standing tall and singing. The fumes tore at our eyes. The march was over. In an instant, the sheriff had walked up to Ralph, grabbed him, put him into handcuffs, and led him away. The students were running and crying and scattered everywhere. Most made their way back to school quickly.

I returned to the school as well and repeated the events to the principal and the minister. We talked about what we should do and decided that I would go to the sheriff's office and demand that Ralph be released immediately.

I wore a top coat and hung a small recorder under my coat with the microphone coming through a slit in the pocket. I could activate the tape recorder by moving a switch on the microphone. I walked into the sheriff's office and when he came out I said, "I'm here to demand the release of Ralph Smith (sic.). By what right have you arrested him?"

"We have put him under protective custody."

"Protective custody from whom? I want you to know that we have contacted President Johnson's representative, Governor LeRoy Calbom (?)³ of the Civil Rights Division of the Federal Government about this. The students were peacefully marching and you had no right to disrupt their march or to gas them as you did. You certainly had no reason to arrest Mr. Smith."

The Sheriff responded meekly, much to my surprise. He nervously said that he would be released soon, now that the danger was over. His voice quavered as if he were frightened.

I returned to the school but before I could walk back, Ralph was there ahead of me, having been driven in a sheriff's car back to the school. I played the tape of my encounter with the sheriff to the principal and the minister. They were amazed at how frightened the sheriff sounded. They had never heard anything quite like it: a white sheriff frightened because of possible consequences for his treatment of a black man. They asked me to play the tape so that the entire student body could hear it. The whole experience had been quite amazing.

When Dickinson returned to the seminary in San Anselmo, he brought with him as a trophy one of the teargas canisters that had been fired at the youth. Welton Rotz, a fellow student and gifted artist turned it into a metal sculpture for presentation to the seminary, symbolic of the Camden students' courage and determination and reminiscent of the SFTS presence with them there.

The continuing presence of seminarians

Back in San Anselmo, students had formed an "SCLC Committee." John Williams, who chaired the group, reported on April 20th

Although most of the excitement surrounding the Selma crisis has subsided on campus, the seminary is still involved in the civil rights struggle in the South. In Camden which is 35 miles southwest of Selma there have been four people from the seminary working with the demonstrations, encouraging Negro leadership and establishing lines of communication with the white community.

Dickinson, the first to arrive, was mentor to those sent to accompany him: The others were:

Gary and Diane Smith. Gary arrived towards the beginning of April and was especially active in relations with the black community in and around Camden. His wife Diane joined him a week later. Dickinson found her especially helpful in encounters in the White community, "for example with Circuit Solicitor Blanchard McLeod who toned down his profanity in her presence!" The Smiths departed on April 19th.

Jim Daugherty arrived some days before the Smiths' departure and

³ Leroy Collins, former Governor of Florida, first Director of the Community Relations Service under the 1964 Civil Rights Act

Kenneth Jones, who had not participated in the Selma march, but left the seminary on April 21st to join the team in response to the call for people to accompany the students and staff at the Academy. He recalls,

I flew down to Birmingham by myself and met up with Dick Dickinson in Camden. I was probably there not much more than a week, but the time was transformative in terms of my subsequent ministries: first in Japan, where I saw Dick again from time to time; then for 40 years in Cleveland, Ohio; and later as a mission co-worker in South Africa.

I still have vivid recollections of walking dusty rural roads with Dick, encountering local white folk along the way, and marveling at Dick's ability to engage people in respectful conversation across widely divergent points of view. I learned there that seeking to be an agent of reconciliation is something other than maintaining a neutral stance in the midst of conflict. I also recall the dynamic energy of students at the Academy, where I stayed, and the difficult situations of some of the faculty and administrators.

Richard Krushnic, who came to the Selma march on a bus chartered by students from the University of Colorado, also spent a brief time in Camden afterward.

Williams' report for the SCLC Committee went on to say,

These people have been making the Camden Academy...their headquarters. They have been kept extremely busy. The SCLC Committee believes that a continuing support of the work being done in Camden in particular and in the South in general is important. Many people have indicated that they want to know how they can continue their involvement with what was begun by our going to Selma. The following information is designed to make you aware of the needs of those in Camden and of the concerns of the committee.

