Excerpts from
'Troublemaker' Memories of the Freedom Movement
Rural Alabama: 1965-1966

Contents:

"I'm Gonna Blow Your God Damn Brains Out!" ~ 1965

By June of 1965, the SCOPE project had become the focus of SCLC's attention. The original idea had been for 2000 northern volunteers — mostly white, mostly college students — to implement the new Voting Rights Act in 120 counties across Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama.

There were obvious similarities between SCLC's SCOPE project and the Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida summer projects organized by COFO, SNCC, and CORE the previous year. But the 1964 projects had had half a year to recruit the thousand or more volunteers who participated, and their recruitment had relied on the active assistance of CORE and SNCC groups across the North. SCLC had only a couple of months to pull SCOPE together without any comparable northern base. Yet despite those handicaps, SCLC still managed to field roughly 500 northern volunteers working in some 80 counties.

Compared to SNCC and CORE, the SCLC field staff was small, perhaps a dozen or so. For the SCOPE project it had to be rapidly expanded. Along with others in Alabama, I was hired by Albert Turner as an SCLC "subsistence" worker to direct a county SCOPE project in that state. Unlike the more egalitarian SNCC and CORE, SCLC's staff structure was hierarchical and "subsistence" staff members were the lowest level, paid $25 a week (equal to about $200 in 2018).

I was immensely proud to be hired as a member of the SCLC field staff. It affirmed me as a real and acknowledged full-time freedom fighter. At the same time, though, I was daunted and (frankly) terrified by my assignment to direct the SCOPE project in Crenshaw County, Alabama. Yes, I'd been active in the Freedom Movement for two and a half years, but I'd only been in the South for a bit less than three months — and that almost entirely in one town — Selma.

Hardly adequate preparation for directing a voter registration project in a rural Black Belt county.

When he assigned me to Crenshaw, Turner told me that the team of SCOPE volunteers would arrive in the county fully trained and ready to roll. Based on my (assumed) knowledge of Alabama realities, which I was supposed to have absorbed from a few months and three arrests in Selma, my job was to coordinate with the local Crenshaw leaders, oversee the SCOPE volunteers, and keep them safe and out of trouble while they got on with the work they were trained to do. (Gulp.)

The truth was, though, that I probably had as much — or more — experience as many of the others who suddenly found themselves directing SCOPE projects. That was the way the Freedom Movement worked, you were thrown unprepared into the deep end. Or as one SNCC member once put it, "leaping off a cliff and learning to fly on the way down."

Crenshaw County was immediately south of Montgomery and had never been worked by Freedom Movement field organizers. It was a late addition to the SCOPE list, largely because the two local leaders, Havard Richburg and James Kolb, lobbied Turner and national SCOPE director Hosea Williams for it. Unlike some SCOPE counties where the local leadership was lukewarm at best, they really wanted us. The local Movement organization was the Crenshaw County Civic Association (CCCA), which at that time consisted of Mr. Kolb, Mr. Richburg, and a small handful of courageous others.

SCLC provided a small amount of money to reimburse the families who had agreed to house and feed us outsiders and also for stipends to four local youth who would work with the project full time. It was clearly understood that Richburg and Kolb were in charge, they would tell me what they wanted done and I would coordinate the volunteers in carrying it out. In essence, we would be CCCA's field staff. For a project pulled together at the last minute with little on-the-ground preparation, it actually worked out surprisingly well.

Because Crenshaw was a last-minute addition and I was one of the last of the new staff hires, I wasn't sent to Atlanta to participate in the week-long SCOPE orientation and training. Instead, Turner took me to Luverne, the Crenshaw County seat, so I could get to know the local leaders and activists, learn the lay of the land, and orient myself before the SCOPE volunteers arrived. Luverne was a small village on Highway 331 between Montgomery and the Florida panhandle. It had a total population of around 2200 or so, of whom maybe 800 were Afro-Americans.

As proclaimed by the all-white Chamber of Commerce, the town motto was "The Friendliest City in the South." An exaggeration, as I was soon to discover. Racism and Jim Crow segregation were deeply embedded in the culture of both town and county. Many Blacks still recalled the lynching of Jesse Thornton 25

years earlier. Thornton, a 26-year-old Afro-American man had committed the crime of addressing a white cop by just his name without the honorific of "Mister." For this transgression against the southern way of life he was beaten, arrested, held in jail while a mob formed. The mob then attacked him with bricks, bats, dumped him in a truck, took him to an out-of-the-way spot where they shot him dead, and then disposed of his corpse in a swamp. His decomposing corpse eventually turned up in a stream near Tuskegee Institute more than 60 miles away.

Mr. Kolb was usually working his rural farm, so Havard was the leader I directly worked with the most. He was a part-time teacher, part-time college professor, part-time barber, and part-time proprietor of a little store in Luverne's Afro-American community. His combination store and open-air barbershop was set off from the dirt street and up a little rise. Turner dropped me off around noon one day in mid-June and I started getting to know Havard and several other Black men who appeared to be just casually hanging around the shop (but who in reality had gathered to meet and assess me).

As was true with most other southern Black communities, Luverne had an efficient network of neighborhood snitches who reported everything Movement-related to the cops and white power structure. So no more than ten minutes after I arrived a cop car pulled up. From the driver's seat, the officer waved me over to his car and I went down the dirt steps cut into the embankment. He introduced himself as Harry Raupach, Chief of Luverne's tiny police force, which consisted of him and two or three others. He asked me to identify myself, which I did.

He had a shoebox on the seat beside him filled with alphabetized 5x7 cards. He riffed through them and pulled out one with my name, photo, arrest record, and other details of my nefarious existence. The Alabama authorities — ever vigilant they — had compiled dossiers on all known civil rights activists and distributed them to every police agency in the state, even minuscule, out-of-the-way ones like Luverne's tiny constabulary. Since I had been in the state for less than three months, I was impressed by their bureaucratic diligence.

Raupach showed me the card. "Is this you?"

I confirmed that it was.

He asked me what I was doing in Luverne and I explained about SCOPE, emphasizing that we were only there to register voters, not protest or sit in or integrate anything. That was SCLC's official policy for that summer — voter registration and political education only. He was polite and completely professional. After he drove off and I returned to the barbershop, the local men told me that Raupach was actually a northerner who had married a local girl and that he had a fair amount of respect in the Afro-American community as a fair and even-handed lawman (a rarity in rural Alabama in 1965).

Twenty minutes later another car pulled up. Not an official car, no markings. A white guy in civilian clothes got out, waved some kind of tinplate badge, and ordered me down to speak with him. I went to see what he wanted and he immediately started shouting all sorts of racist hate at me. Then he pulled out a leather blackjack. Waving it around my head like he was going to bash in my skull, he ordered me to get out of Crenshaw County. "Or else!"

Without conscious thought, I automatically fell back on my nonviolent training. Keeping my voice calm and casually conversational, I told him I was there to do a job, to register voters, and so on. While carefully not reflecting back any of his hostility or escalating the tension, I made clear I was not going to run away or obey orders to leave. I asked him who he was. He told me it was none of my God damned business.

We went around and around on this for a bit, him threatening me with his lead sap if I didn't agree to leave and me being quietly, courteously, obstinate. Then he shoved the blackjack into his pocket and pulled out a .38 revolver, jammed the muzzle against the side of my head and screamed, "I'm gonna blow your God damned brains out right now!"

