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 claiming 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, which are 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!"

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, knock him over, 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 Candle, 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 blasted my hand doing it! I forgot to use my brass knuckles!'"

It was raining harder as the car speeded and jolted back toward Candle. "For some reason I couldn't stop thinking about those men I'd slugged," 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 older boys 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 rainwater 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 wreak 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 to say to that. 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 about nonviolence. 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 crummy. 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 shouting.

"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 phonny 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 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.

"A few days later Eddie heard rumors that a movement was under way to have him committed to a state mental institution. "I don't know what that means," 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."

"But why did I do it in the first place?" he asked himself. "I decided to leave town. I didn't want to get buried in no snake pit."

He went to Baltimore, obtained a job, and was assigned to distribute literature to qualified Negro voters and encourage them to register.

He said, "Again I was housed by a
was colored and who wasn't. It didn't know, I hardly paid attention to who family I knew—and there was a clean 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 widen. I read pretty soon, given to think 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 and scope which included loiterers 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 a week doing housework, 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 needed to have money. 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 cursed all the while. I looked in the mirror and saw my face with a lot of rows of veins. I knew I was in a violent mood, but I had to vent it somehow. I thought it was enough for the cops to have me in jail and practically slammed in my face.

Meanwhile, Eddie Dickerson was released. Eddie appeared before the judge and was told he could go. He was released.

"I wasn't 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 as a day laborer. 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 colored woman 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 adored me. I 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 re-

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 I 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, "What if someone puts a lighted cigarette against your neck, will you remain non-violent in your presence?"

I was disappointed. I thought he would say it didn't matter. He read a great deal. I had to jam my fists in my pockets in my back. He jumped me from behind. I decided I better get out of the State of Maryland pronto . . . . "

Eddie Dickerson was another cell load of prisoners, all Negro. Among them were the Reverend Ralph Abernathy. Dickerson remembered 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 them. I've always liked music. Sometimes I'd sing along. There was one to the tune of '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 80th street any day."

Farmer gave Dickerson a tiresome, undramatic job in New York CORE
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 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 livelihood. She didn't say much, but she listened.

A collection 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 coming 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."

Cambridge, 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 per cent of the population over 25 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 last interest in the community's welfare. But this community has made measurable progress in bireacial 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 Negroes 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 his face twisted, his eyes grew narrow and firmly showed us to the door. He added, "He was well liked, howbeit modest; 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 Stratton 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 hearing about Eddie and another boy being fooled around in some rich lady's greenhouse and the other boy had 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. One night a fellow came to call on her and Eddie ran out of his house and some 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 Kinman, however, takes a less charitable view of Eddie. Kinman, 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
An Epilogue
From Redbook, September, 1963

"Why didn't they hit back?" was the question that puzzled Eddie Dickerson when he sluggeds 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."

"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

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