- 1) With the Committee continuing to finance those persons who have been going to Camden on a relay basis there is a need for financial support. The fund that was established is rapidly being depleted paying for transportation costs plus \$4 a day to cover expenses for those who go to Camden. In addition, economic reprisals have been severe in Selma and are beginning to take their toll in Camden. This heaped upon the already impoverished condition of the people makes us aware of the need for continued support for those people who are struggling so bravely in the face of the economic repercussions. We would encourage you to solicit additional funds from people you know...In addition we would like to encourage a long-range continuing support as we anticipate lending our support to the Camden Academy for as long as is necessary. In helping the academy, which is a focal point of the Negro community for a wide area, we will be lending strength and encouragement to a community of Negroes much larger than the academy. To begin such a program we would encourage those persons who still have some concern but not much money at present to pledge a certain sum of money to be paid monthly and beginning from the time when you feel you will have recouped your finances from your last philanthropic endeavor...
- 2) The response to the drive to raise food for Selma was great. Most of the food we were able to take on the bus with us. As yet food that has been received since then has not been transported to Selma because we have no means of transporting it. All of our efforts have not yielded us a truck in which we could deliver the goods. ... If anyone knows of any anyone who could donate a vehicle for transporting goods, please let us know.

Jim Martin had flown to Selma and back during the week after “Bloody Sunday,” and then, with **Tom Blaney**, drove a truckload of books, food and clothing to Starkville and West Point, Mississippi. In May, he returned to Alabama to work on voter registration with the group housed at the Academy.

Dickinson completed his term with the project toward the end of April, and was preparing to return to California when he received an urgent message from Dr. Gill, asking him to return via Washington D.C. William Louis Dickinson, a first term Republican congressman from Alabama's 2nd congressional district, was making statements there accusing the black community of sexual impropriety during the march. Dickinson's task was to dispel this rumor on Capitol Hill. Together with Roman Catholic Sister Leoline, and an Episcopal Priest from Pittsburgh he met with Gerald Ford, House Minority Leader and other congressmen and held a press conference to discredit the allegations of “misbehavior”.

Dwain Epps arrived in Camden in time to be briefed by Dickinson before he departed. He says that he also had decided to forego the Selma march but instead to spend a longer period at Camden to accompany people there during the tense time that was certain to follow. He wrote to a friend at the time that he had responded to Dickinson's request for someone to continue his work.

He said he wanted someone who was 1) mature, 2) reasonable, 3) who had lived in the South and could understand the position of the whites, 4) and who was concerned as a Christian that all men live with the benefits of God-given and American-given freedom and opportunities.

I found out at 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday (April 22), at 2:00 I had decided to go, Friday at 8:00 a.m. quit three jobs and was on a plane for a planned 5-weeks stay.

Epps had entered seminary in 1963 after having spent three years in the US Air Force at Keesler AFB, Biloxi, Mississippi. “After graduation from college and receiving an AFROTC commission.” he commented, “I was asked where I would like to be stationed on permanent duty, and I responded, ‘overseas-unlimited.’ Indeed I felt like I had gone to a foreign land when I got to Mississippi from Oregon, where I had grown up!” However, he had soon become involved there with a group of young Southern Presbyterian “liberal” pastors who had recently graduated from Louisville Theological seminary in Kentucky and had decided to return home to Mississippi. Through them he had become involved in the struggle to prevent the PCUS Synod of Mississippi from being controlled by conservative, segregationist forces. In 1964, after his first year at SFTS, he was invited by one of his friends and mentors who was then the pastor of the PCUS church in Columbia, Mississippi to serve in his stead as a summer intern while he was on study leave. That summer the civil rights movement was focusing particular attention on Mississippi where the struggle was being especially brutally repressed. Not long after he arrived, the Klan murders near Philadelphia, Mississippi of three young civil rights workers – James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman – had drawn national attention. “That summer,” he commented, “was my baptism by fire as I was informed my members of my congregation that I too was being carefully watched as I drove about in my VW Beetle with Oregon license plates!” His experiences in Columbia are related in William McAtee's fine book, *Transformed: A White Mississippi Pastor's Journey into Civil Rights and Beyond* (University Press of Mississippi, 2011)

Epps recalled that when he landed at the Birmingham airport in the early evening, he was met by James Bevel, Director of the SCLC Alabama Project, and driven to Selma, where Bevel invited him to dinner at Walker's Café on whose sidewalk the Rev. James Reeb had been beaten to death six weeks before.