I responded in a calm conversational voice — though, of course, on the inside I wasn't calm at all. I explained that if he did that, yes I'd be dead. But then what? Martin Luther King would come to lead mass protests, sit-ins, and freedom rides. The news media would be all over the place poking around and asking questions. So would local, state, and federal police agencies. He'd be investigated by the Department of Justice, and he'd go through the hassle of a trial (we both knew that no white jury in Alabama would ever convict him of killing a civil rights worker, so I didn't imply he'd end up in jail). He clearly hated the federal government and the news media as much, or more, than he hated Afro-Americans — or me.

This went on for what seemed like quite a while, but was probably no more than 10 or 15 minutes, him cursing and threatening me, raving about "niggers this," and "coons that." It was (and still is) my habit to carry a pen and blank 3x5 cards in my shirt pocket in case I need to note something down. So I waited until he momentarily moved his pistol away from my head and then, slowly, unthreateningly, I stepped to the rear of his car so that I could write down his license plate number. Again I asked him his name, which he still wouldn't tell me.

So there he was, yelling and ranting and doing his anger-intimidation thing, and there I was, replying calmly and doing my writing-down-notes thing, and in a weird sense it was like we were in two different conversations, not interrelating at all. Eventually, his rage ran down, he issued some final death threats about me being gone by tomorrow, and then drove off.

All the while, Mr. Richburg and the other men in the barbershop were watching this confrontation. And I suspect quite a few other Afro-Americans

were peeking out from behind their curtains. When I rejoined Havard in the barbershop, he identified the guy as head of the Crenshaw County Ku Klux Klan and a member of the sheriff's posse, which was what his tin badge had signified. He owned a diner out on the highway — a racist, white-only hangout openly defying the Civil Rights Act. Richburg was one of the very few Blacks in Crenshaw who had ever stood up to him and defied his threats — which was why he was one the two local Movement leaders.

Looking back on it now, it seems likely to me that Mr. Richburg must have had guns in his shop. That was the common practice in the South, particularly for a Black man who had defied the KKK. With a .38 held to my head, he couldn't have prevented the Klansman from murdering me. But I've often wondered whether he or one of the other men would have shot in retaliation if the Klan guy had killed me. Realities being what they were, I think they probably would not have — nor would I have expected or wanted them to.

When Turner had dropped me off an hour earlier, I'm sure Havard and the other men must have had some serious doubts about this young white guy presented to them as an SCLC freedom worker, though, of course, they were far too courteous to indicate any such thing. But after nonviolently standing up to that KKK leader, refusing to be intimidated by him — and somehow not getting killed or hurt in the process — I think I gained some measure of respect from them and others in the Afro-American community as someone who really might be one of "Dr. King's men."

Of course, I didn't let on to them how little I actually knew about what I was doing, and how completely unsure I felt about myself and my abilities to lead a voter registration project. I guess I was a living example of that old saying, "Fake it till you make it."

There is, however, no question in my mind that my training in nonviolent tactics saved me that afternoon from serious injury or death. Training — and luck. You can count on training, but never on luck. Later that summer, on August 21st, my friend Jonathan Daniels, and had stayed with the West family in Selma at the same time I did, was shot to death by a Klansman in Lowndes County, which abuts the northwest corner of Crenshaw.

I later learned that Jonathan had been ambushed by Tom Coleman, a racist killer determined to murder civil rights activists. Like the Crenshaw Klan leader who had threatened me, Coleman was also a member of the sheriff's posse. Jonathan was well trained in nonviolence, but that day his luck ran out. When Coleman stepped out of a doorway with a shotgun and opened fire on an integrated group of four, Jonathan had no time to use his de-escalation training. All he could do was pull Ruby Sales aside and step in front of her, shielding her and taking the full blast himself. Though it occurred only 45 miles from Luverne, I heard about it from news reports. I hadn't even known he was in Lowndes working with SNCC.

As with the mysterious death of Mike Robinson, after Jonathan's murder I experienced anger, loss, sadness, and intense frustration because I and everyone else knew there was not a snowball's chance in hell that an all-white jury in Alabama would convict the killer. It was bitter and infuriating — and frightening because now I too was a KKK target.

From time to time over the years I've told this story about my welcome to Crenshaw County and the later assassination of Jonathan Daniels, and folks sometimes ask me whether I was scared. Yes, of course, I was — a crazed racist holding a pistol to your head is good reason to be scared. But I was concentrating so hard on applying my nonviolent training that I really didn't have much time or attention for experiencing terror.

I think what they're really asking, though, is why, with that immediate and unambiguous death threat and the recent murder of my friend Mike Robinson, did I stay in Crenshaw? Why the hell didn't I get on the first bus out of town? And I believe the answer is that I had worked through those fears in the weeks (well, months) before I left the North. Unlike many summer volunteers, I knew the real dangers of being a freedom worker in the South, so I had had to face and master those fears before I ever got in that car headed for Selma.

The SCOPE Project ~ 1965

That first night I slept in Havard Richburg's snug brick home. The next day he took me to an old, abandoned shack that we would use as our "freedom house" and where I would sleep.

Empty homes were not hard to find in Alabama's Black Belt. In the 20 years between 1940 and 1960, close to 41% of Crenshaw County's Afro-American population had migrated out, riding the dog north or west from Montgomery's Greyhound depot in search of jobs and an escape from segregation. Mostly it was the young adults who left, so the county's Black population was skewed towards children and elders, many of whom were raising their grandkids away from the crime and urban poverty of the northern ghettos where their parents were struggling to eke out a living. Stark and brutal as rural poverty was for Afro-Americans in Alabama, there was at least a sense of shared community and mutual support that was largely missing from the packed urban slums of the North.

Like Richburg's combination store & barbershop, our freedom house was in Luverne's small Afro-American community. It had holes in the floor, and the cracks between the warped wooden slats of the siding were covered over by flattened cans and old license plates nailed to the boards. There was no running water of any kind, just an outhouse. Taking a shower meant standing in the dirt yard in a swimsuit and pouring water over your head from a bucket or

washbasin. The shack — excuse me, I mean the "freedom house" — was furnished with an old iron bed and an equally ancient feather mattress. I placed the legs of the bed in tin pie-pans that I kept filled with water to discourage roaches and other local vermin from joining me in bed as I slept. Some of the local bugs were so big they made audible clicking sounds as they skittered across the floor at night.

To the enormous envy of SCLC field staff like me, SNCC workers had the Sojourner Motor Fleet of new Plymouth Furies, fast as a getaway and equipped with citizens-band, two-way radios. SCLC had some hand-me-down clunkers donated by northern churches. But there weren't enough of those to go around and I hadn't been issued one. Turner had promised that the SCOPE team would have at least one car, but until they arrived I was on foot. Mr. Richburg drove me around the county, showing me who and what was where, teaching me the road network, and introducing me to those local folk who weren't terrified of being seen speaking to a civil rights worker.

In Crenshaw County at that time there weren't all that many Afro-Americans willing to publicly identify themselves with the Freedom Movement. The Klan was strong in that part of the state and Black folk were justifiably afraid. Not a single church was willing to allow us to hold a civil rights meeting or voter registration class on their premises. Not one. Not one. We ended up using the local pool hall as our headquarters and meeting space. Unlike the wood-frame churches, the pool parlor was made of fireproof concrete blocks.

The SCOPE team arrived around noon on June 21st following their week-long orientation in Atlanta. Personally, I think Crenshaw was blessed with one of the better teams (though perhaps I'm biased). Arriving along with the volunteers was Elbert Thomas, a Black SCLC subsistence-staff member who Turner had assigned to co-direct the project with me. Not long after, however, he was shifted to another county. Paula Ferrari, a young woman from San Francisco, was also later transferred to another project, leaving Crenshaw SCOPE with four volunteers from outside the state, four local teenage activists who received a small SCLC stipend — and me.

Jerome and Willa Mae Ware, Charles Jackson, and Beverly Street were the young activists. I say "young," but at 21 I was only a couple years older than they. The four local teens teamed with us outsiders in canvassing and organizing so that whenever possible our work was done on an integrated Black-white basis. With Mr. Kolb and Mr. Richburg working full-time at their jobs, the young activists also provided the essential day-to-day local knowledge that the project had to have.

The out-of-state SCOPE volunteers were also all in their early to mid-20s. Two of the them arrived in their own automobiles. David Sookne, a math major at the University of Chicago, had previously done some voting rights work in Fayette County, Tennessee and participated in protests in the North. He had a

fairly new Volkswagen bug that could seat four (five in a squeezed pinch). It wasn't fast, but it was reliable and it became our precious project car. Dunbar Reed III, an Afro-American college student from Atlanta, had a shiny, red, two-seat, sports car convertible. A sweet ride indeed. Unfortunately it provoked local whites to chase him at high speed, so I reluctantly had to ask him to take it back home and park it for the duration of the project.

Carroll Richardson was a former student and CORE activist at the University of Florida. An Air Force veteran, he had participated in part of the Selma to Montgomery March with others from Gainesville. Richard (Dick) Klausner was from Grinnell, both the town and the college. He had participated in the March on Washington and had been arrested a couple of times at protests in the North.

SCOPE had been organized out of the Atlanta office and those of us who had been working in Alabama really didn't know much about it. We'd had a couple of very general orientation meetings that were long on vision but short on details. "Don't worry about it," they had assured the Alabama staff. "The volunteers are going to be thoroughly trained. You're the veterans, all you have to do is be the liaison with the local leaders, keep the SCOPE volunteers out of trouble, and keep them safe. They'll know the whole SCOPE program."

So that afternoon we had our first meeting of the Crenshaw County SCOPE project in the freedom house — Me and Elbert from SCLC, four local SCOPE volunteers, and five volunteers from outside the state. After everyone introduced themselves, I asked, "So, what are we supposed to do?"

The out-of-state volunteers looked surprised and one replied, "What do you mean? You're the county director, you're supposed to tell us."

That's when I learned that while they had received intensive training in southern racial realities, cross-cultural relations, history of the Freedom Movement, and so on, their practical training had all been oriented around how to implement the Voting Rights Act (VRA). But the Act had not yet passed. It was still being filibustered by South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond with no end in sight. Absent the VRA, we were back to the traditional voter registration methods of the Deep South. Which they had *not* been trained in. *Oy veh!*

For Afro-Americans in Crenshaw County before the VRA, registering to vote was a complicated ordeal. You had to go down to the courthouse on one of the few days the registration office was open, which meant you had to take off from work — with or without your employer's permission — and risk being fired. The sheriff, his deputies, and the white courthouse loafers who hung around the building made it their business to discourage "undesirables," so you had to run their gauntlet of intimidation, insults, threats, and sometimes arrest on phony charges just to get to the registration office.

Once at the right window, you faced harassment and humiliation from the clerks and officials and then the application and the literacy test. The Alabama Voter Application Form was four pages long and deliberately designed to intimidate. You had to swear a legally binding oath under penalty of perjury that your answers to every single question were true — including those about your family, landlord, and employer. Yet, as you well knew, your answers would be passed on to the White Citizens' Council (and probably the KKK) for appropriate action on their part. So if you told the truth you endangered family members and risked being fired or evicted, if you lied you risked being jailed for perjury.

After completing the application and swearing the oaths, you then had to pass the so-called "literacy test," which was in no way a fair or objective test. It was merely a pretext allowing registrars to "pass" or "fail" applicants according to their personal whim. By long custom, registrars had the power to exempt white applicants from taking the test if in their opinion the whites were of "good character." Afro-Americans, however, were always required to take the "test."

In "Part A" of the test, the registrar chose a section of the Alabama Constitution for you to read aloud. He could select an easy section or a long one full of legal double-talk. He judged whether in his opinion you read and pronounced all the words correctly. Then you had to verbally interpret that section to his satisfaction. His judgements were final and could not be appealed. After that, you had to either copy out by hand another section of the Constitution or write it down from dictation as he mumbled it. Again, he and he alone determined if you did that correctly.

Then came Parts "B" and "C" of the test which were two sets of four questions each that you had to answer correctly in order to prove that you had sufficient knowledge of government to vote wisely. Questions like:

> Who pays members of Congress for their services, their home states or the United States?
>
> If a person charged with treason denies his guilt, how many persons must testify against him before he can be convicted?
>
> At what time of day on January 20 each four years does the term of the president of the United States end?
>
> Can the state coin money with the consent of Congress?
>
> In what year did the Congress gain the right to prohibit the migration of persons to the states?
>
> The president is forbidden to exercise his authority of pardon in cases of _____. [15]

Based on his opinion of your responses the registrar then determined whether you were sufficiently "literate" to become a voter. (Of course, even if he

judged you insufficiently literate to vote, you still had to obey all the laws and pay all the taxes enacted by the public officials you weren't allowed to vote for or against.) *

According to the 1960 Census, there were 2200 Afro-Americans old enough to vote in Crenshaw County. Less than 500 of them, roughly 22%, were registered. Compared to most other Black Belt counties that was actually a high percentage, but since whites in Crenshaw outnumbered Blacks by two to one and 98% of them were registered, Afro-Americans made up just 7% of the total electorate. Not enough to even influence, let alone win an election. Not enough to gain even minimal courtesy from elected officials. So our goal that summer was to register enough Afro-Americans to give them a political foothold in the county.

In Selma I had begun to learn that civil rights work differed considerably between North and South, and Crenshaw furthered my education. In northern cities, political work generally revolved around organizational meetings, the written word, and speeches. But in the rural South, community organizing and voter registration were almost entirely about conversations. Not slogans, not chants, not oratory, not exhortations, but extended personal interactions with *individuals* on their porches or in their homes and with small clusters at little country stores, barbershops, beauty parlors, and even out in the fields.

For northerners like me and the SCOPE team, that took some getting used to. And part of that was learning how to deeply listen to what people were *saying*, what they were actually *meaning*, and what they weren't *explicitly* saying but still trying to tell us. Not so easy as it might sound.

And just as difficult as adapting to conversational politics was the slow pace and heavy accent of spoken language in rural Alabama. To a degree, I had already encountered that in Selma. The first few days I was there I often found it hard to understand people, and when I did grasp their meaning I was sorely tempted to finish their sentences to hurry them along — not a good idea as even an ignoramus like me understood. On their part they found me equally difficult to comprehend, my California accent and slang was foreign to them, and my speech was way too rapid.

I was soon getting on fairly well in Selma, but Crenshaw took some additional getting used to. For SCOPE volunteers fresh from the North it was harder, though after a week or so they managed. Eventually I came to understand that in the North we put a premium on clear and rapid exchanges of necessary information because everyone had somewhere else they had to be or something else they needed to do. But in the rural South, particularly impoverished Afro-American communities, conversation was the main pastime and often the only

* For detailed information on pre-VRA voter-registration systems and sample literacy tests in the Deep South see www.crmvet.org/lithome.htm.

available diversion from the drudgery of routine tasks. It was, therefore, a highly valued social art, not to be rushed.