I was expecting to be given instructions on what I should do in Camden, but instead Bevel wanted to talk about the war in Vietnam and his ambitious plan to send a boatload of white US

clergy to Saigon to demonstrate for peace! At the time that seemed to me to be irrelevant to the urgent task at hand. Years later I realized he was giving me a valuable lesson in the interconnectedness of issues. Justice and peace are two sides of the same coin!

Not long after he had been installed in the dormitory at Camden Academy Epps wrote to his pastor friend in Columbia,

On Monday [April 27th] I found myself at the head of a march alongside an eighty year old woman, almost blind and walking with two canes marching for the dignity of her people, even though she may die tomorrow. Soon after I found myself in conversations with the D.A., mayor, president of the bank, Baptist minister, supt. of schools, and other whites who saw me marching, and know I'm living with Negroes. They also know I am trying to avoid violence and that I love and am concerned for them too. ... My life has been redirected.

Epps departed toward the end of May for graduate studies in Germany, but arrangements were already underway to assure a continuing presence.

Martin Hessel, one of his classmates, came to join him before he departed. He wrote recently,

In all the publicity that has come out so far, there has been no recognition of the fine follow-up process you initiated, including your full day with Dr. King in Wilcox County, in which I had my first exposure to the deep south, it's pain and it's hope....

The UPCUSA mandate

The SFTS volunteers came to Camden under the auspices of the United Presbyterian Church, but they maintained close ties with the SCLC and SNCC campaign organizers. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was no stranger to Camden. He had visited before, but he came again to visit rural communities in Wilcox County in early May for the first time since the Selma march and seminarians at Camden were asked to travel in his entourage as a visible "outside" presence. This afforded them the privilege of witnessing his engagement with local people first-hand and tape-recording his sermons in local congregations.

SFTS was by this time active at several levels in the national struggle for civil rights and against racism. The UPCUSA General Assembly had created the Commission on Religion and Race (CORR) in 1963 as "the focal point for race relations and liaison with interfaith and ecumenical efforts," under the leadership of Gayraud S. Wilmore. SFTS Faculty member Dr. Ben Reist⁴, who had gone to Selma for the march, served on that Commission from 1968-1977, and chaired it from 1974-1975. CORR cooperated with other denominations through the National Council of Churches (NCCCUSA) in maintaining an ecumenical presence in Washington to promote legislation and action to further the cause of Civil Rights.

While Dickinson and Epps were in Camden, there was an active, but informal relationship between the seminarians and national headquarters of the Presbyterian Church. Seminarians reported regularly to "Gay" Wilmore⁵, Bryant George and Metz Rollins in New York, and at critical moments people in those offices and in Washington, D.C. were in regular contact with federal agencies whose presence on site was a valuable buffer against threats of violence. From the time of Selma, Reist remained in close touch

⁴ Reist's later book *Theology in Red, White and Black* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1975), which looked at the relationship between Christianity and African American and Native American cultures and theologies, was a pioneering effort to think theologically in a multicultural style.

with national church offices, and was instrumental in developing a formal framework for the continuing presence of SFTS students in Camden under the joint auspices of CORR and the Board of National Missions.

On May 17th, Bryant George, the Associate Chairman of the UPCUSA Board of National Missions wrote from New York to Prof. Reist, informing him of the “approved program for the C.O.R.R.-Board of National Missions-San Francisco Seminary Civil Rights Action Program in Camden, Alabama, Summer 1965,” and laid out its terms:

One thing must be clear. The students may very well have to be in the community to live as the facilities of the school are in no way promised by this program. They are to be responsible to the C.O.R.R. through Metz Rollins. They should contact Rollins at once and let him know their starting dates so that he can be with them. The monies will be held by this Board and paid out from here...