From stories in the mass media (and, to be honest, our fund-appeals), Movement supporters in the North assumed that civil rights work in the Deep South was an action-packed series of dramatic protests, police violence and intimidation, inspiring mass meetings, confrontations with the Klan, and stoic suffering in brutal jail cells. The reality, however, was far more prosaic. Mostly what we did all day was canvass door-to-door in pairs. Our goal was to have conversations about voting, or attending a meeting, or the meaning of "freedom," or how to respond to some local problem. If we were lucky and did our work well, a small evening house meeting in someone's home with two or three of us and hopefully half a dozen or so local participants might result.

Maybe two or three times a month there might occur a "mass meeting" with one or two dozen people. And on registration days, between 50 and 75 courageous people would show up at the courthouse to face the sheriff and attempt to register.

Luverne, and Crenshaw's other little towns and villages, replicated Selma's model of dirt streets indicating Afro-American homes and the local SCOPE volunteers knew who was who and who was living where. But out in the rural, South whites and Blacks were scattered randomly and only the main highways were paved. The country lanes and byways were just dirt roads, regardless of the race of those who lived where.

Most white-owned properties were obviously upscale and easily recognized as such. But the shacks of poor whites with sagging porches and outhouses in the back were often indistinguishable from those of Black sharecroppers. Which posed significant dangers for us because whites at the bottom of the economic pyramid were often the most virulently racist and violent, and they fiercely resented freedom riders thinking their home was that of an Afro-American — an unforgivable insult.

So unless whoever was living there was visible, we had to carefully assess each rundown, tin-roof shanty for signs of who dwelled within. A Confederate battle flag was an obvious sign, but most of the time it wasn't that easy. So if we saw a little blond-headed kid playing in the dirt yard we'd usually pass that house by. But not always, because more often than you'd think, the local person canvassing with us would casually tell us, "Oh, they're Negro."

Meaning, in the unspoken but deeply ingrained code of southern race relations, that the child's Afro-American mother, who might or might not be married to a Black husband, had experienced what was sardonically referred to as "midnight integration" with a white man. In some cases that might have been consensual, but often it was rape — either brutal and violent or coerced through economic power or some other form of threat. Genteel whites actually had a

term for white men coercing sex from Black women, it was referred to as "paramour rights."

Poverty among Crenshaw's Afro-American community was endemic and their fear palpable. Fear of their bossman, fear of their landlord, fear of the sheriff, fear of the Klan. Fears that were well-founded and based on long experience. Sometimes they'd just tell us right out, "Can't talk to you." So we'd briefly say what we could, then walk on to the next house. As everyone knew, we were under constant observation by both the law and snitches and some folks just didn't want to risk being thought of as friendly with us "outside agitators." So often no one would come to the door though we could hear someone inside.

I'd seen fear in Selma, but nothing like Crenshaw. By the time I arrived in Selma, the Freedom Movement had been active there for more than two years and had wrought great and liberating changes. So I took encouragement from knowing that when Bernard and Colia Lafayette of SNCC arrived in Selma at the beginning of 1963, they faced, and eventually overcame, the same level of fear we were seeing now in Crenshaw.

For me, the saddest, and most troubling encounters were with Black men and women caught in double fear, fear of local whites suspecting them of dangerous sympathies and fear of offending these strange white folk standing on their doorstep. Sometimes the people we spoke to were afraid to make eye contact with us and when they told us, "Yas suh, I'll go register, suh," we knew they were just saying whatever they needed to say to get us to go away. We'd pretend to believe them, leave them our flyers, and promise to come back another day.

Not everyone, of course, was paralyzed with fear. Some Afro-Americans in Crenshaw were willing to risk everything by taking a stand — that's why there was a small but growing movement. That's why they asked SCLC to send in a SCOPE team. When we knocked on the door of those homes we'd be greeted with smiles of welcome, offers of cold lemonade, invitations to sit a spell on the porch and rest our feet. Some folk were ready, even eager to come to meetings, offer us rides, talk to their neighbors, and try to register. And feed us. Among some Black families in Luverne there was actual competition for the honor of hosting civil rights workers at their table.

As I canvassed door-to-door all over Crenshaw County, every once in a while someone would ask me if I was that guy the Klan leader had threatened. Which confirmed something I had learned in Selma, that civil rights workers lived in a fishbowl, that everything we did and said was carefully noted, discussed, and evaluated by both Afro-Americans and whites. If we drank whiskey, it was noted, if we took up with local girls it was gossiped about. How we carried ourselves, how we behaved, how we interacted with the community

and each other, had as much, *or more*, influence and effect on our work than the explicit political content of our conversations, speeches, and protests.

By mid-July, we were having several house-meetings every week. And each Sunday members of different congregations invited us to attend services. Most of the time we were introduced and allowed to say a few words after the sermon. But no church was willing to risk being bombed by allowing us to hold a voter registration meeting on their premises, so we continued to use the pool hall as our base.

Yet even among those willing to be identified as Movement supporters — including those who might have tried to register in the past or had been willing to attempt it before the March to Montgomery — there was now reluctance to go down to the courthouse, because they knew the VRA was going to be enacted. Why expose themselves to humiliation and degradation and *not* get registered, when in a few days or at most a few weeks, the Act would pass and they could actually register in safety?

I understood the logic of that. Our counter argument was that going to the courthouse now was an act of defiance, a stand for freedom, a statement against segregation and the southern way of life. And that by showing up at the courthouse they kept the pressure on Congress to pass the bill. From a movement-building, social-change perspective I think what we said was valid, but I understood why some folks wanted to wait.

The SCOPE team had arrived in Crenshaw County on June 21st and the project was scheduled to end the last week of August, when the outside volunteers returned home before colleges reopened for the fall semester. During that July and August, the voter registration office was only open on seven days.

On each those seven days 50 or more Afro-Americans attempted to register, and the racial atmosphere at the courthouse was tense. The furious hostility of Sheriff Horn, his deputies, and the white courthouse loafers boiled off them like the stench of hate. Richburg and Kolb feared that the visible presence of "white race traitors" might trigger violence. So on registration days, they and SCOPE volunteer Dunbar Reed handled matters at the courthouse while I and the white SCOPE volunteers concentrated on encouraging folk in Luverne to make the attempt and transporting rural applicants to the courthouse and back.

On the two registration days in June prior to my arrival, the Crenshaw County Civic Association — mainly Mr. Kolb and Mr. Richburg — had brought 31 Afro-Americans to the courthouse, all of whom completed the application process but only 7 of whom were registered. In July and August, the first six registration days of the SCOPE project were conducted under the old traditional Alabama literacy test rules. With our encouragement and logistic support, 287

Afro-Americans attempted to register over the course of those six days for an average of 48 on each day.

The registrar delayed as much as he could, so only 101 managed to complete the application process before he closed the office each afternoon. In an attempt to prevent passage of the VRA, word had come down from the governor's office that at least some Blacks had to be allowed to register to "prove" that the new law was not needed. So out of those 101 about half "passed" the test and became registered voters. But even so, that was just 17% of those who courageously defied the Jim Crow system by showing up at the courthouse to register.

The VRA was finally enacted into law on August 6th and the only August registration day after that was August 16th. With the VRA now the law of the land, the registrar could no longer force people to take the literacy test. But he could still delay, obstruct, confuse, and impede. On that day some 175 Afro-Americans lined up to register. Only 50 were processed before he closed at 4pm. No one who arrived at the courthouse after 10am managed to complete the procedure. The last applicant allowed to apply had had to wait six hours in the sweltering August sun. All of those 50 who managed to apply became registered voters as the VRA required, which was in itself a significant victory, but the registrar's continued delaying tactics were so bitterly resented by us that we reacted with discouragement.

Over the two months of the SCOPE project, 462 Blacks attempted to register, 261 completed the process, and 101 were registered. Looking back on it now, I understand that encouraging and facilitating roughly 20% of the 2200 voting-age Blacks in Crenshaw County to defy generations of Jim Crow intimidation by attempting to register in a short two-month period was actually a significant achievement. But compared to the high hopes we'd had of registering much larger numbers under the VRA, I felt like a failure. As a passionate young activist, what I didn't understand back then was that no social struggle *ever* succeeds as much as the participants want or hope, but that doing the best you can in the situation you face is how progress is made — however slow and frustrating it might be.

A week after that last registration day on August 16th, the SCOPE project began to wind down. After we departed, Kolb and Richburg continued the struggle, encouraging people to register and pestering the U.S. Department of Justice to enforce the Voting Rights Act against the delaying tactics of the registrar. And eventually the act did take hold. Today, it is arguably the most effective and important civil rights legislation of the 20th century — which is why racists and right-wing conservatives in the Republican Party are determined to weaken and gut it.

In 2016, the percentage of both Blacks and whites registered to vote in Crenshaw County was high and more or less equal. But because of population

differences white voters outnumbered Afro-Americans 6800 to 2300 (74% to 25%). The 2016 presidential vote split almost exactly on racial lines with Trump receiving 72% of the vote and Clinton receiving 27%. Which indicates that no more than 2% or 3% of whites voted for a Democrat. Nevertheless, though outnumbered three to one, Afro-American voters are today numerous enough to insure courtesy and respect from elected officials — their streets are now paved, and the chairman of the five-person commission that governs the county is Afro-American. Discrimination, poverty, and exploitation still continue, but Blacks in Crenshaw are now at least treated as citizens.

To some small degree, SCOPE played a role in that achievement.

License to Drive ~ 1965

Driving in the Deep South was always tense and sometimes downright terrifying. Cops and Klan knew our cars on sight and threats of arrest, ambush, and chase were ever present. What had happened to Viola Liuzzo and other freedom workers could happen to us at any time. Sometimes we were so scared going through particularly dangerous areas that we'd sing freedom songs just to keep our courage up.

Police frequently pulled us over for imaginary traffic offenses or other pretexts. Such stops might end up with anything from bogus tickets and fines, to physical attacks, to arrests on a variety of trumped-up charges. Like Ivanhoe Donaldson of SNCC who was delivering a truckload of donated food and medical supplies to the Movement in Clarksdale, Mississippi when he was arrested for transporting "narcotics" (aspirin). Or another SNCC worker who was stopped for a "dim taillight" and then busted for carrying a "concealed weapon" in the vehicle — the "weapon" being an empty Coke bottle. Sometimes not only the car's driver but the passengers as well would be jailed for some phony infraction that in the rest of America would result at worst in a citation. Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman had been stopped for "speeding" by deputies working hand-in-glove with the Klan, then held in jail on that excuse until the KKK assembled a lynch mob to murder them.

Most of us in the Movement had two different driving modes. In towns or other places where cops were plentiful we drove slow, cautious, and careful like the legendary "little old lady from Pasadena." We ostentatiously obeyed the letter of every regulation. In rural areas, particularly Klan country, we drove like the proverbial "bat out of hell" as fast as we could.

According to Alabama law, if you lived in the state for 90 days you had to obtain a 'Bama license. I knew there was no chance of getting a license in Selma or Crenshaw County where I was well known to law enforcement, so a Black friend from Luverne drove me up to Birmingham and let me use his car for the

driving test. As owner of the vehicle, however, he had to appear with me before the examiner, and there was no place in Alabama where "Black and white together" wouldn't be taken note of.

After successfully completing the written portion it was time for the driving test. The examiner told me to pull out into traffic, which I did. At the first intersection he said, "Turn left." At the next intersection, he again told me to take a left. At the third corner it was yet another left. Finally a fourth left and we were back at the starting place. He told me to pull over, stepped out of the car, and without a word stamped, "FAILED" on my test sheet.

My friend from Luverne — and later other Afro-Americans back in Crenshaw — all thought this was hilariously funny. "Now you know what it's like to be Black in Alabama," they told me with big grins. Of course, we knew that was a gross exaggeration. In no way did I really experience Black life under Jim Crow segregation. What they meant was that for Blacks, it was a common humiliation of daily existence to be harassed, degraded, and denigrated by whites in authority who used their power for no reason other than to express their white superiority. Just as I had been "failed" for being a civil rights worker, Blacks would often be "failed" at the whim of the examiner simply because they were Afro-American.

A few days later, Dave Sookne and I took his VW up to Montgomery and since we were two white guys together I had no problem obtaining my Alabama license.

Luverne Sit-In ~ 1965

By the end of July we were worn down from intense 14-hour days, unremitting danger, constant tension, and the enervating heat of an Alabama summer. When you're exhausted you do dumb things out of sheer weariness. One evening in Luverne I was walking back to the freedom house after a house meeting. The dome light of a car parked on the street up ahead of me briefly came on when someone inside opened the door for a moment and I saw it was occupied by white teenagers.

Since there were no streetlights in Afro-American neighborhoods, white kids parked there in the dark to drink and neck where they knew neither their parents nor any nosy (white) neighbors would catch them. Local Black folk resented that custom because it evinced a contempt for them and their community — as if it were a place of no decency, where morals were nonexistent and "sin" socially acceptable. Of course there was nothing they could do about it, it was just another one of the many social humiliations of white supremacy they had to endure.

The direct route back to the freedom house took me right past that car. To avoid it I would have to go some blocks around. I knew it was dangerous, they were white and they were drinking, but I was just too exhausted to give a damn. So I walked right past them. They called me “nigger lover,” and threw a half-empty beer can that hit me in the forehead, raising a bruise and causing a cut that ran blood into my left eye. I was lucky they didn’t pile out of the car and beat the crap out of me. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb.

Meanwhile, the Voting Rights Act (VRA) was still hung up in the Senate by a southern filibuster. After more than a month’s hard, sweltering, frustrating work, we’d gotten more than 200 Afro-Americans down to the Crenshaw County courthouse to try registering under the old Alabama rules. But only 42 had succeeded in being added to the voting rolls, which, compared to our initial high hopes, was disappointing and discouraging. Wiser in the ways of both Alabama and political reality, Mr. Kolb and Mr. Richburg, were pleased and satisfied with 220 applicants and 42 new Afro-American voters. They understood the difficulties far better than I did.

We of the younger generation, however, were frustrated. The local teenage SCOPE volunteers working with us were even more bored and disgruntled than us outsiders. When they had agreed to join SCOPE for the summer it had seemed a bold and glamorous opportunity to challenge racism and defy white supremacy. A chance for them to strike a blow for freedom like the marchers and freedom riders they’d been watching on TV for years. Instead, all they’d done day after day was the hot, weary drudgery of door-to-door canvassing. So they came to me and said they wanted to integrate Luverne. It had been over a year since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had become law, yet everything in town was still segregated, still white-only.