Five mature seminarians from (SFTS) will be placed in the Camden, Alabama area for a ten week period beginning in late May. They will receive orientation from the staff of C.O.R.R. They will be related to all of the Presbyterian work there and under the direct supervision of J. Metz Rollins of C.O.R.R. Staff. The function of these men (sic!) will be to work for:

1. Integration of public facilities
2. Voter registration
3. Reconciliation of races with the identifying of white moderates as the core of this work
4. Direct relationships with SNCC and SCLC
5. Development of a bi-racial committee for race advance in the area
6. Exposure of police brutality
7. Community development in areas not covered by the above
8. Direct relief using supplies available from California Churches
9. Establishment of direct relationship with Southern Presbyterian Churches
10. Possible recruitments of seniors for service in Southern UPUSA white pulpits
11. Such other functions as C.O.R.R. Temporary Southeast regional Council deems necessary and wise.

The total C.O.R.R. budget for this operation will be \$3,000. Any additional funds needed will have to be secured by the students or the seminary possibly on the basis on which they have been funding the program to date.

⁵ Wilmore's book, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, was published by Orbis Press in 1998.

Housing to this date has been at Camden Academy. While the focus of the work will be in the Camden area; it is in no way clear that housing will continue to be available at the Academy for the students so alternate arrangements should be worked out as soon as possible.

The second relay

John Worcester, who provided this information on the PCUSA mandate, wrote that

In March of that year, I was ... one of the group of students who pooled their resources to charter a bus to Selma to participate in the march to Montgomery. Dr. Ted Gill arranged with SCLC to have us assigned to the group which trucked ahead of the march each day to set up the tent camp for the night. After the conclusion at the state capital, he returned part of the way back to Marin Co. on the bus with us. Needless to say, these were memorable experiences.

(Later,) I was one of a team of five students who spent the summer of 1965 participating in a "Civil Rights Action Program" jointly sponsored by the UPCUSA Commission on Race and Religion, the Board of National Missions and SFTS. ...The other students were **John Golden, John Williams**, and a married couple **Gary and Yvonne Young**.

... We spent some ten weeks in Wilcox Co., and we were housed at one of the vacant dormitories at Camden Academy... We did voter registration and associated work alongside a group of college students working in that county under the S.C.O.P.E. project of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Summer Community Organization and Political Education).

Worcester kept a personal journal during his first few days in Camden. There he wrote:

Arrived Camden Saturday – 6/26 – 10 am from Mobile [on Trailways bus]⁶ with Sammie Westry, former Camden resident and Academy student; now Mobile resident, with wife and 2 children, 23 yrs old. He gave me good insight into conditions now and in former years here.

Met Principle Hobbs on arrival – and then met [John] Golden, [John] Williams, Connie Turner, Joyce Brians [later known as Maria Gitin] – all of us living at Academy [dorm] – Brians and [Connie] Turner working directly under SCOPE project.

Had long talks with Williams and Golden, hearing of their work here and the division of labor to date. Williams has been trying to maintain contact and further a conciliation of the community leaders – white and Negro. And in this has tried not to become too deeply identified with the Movement. Turner, Brians, and Golden – and myself for present – will be working closely with the SCOPE voter registration, political education, and OEO [Federal Office of Economic Opportunity] project...under Major Johns and Dan Harrell.

Also learned of the undercurrent of dissension that is now going amongst those living here at the Academy [dorm]. Girls and boys differ on many points – not only [what] the Movement means (John W's attempt to empathize with White community) – but also just general living conditions and communication. [It's not clear how] Turner and Brians [are living here,] how they got in, or have been able to remain.

6 Brackets indicate explanatory additions Worcester added in 2014

There is talk of beatings and intimidation – today a man was beat, and some few days ago a Negro boy was badly hurt. In trying to visit the lumber mill workers, several have been arrested for trespassing. The mill workers live on the property and have to trade at the general store run by the mill owner – they are paid in credit slips according to Golden. Plans are to march on the mill in the near future for a meeting.