From the get-go, SCOPE Director Hosea Williams had decreed, “No protesting. Voter registration and political education only.” But that, I concluded, had been based on the assumption that the VRA would be in effect and we could actually get large numbers on the voting rolls. It seemed to me now that direct action would not only add pressure to pass the bill but encourage more people to come out and attempt to register. I explained the situation to Richburg and Kolb and proposed that on August 2nd, the next registration day, the young activists would test compliance with the Civil Rights Act while the adults were at the courthouse attempting to register. They agreed and told me to go ahead.

Deciding that it was better to beg for forgiveness afterwards than attempt to obtain permission beforehand, I didn’t check with either Albert Turner, my direct SCLC supervisor, or SCOPE headquarters in Atlanta. I was pretty sure that Turner would have agreed, he was that kind of guy. But I didn’t know Hosea or what he would say. Anyway, I figured no one in Atlanta would notice what happened in little podunk Luverne — a tiny flyspeck behind the back of

way beyond. And since lunch counter segregation had been illegal for more than a year I really didn't expect any trouble if some young folk implemented the Civil Rights Act — Wrong!

Thank God for CORE and N-VAC though, because due to the habits they had drilled into me I insisted that everyone taking part in the integration testing go through a real N-VAC style nonviolent training session on the Sunday beforehand. One of those screaming, in-your-face, how-to-survive-a-beating type trainings. And, of course, in proper CORE fashion, I informed the mayor and Police Chief Raupach of our intentions.

On Monday, August 2nd, we gathered at the pool hall. Our integration team was made up of our four local volunteers and half a dozen other local youth, Dunbar Reed, Carroll Richardson, David Sookne, and me. We formed two groups, a first team led by me and Dunbar and a reserve, led by Carroll and Dave, which would form the second wave if the first team was arrested. (Dick Klausner was on voter registration duty that day, transporting people to and from the courthouse.)

At that time there were only three public eating establishments in "downtown" Luverne, a dime store lunch counter and two small cafes. Our little group of eight or nine integrators arrived at the first cafe around 11:30am. It was closed, locked up tight to prevent any Afro-Americans from drinking a Coke in a "white" establishment. The dime store was open but their lunch counter wasn't. The stool tops had been removed, leaving just the bare pipes sticking up so that we couldn't sit in. No Black customers were going to defile that white-only lunch counter on that day — no siree, Bob!

The third joint was Lowe's Cafe, which did double-duty as Luverne's tiny bus stop. I assume they had a contract with Greyhound and they must have been under integration orders from the Interstate Commerce Commission ever since the Freedom Rides of 1961 — though so far as we knew no Afro-Americans had ever dared test them. Anyway, they were open. We walked in around noon and the two or three other customers (white, of course) quickly left. We ordered Cokes and were served, though not graciously.

A gang of white men began gathering outside. It was lunch hour at the peanut plant, which is what passed for "industry" in Luverne. A deputy sheriff came in and hauled Dunbar out of the cafe. He didn't say why, perhaps it was for the crime of "drinking a Coke while Black." We paid our bill and followed them out. A pair of Afro-American girls too young for sitting-in were standing by as messenger-runners. I didn't like the look of the crowd, so I told them to run back to the pool hall and tell the reserve group to stay where they were and *not* to come up. But before I could make sure they had the message straight, a dozen or more white men suddenly flashed over into a mob.

They attacked with fists and feet and our team was scattered by the sudden violence. I was knocked to the ground on the pavement of an adjacent Chevron station where I curled up in the nonviolent defensive posture. I had fallen on top of a cross-shaped lug wrench. So while one jerk was kicking my legs and back and another one was jumping up and down on me, that damn wrench was digging into my ribs. Not that I noticed it very much, I was singing (well, screaming, really) "We Shall Overcome" at the top of my voice and I could hear the others doing the same as they too were attacked. But I couldn't see anything because the thugs were all over me and I was curled up in a tight ball.

After a few minutes (it seemed like much longer) they stopped kicking and hitting me. Chief Raupach — he of the shoebox dossiers — had come up. He told the mob that *we* (not they) were under arrest. That seemed to placate them (and besides, they were getting tired). With the violence halted we got up off the ground. I was relieved to see everyone on the integration team appeared okay other than some minor cuts and bruises, which was pretty much my state as well.

As we started to follow the Chief off to jail, I was surprised to see the reserve group from the pool hall arriving. The messenger girls had gotten it wrong and told them to come up. The mob immediately jumped them, hitting, kicking, cursing, screaming epithets and insults. I watched as everyone on the team instantly dropped to the ground and curled up as I'd trained them to do just like pros. They weren't under attack for long, Raupach quickly went over and rounded them up too and we all walked a block or two over to the little Luverne police station where Dunbar had been deposited by the deputy sheriff.

We were now more or less out of sight of the mob — which was no doubt going back to work after doing their civic duty defending the southern way of life. Raupach simply told the local kids to go home. The outsiders, Dunbar, Carroll, Dave and me, he held. He was not pleased. He quickly made it clear that he thought trying to integrate Luverne was a really stupid stunt, and that doing it during the peanut plant's lunch hour was even dumber. Though I didn't say anything, I knew he was right about the timing. I hadn't even considered that and I certainly should have.

He also made it clear that since we hadn't done anything illegal he wasn't going to arrest us. He was, however, going to hold us in the station until he was certain the mob had dissolved and it was safe for us to be back on the streets. He also asked us not to go back to Lowe's Cafe. Having made our point about the Civil Rights Act we agreed — at least for that day.

For myself, the adrenaline was wearing off, my cuts and bruises were beginning to make themselves known in no uncertain terms, and I was depressed and worried. Well, all right, to put it in those technical psychological terms I had studied as a UCLA psych major, I was freaked out. Not about the attack as such but over how Mr. Kolb, Mr. Richburg, and the Afro-American

community were going to react. I mean, I'd been sent to Crenshaw to help adults register to vote but now I'd gotten their children beaten up by racist thugs. I was utterly despondent. I knew I had royally screwed up — Wrong!

When we finally got back to the pool hall it looked like at least half of Luverne's Afro-American community was there. They were ecstatic. They were so proud of their kids they could bust. For years they'd been seeing demonstrations on TV, lunch counter sit-ins, white mobs, protesters curling up in nonviolent defense, youngsters defying white racists. But that was city stuff, Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, not rural Alabama. Not little Crenshaw County deep in Klan country. But now *their* kids had done it! *Their* kids were civil rights heroes!

Parents kept coming up to me: "Did my boy do it right? They did it right, didn't they?"

"Yes, they did it just right. They were champs. When Dr. King hears about it, he'll be proud of them."

It was like everyone was walking on air. Their children had confronted white supremacy, integrated Luverne (or at least forced them to shut down their white-only lunch counters), and done it right as rain. And safely. No one had been hurt bad at all. Just bruises, cuts, and scrapes. So everyone was celebrating. It felt really, really good. Of course, I realized that if any of the kids had gotten seriously injured the reaction might not have been so positive. But "sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof," as they say.

Both Albert Turner and Hosea Williams also had positive reactions, largely, I assume, because that's the feedback they got from Richburg and Kolb. And as I later learned, other SCOPE projects throughout the South were facing the same issues and coming to the same conclusions. A number of SCOPE projects had already turned to direct action, including mass marches and arrests in Americus Georgia that Hosea himself had led. So all in all our Luverne sit-in had been a great success and Crenshaw County's Afro-American community was pleased, proud, and noticeably more inclined to go down to the courthouse next registration day.

As it turned out, though, I later learned that our action did result in one significant casualty. Not long after I and the SCOPE team left Crenshaw at the end of August, Chief Raupach was abruptly fired for his failure to actually arrest and prosecute us and his obvious unwillingness to use his office as a weapon of white supremacy. Someone later told me that he and his family had been forced to leave the county, but I don't know if that was true.

Dave's Driving Lesson ~ 1965

Later that evening we were still at the pool hall celebrating the sit-in when the phone rang. The local leader from Brantley's Black community was on the line. He was a Korean War vet and I believe his name was Mr. Greene, though I may not be remembering that correctly. He was calling to say that the local youth in Brantley had heard what the kids in Luverne had done and they wanted to do the same thing. (The rumor line in those rural counties was as efficient as today's Internet.) He asked me to come down to teach them how to sit in and test compliance with the Civil Rights Act.

Now anyone with the sense that God gave a goat would think that having just dodged a bullet maybe we should think twice about this. Not me, of course. We agreed that on the following Saturday we'd hold a training session for the Brantley kids and proceed from there.

Brantley was ten miles south of Luverne down Highway 331 and the second largest town— well, "village" would be more accurate — in the county. It had perhaps 1,000 people, maybe 350 of whom were Black. Luverne had a single traffic light which they didn't really need but were quite proud of. Brantley at less than half the size only had a stop sign or two. The first time I saw Brantley was when Mr. Richburg was driving me around on my second day in Crenshaw. As we drove through its minuscule business district I noticed several white men wearing pistols on their hips — civilians, not cops.

This was long before the National Rifle Association and the Republican Party made "open carry" a conservative political cause and seeing armed citizens on the streets was quite unusual. I asked Havard about it and he told me that white men in Brantley liked to have their guns handy in case they needed to shoot someone. In the slang I heard later from my Vietnam-veteran friends, Brantley was "one hardcore 'ville."

The next Saturday, Dave Sookne, Dunbar Reed, Dick Klausner, and I drove down to Brantley in Dave's VW bug for the nonviolent training session, which was supposed to take place on a little make-do softball field in the town's tiny Afro-American community. What we didn't know (but should have) was that almost all of Brantley's Black men had gone over to adjacent Butler County that day for a softball match. Leaving mostly women and kids back home.

About seven or eight Afro-American kids were waiting for us. We'd hardly begun to introduce ourselves when suddenly half a dozen cars loaded with white guys came roaring in, skidding to a halt on the dirt infield in a cloud of dust. Yelling, cursing, and shouting racist epithets, they leapt out carrying bats, ax handles, and chains, and charged right at us with no hesitation at all. It was obvious that they'd been tipped off in advance — either by a snitch or a tap on our phone — and had been waiting in ambush for us to arrive. I guess there

were about two dozen of 'em — I didn't take a formal count — and so far as I was concerned they were all Klan.

"Run!" I yelled to the local kids and they scattered immediately knowing exactly where to take cover. I figured the Klan would chase us rather than them, so we bailed too, darting into a nearby shack. An old Afro-American woman ran out on the porch swinging her broom at the Klansmen and yelling at them to stay out of her house. That gave us just enough time to get out the back door, dash around to our VW, and boogie out of Dodge.

The white guys immediately ran back to their cars, leaving the old woman and the Afro-American community unharmed. They had big powerful cars — a Trans Am, a Pontiac GTO, a pickup truck with Klansmen clambering into the bed, and three or four other vehicles bringing up the rear. We had four people squeezed into a VW bug with a little four-banger engine. Not the recommended vehicle for a desperate car chase.

Dave was driving and I was in the shotgun seat. As I've mentioned, Dave was a graduate student in mathematics at the University of Chicago. Now as a disciple of Dr. King, I was, of course, opposed to racism and all other forms of stereotyping. But the truth of the matter was that in many ways Dave matched the classic mathematician stereotype. Very precise, very meticulous, very orderly. Earlier that month his VW had come due for its 12,000 mile service, so at exactly 12,000 miles he took it up to the dealer in Montgomery, even though we needed it that day (well, we needed it every day). He never drove over the speed limit, he always came to a complete halt at every stop sign, and ... well, you get the idea. Steve McQueen, he was not.

As we drove out of the Black neighborhood towards the paved highway we passed three cars parked side by side on a little patch of grass: the state trooper's car, the sheriff's car, and a new Cadillac. Sitting on the hood of each were: the state trooper assigned to Crenshaw County, the county sheriff, and the Mayor of Brantley. They had big shit-eating grins on their faces and as we passed by they waved at us. Duh, no need to guess how that mob got formed.

Immediately beyond where they were parked was Brantley's stop sign. Dave came to a full stop. So in a manner I'm sure you can imagine, I gently inquired as to why he was stopping with the Klan coming after us? He replied, "Well, they might try and arrest us." Which, granted, in other circumstances would have been a valid point.

I told him (again, in the manner you can imagine) that getting busted looked like our best chance of surviving because if they arrested us they might have to protect us. Then I jammed my left hand down on his knee so his foot couldn't move from the gas pedal to the brake and shouted, "You better steer, cause you ain't touching that brake till we reach Luverne!"

So we start boogying north on two-lane Highway 331, hell hounds on our tail (to paraphrase bluesman Robert Johnson). Now Dave was getting into what was going down. When the Klan cars behind us tried to pull up alongside — to either run us off the road or open fire on us — he swung left and right to block them. He had this grim look on his face, teeth set, eyes wild. It was obvious that he'd slipped the bounds of space and time and was now in some savage alternate universe — he was actually going over the speed limit!

The road was hilly and curved. I'd eased my hand up off his knee but I still wasn't about to let him touch the brake, so when we came up behind someone he had to pass right then and there. We passed cars on hills. We passed cars on curves. I looked back and the Klan was still behind us, but they were passing more cautiously, which is how we managed to stay a bit ahead of them. Their lead car — the Trans Am — sported a Confederate battle flag license plate and I could see the thugs in the pickup truck behind it leaning out, waving their ax handles and bats as they shouted at their driver to "Get 'em! Get 'em!" For some reason they weren't shooting, I don't know why.

We came up behind a station wagon with Minnesota plates — Land of 10,000 Lakes. The back window was filled with beach toys and suitcases — obviously Ma and Pa and the kids coming back from summer vacation on the Gulf. Dave passed them up a hill and around a curve — a suicide pass. The driver's jaw just dropped in amazement as we went by. I always wondered what he thought as the Klan cars then started to flash by him. Guys waving Confederate flags and ax handles, whopping it up like mad. I imagined him saying to his wife, "Oh my God, Martha! People down here are crazy! We ain't stopping till we reach the Ohio River!"

So by now Dave's got our little VW up to 70, 75 miles per hour, even faster on the downhill. The road was poorly paved and the bug was shaking and shimmying. The Klan cars were swinging back and forth trying to get in position to run us off the road, but Dave kept blocking 'em. Three miles on, five miles on, somehow we managed to stay ahead of them. Six miles. Seven. At eight miles the highway widened to four lanes just outside of Luverne. No way in hell could we block them on four lanes.