This evening Golden, Brians, and I went to Gees Bend – about 25 miles NE of here – for a mass meeting – with Major Johns and (Roosevelt?) – heard Johns speak to a crowd of 80 or 100 – in a Negro farm village of some 1100 people. Met some of the people and introduced ourselves – very friendly reception by the people – so eager to talk and greet us.

Sunday night – 6-27 – 11:15 (pm). To church this morn with Golden and Williams via Hobbs auto to Millers Ferry – one of the two UP churches served by [Rev. Thomas] Threadgill – met people out there (Mr. Patterson, teacher) who related much of school's history. National Missions built (four) schools [in this county] many years ago and at first gave full support – now the schools and land (?) belong to church, but teachers are public paid and responsible to public – Nat'l Missions have slowly withdrawn support attempting to force Board of Education to assume responsibility for their maintenance – but they have greatly discriminated in their maintenance as things are in terrible repair and materials are very poor grade – e.g. the only real shop equipment other than discarded hand tools that Millers Ferry has obtained are from Board of National Missions.

Had fried chicken and hash-black potatoes – dinner by the girls.

... (Left) for Baptist church and student mass meeting at 7 pm to be given a ride by Mrs. Threadgill – rain came fast and hard at 7:30 and few showed up for meeting – listened to Lester, K.C. Jones (local student) and finally Jimmy Wilson SCLC staff speak – Wilson is terrific...from another areas – a marshal in Selma march.

(Afterwards) met SCOPE staffers and sat in on their table talk meeting – much dissension which was apparently smoothed over when Major Johns arrived late from Coy, ([Connie] Thurber, Ann Nesbit ... Phoenix, Bob Block, Judy) ... [Major] Johns made me to be PR man which will mean many things – the group came up here [Academy dorm] (walking thru town in the dark) to work on a report and do some planning – PR will mean in the major part attempting to see that info on all aspects on work here is up to date and is correct, as well as helping to interpret the goals and aims to the local people – [To be] up at 7 am for staff meeting in morning and preparation of handbills for boycott.

Monday 6-28 [written on] Tuesday morning 2:30 am. To Antioch Baptist at 7:45 [am] for staff meeting – Major Johns appointed project staff people – me to news relations and PR work.

At 12:30 pm about 18 arrested – including all girls here and Mr. [Albert] Gordon and Major – for “possessing and distributing handbills on boycotting” – at 1:30 I met Mayor Albritton after checking story with Golden – from Mayor read statutes and was informed of their bail – visited them at jail and the 2 girls in Sheriff's office – Golden had contacted Justice [Dept.] men

from Selma and we were interviewed by them at about 3:30 pm. (Sklar and Rayburn) – I phoned UPI and AP on this story and found much coop. Later the new people called me back to get to basis of story and talked for some time – I am pretty well established as news relations man – (now to broaden that position).

At 7:30 [pm] a mass meeting was held – little girls led songs – I began with a reading from Exodus 3 and with a prayer and then Mr. Gordon spoke – I finally saw someone speak who was communicating to the local folk – unfortunately they do not respond in near this way to outside leadership (especially whites) – unfortunately some of the younger SCOPE volunteers want to assume leadership and make decisions for the folk – fortunately [a Camden Academy teacher,] Mr. [Albert] Gordon emerged as the strong local leader who can move his people – following his long speech – Rev. Middlebrook from Selma arrived and carried on the meeting – he is a fine speaker and tremendous thinker – a 22 yr old Baptist preacher who really communicates – he motivated people and there [is a] great possibility of demonstrations tomorrow and jailing of many people.

Met Shirley Mesher at staff-strategy meeting afterwards – she coordinated publicity on Selma march and gave good source names to contact.

Have talked at great length with Williams and Golden about the philosophy behind our division of labor – disagreement over direct action which Golden and I approve. Williams will remain in his work with white community because of his faith in committee as best source of relieving situation – his value, to me, is his position with Mayor as a factual basis of arrests and procedure.

I am more and more inclined to see this committee thing as “tokenism” and that Williams is being used by Mayor to preserve status quo and at same time fulfill minimum requirements – I feel we need to demonstrate to the nation the problem here as well as all over Alabama that political disenfranchisement if basic to entire problem and thus use some means of pressure thru non-violent civil disobedience against what appears to be an unjust against boycotting.

Tuesday 6-29 [written on] Wed. morn. 6/30 3 am. To church at 7:15 am to meet Mr. Gordon – word from Middlebrook was “go if the local leaders want to take it.” Met Miss Ethel Brooks of Coy, a former leader of demonstrations – she and Gordon are leaders. Charles Nettles (a SCLC staff worker supposedly) who had taken responsibility for Major John’s car – said he had to go to a bail man to get Major out – the BIG decision was made by Gordon – that demonstrations take place after a mass at 7 am on Wed. morn and list of grievances presented to stand behind march. Golden and I followed Nettles, Don Green (boy who was slapped), and Ethel to Selma and then on to Montgomery to seek bond – according to Nettles. I went to make direct contact with U.P.I. and A.P. regarding the proposed demonstrations – to find out that neither mend are in til 3 pm. In meanwhile, Nettles found that Rev. R. Boon (who we later found is state director of project) wanted Major to stay in jail – Ethel, John Golden, and I fortunately met Boon coming in and confronted him with the disorganization found in Camden – he denied that Nettles was ever given staff status as a SCOPE leader. He had left without taking Ethel back and she was mad that he was not a leader and was hurting the movement here.

Boon drove to Camden with us to get to issues – talked with Mr. Gordon and said it was up to Gordon to make it go. (Ate full chicken dinner in Montgomery – 62 cents – DELICIOUS)

When we arrived 7 has been released from jail and Joyce, Ann, and Connie were freed leaving two other in and Major Johns – Make Harley was beaten while in the cell – others were all right.

Took Judy's medicine to Mayor at 6:30 to give to Judy then came on up to Academy to my mail – John Williams drove me back to church, after all the staff workers at the church came up – with Joyce and Connie. Ann was left working at the church alone – I went down – Ann making posters for march the only white person with many Negroes in church – I stayed a while, got keys to Major's car – after talking with Charles discussing Golden's reprimand of him – at about 9:15 [pm] we came back to Academy after having told all children to leave – K.C. Jones was going to stay all night with several others – I said ok – but to take care and we called them to turn off lights.

After getting home [Academy dorm] and talking for about 45 min. Threadgill called and said he wanted to talk – came immediately over to tell Connie, Ann and I that he got a call telling him of big trouble at church – a boy beaten. I called but couldn't get [Mayor] Albritton – Threadgill and I drove alone to the Wilson qt. – found the boy with a deep cut on his head and his jaw [swollen] like a cantelope – so we brought him with 3 others to Academy (me driving Major's car) where Roosevelt and John Davis took him to Selma.

Came to find Bob Block running press sources. I gave him free hand and he took it well tho' too nervous.

Yvonne and Gary [Young] came at about 2:30 with Williams and Gold who had left for airport, only 10 min. before.

Wednesday 6-30 [written on] Wed. night 11:45 pm. Wakened at 5:30 am to see Mr. Gordon sitting in our lounge – we talked a while and I went down to get some brkfst and ended up washing dishes with Yvonne and Gary – at about 6:45 I received a call from K.C. Jones at the church saying that the Mayor and police were there not allowing anyone to go in the bldg. – that Bob Block and the others were being kept from entering – I left at once with Gordon and when we got there no one was there but the children, students, and workers – police were gone.

Saw shot gun blast in church and the inner door was on the floor with broken hinges – UPI man from Mobile (J. Britnell) was there and interviewed the students that were at the beating – Mrs. Septima Clark from SCLC exec. Staff was with us all morning and directly contacting Hosea and Andy Young.

People were gathering slowly and children began singing at 8:45 after meeting had reached height, Major Johns was released to come into church – he said "no demonstration", but whispered that he had to say this. ...

Worcester had no time after that to keep a diary. Things were moving too fast.

Maria Gitin has written extensively in her book about “the revs,” as she and other volunteers referred to the SFTS seminarians resident at the Academy. Neither John Williams, now deceased, nor the Youngs have left a personal record of their experiences.

John Golden, however, was interviewed by Gitin in 2008 and records some of his memories in chapter 16 of *This Bright Light of Ours*:

John told me that the reason he had been in Camden that summer was that the Presbyterian Church, which sponsored Camden Academy, asked white seminary students from the North to help with reconciliation between blacks and whites. “Rev. Thomas Threadgill convinced us that there were some good white people,” John said. He had come out after the Selma marches and began working with Rev. Threadgill’s group. After they disbanded, he stayed on and worked with the voting rights activities in Camden, but he didn’t consider himself part of our SCOPE project... “There was this group of only six or seven white women taking great risks. One woman went home after a meeting and her husband cocked his pistol at her and said, ‘You have a choice. You either stop going to those fucking meetings or you are dead, bitch.’ The group stopped meeting shortly after that.

In her book, however, Gitin records extensively her experience of Golden as a respected leader devoted to the people, black and white, who were working to overcome the devastation of endemic racism embedded in law, culture and practice, not just in Wilcox County, Alabama, but also back home in California after he returned.

John told me that he tried to return to seminary but he couldn’t adjust. I was there in Camden for that ten weeks that you were, and then came back to Berkeley/Oakland briefly, then returned to Wilcox right after Jonathan Daniels was killed. That really affected me. I stayed with the Charleys out in Coy working on the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service Committee. We were trying to get some black folks elected.

Just before this local agricultural committee was going to vote, a guy from some branch of state government came to monitor the elections. There was a rumor it was going to be rigged. We got some of our people elected but they were white; some blacks voted for the same whites to continue to serve. Voting then could be with an ‘X’ or a signature. The rules they set up for this committee were that they had to draw a line through a white man’s name.

Costly Discipleship

The concern expressed by the Board of National Missions in the terms of its Action Program that “it is in no way clear that housing will continue to be available at the Academy for the students ...” proved accurate. Sheryl Threadgill (Thomas and Mildred’s daughter) told Maria Gitin that the Board of Education evicted her family, along with the seminarians and other civil rights workers they had allowed to reside at the academy in August 1965, when was only thirteen.⁷ Their home and the chapel were torn down. Gitin says of her interview with her that Cheryl said

7 Cynthia Griggs Fleming’s book, *In The Shadow of Selma*, quoted by Gitin, dates the eviction notice from Wilcox County’s superintendent as December 23, 1965.

...her parents had supported families and students in their courageous attempts to integrate white public schools, setting an example by encouraging (her) to lead the way in the dangerous desegregation of the white Camden high School. As a freshman in 1967, (Sheryl) was one of the earliest students to attend white Wilcox High. No local state or federal protections were given to these students or their families. After one year, (Sheryl) returned to Camden Academy due to the incessant cruelty of her classmates and mistreatment by teachers, however she continued to be a leader in school integration marches and demonstrations.

Tom Threadgill came down at the time with a chronic lung disease from which he eventually died, too young, at sixty-six years of age in 1989. By 1975, according to former students interviewed, no trace of the historic buildings of the Camden Academy was left.

A continuing story

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma march, the Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald, president of San Francisco Theological Seminary, invited alumni who had participated in it for a reunion in San Anselmo In early April 2015 to reflect on that experience and its contemporary significance. He was responding to an alumni/ae initiative led by our classmate, the Rev. Charles "Chuck" Robertson. In preparation for the occasion, Robertson initiated an email exchange by that fed to a rich sharing of experiences during the reunion gathering. Among those present were a number of former students who had participated in the actions of solidarity described here. Since we arrived in Camden and left at different times, some thought that we should try to weave our memories together into the story of what students and faculty of SFTS sought to offer to the courageous students and faculty of the Camden Academy, and especially what they have given us. It is with gratitude to all who have shared documents and stories that this summary record is presented as a work in progress, an invitation to all to enrich it as our contribution to the seminary's rich history. It is also a tribute to Dr. Theodore Gill, the president of SFTS in our day, who inspired us with his courage and theology of engagement for justice and strode into Montgomery alongside the leaders of the Selma march.

Dwain C. Epps
Montbovon, Switzerland
October 2015