The Trans Am and the GTO hit their accelerators and got ahead of us, then came to a tire-burning stop skewed across the highway as a barricade, the pickup truck was coming in right behind us. But they had blocked the road just beyond a turn-off. Dave wrenched the wheel left and we skidded into a dirt lane.

Years later he told me, "Dick pointed it out to me. I said that I thought it was a dead end, but he was sure that it cut across to another road leading into Luverne. And it did. As I prepared to turn, I had to remind myself mentally, 'Don't signal left, don't signal left,' and I did not."

So there we were bumping along on a narrow dirt road. Our Klan pursuers regrouped and came back on our tail but the rutted lane was just one car wide so they couldn't pass. They fell back a bit, either because our VW was better on the dirt or the dust we were kicking up partly blinded them.

A few minutes later we reached another road leading into town. It was also four lanes. We turned into it and headed north towards Luverne, flat out flying as fast as that bug could go. We'd managed to pull ahead of them a bit on the dirt lane, but now that we were all back on hard-top they were catching up. If they passed us they would blockade us again.

Suddenly we saw three cars speeding towards us from Luverne — full force, pedal-to-the-metal. As we flashed by each other I saw they were filled with Black men armed with shotguns and rifles. They slammed their brakes and came skidding to a halt, tires smoking, spun around and dodged in behind us — between us and the Klan.

What had happened was that Brantley people had called up to the pool hall, "They're being chased, they're trying to make Luverne." The community immediately mobilized. Cars of armed men had gone out on both roads to escort us back into Luverne.

The Klan cars charged up on the three cars of Afro-American men who were driving side by side across the width of all four lanes to block them. The Black men thrust their rifles out the windows in a clear and unmistakable warning. The Klan cars abruptly slowed, fell behind, and then turned around. They were up for a beating or a lynching — not a battle with armed men ready to fight back.

One time, after hearing that story, someone asked me, "But I thought you were supposed to be nonviolent?"

A fair question indeed. As practitioners of Tactical nonviolence none of us on the SCOPE project carried or used weapons, and we made clear that when they were doing Movement work with us — canvassing, sitting-in, registering to vote — local folk were expected to also be nonviolent. And as a practical matter, in most dangerous situations nonviolence was still the safest and most effective tactic, which is why I used nonviolence when the local Klan leader put a pistol to my head rather than trying to violently wrestle it away from him. Had that mob caught us we would have tried to survive using nonviolent tactics — not out of ideology but because we were unarmed and heavily outnumbered.

But we respected and honored the principle that Afro-Americans had the moral and constitutional right to protect their community and the people in it from terrorist violence. And had it come down to cases those three carloads of armed and determined Black men could have stood off that mob and I for one was grateful to them. Afterwards, we all slept better at night knowing that Luverne Blacks were armed and ready if the need arose. The Klan knew it too.

Showdown in Brantley ~ 1965

With our guardians behind us we tore at high speed through Luverne's Afro-American community until we reached the safety of our pool hall headquarters. There we profusely thanked the men who had risked themselves to protect us. After I'd calmed down a bit and my pounding heart had slowed, I phoned Albert Turner to report. He said he'd come right over — a two-hour drive from his home in Marion.

While we waited for him we described to the others what had occurred and speculated on what would have happened if they had caught us. From the aggressive way they drove up in Brantley, leapt out of their cars, and charged in without a word, we had no doubt they intended to beat the living crap out of us. But since they didn't come in shooting my guess is that lynching us might not have been their initial intent.

Yet once violence breaks out, emotion and adrenaline spike and there's no way to know how far a mob will go or what they might do. Psychologists and social scientists use terms like "the madness of crowds" because it's impossible to predict what people will do in the heat of the moment. And once the car chase was underway it created a predator-prey emotional dynamic. Had they caught us on the road — with fewer witnesses than in Brantley's Afro-American community — there's no way to know how it might have turned out.

Turner arrived and as we were describing what happened, the phone rang. It was Mr. Greene, the local leader from Brantley, now home from the softball game. He was furious, livid with rage. Angry at the whites because we were his guests and they had attacked us, and pissed off at us for fleeing.

"Are you going to come back?" he asked Turner.

"Yes, we're comin' back," Turner responded quietly.

"Are you gonna let them run you out again?"

"No, we're not going to be run out."

I later learned that when Brantley's Afro-American men returned from the game in Butler County and found out what had happened, an emotional wave of rage at those who had attacked their community and threatened their kids swept over them. Brantley's white mayor showed up, no doubt to put them in their proper place, and to his shock it didn't go as he expected. Blacks were shouting fury at him face to face. Some of them were carrying weapons. "I'm a Korean War veteran!" Mr. Greene shouted at him. "You can't do this to us!"

They jawed him up one side and down the other, so much so that he retreated. And I suspect that defiance, that speaking truth to power, felt empowering. Which is why, I assume, Mr. Greene called to invite us back, in essence throwing down a challenge to white supremacy in Brantley.

After he hung up, Turner told us what Mr. Greene had said, and asked, "You all ready to go back?"

We looked at each other (gulp) and in small voices replied, "If you say so." The next day was Sunday — everyone-go-to-church day — so our return to Brantley was set for Monday.

Albert Turner had a big, Detroit-type car large enough to seat six. So on Monday morning the four of us from Saturday plus Turner and Carroll Richardson returned to Brantley's Afro-American community.

Based on Saturday's phone call from Mr. Greene, I expected to see supporters in evidence when we arrived at his home because they knew when we were coming. Not the case. The dirt streets were empty. No one was sitting out on their porches. No one. All the windows had their blinds drawn.

The bold, righteous anger of Saturday evening had been replaced by fear. "Oh Lord, what did we do? We cursed at the mayor!" Whites in Brantley outnumbered Blacks two to one, and in the local lingo they were "mean as rattlesnakes." The community's fear of white retaliation was rooted in long, hard experience.

Not Mr. Greene though. "You guys gonna stay?" he challenged us.

"We won't be run off," Albert Turner assured him quietly.

So we sat out on Mr. Greene's porch with him and his two sons, who were in their late teens or early twenties. Now, of course, we're Dr. King's people. And since this was, in effect, similar to a protest situation, we were pledged to nonviolence. Not Mr. Greene though, he had a right to protect his home and his community — a right we respected and supported, as I believe Dr. King would have. Mr. Greene was armed and so were his sons. They had rifles and shotguns close to hand on the porch — but not visible from the street, not out threatening or challenging anyone. Not displayed in macho bravado. But ready if needed.

The Black neighborhood was eerily empty. No one was visible at all, it was like we were in a ghost town. But up the slope of a little hill, in the bushes, we sensed that Black folk were watching. From behind the windows with the curtains closed, people were peeking out. What's gonna happen? What's gonna happen? Greene's neighbors were afraid to stand with us, but everybody was waiting to see what would happen.

No more than ten minutes after we arrived a car drove up and an Afro-American woman jumped out. She was the mayor's maid and she was in a state. "Oh! The mayor sent me to tell you to get out of town. He's gonna call his mob!"

As the guest of honor — so to speak — Turner was in the rocking chair on the porch and he was slowly rocking back and forth. "Well," he told her, "you can let the mayor know we're not leaving."

"Oh! He's serious! He's gonna call the mob! He told me to warn you off!"

Turner just rocked back and forth. "Well, we have a right to be here. We're guests of Mr. Greene. We're not leaving."

She got in her car and drove off. Maybe 20 minutes later, a car filled with white men drove by. They gave us hard looks and we looked right back at them. They looked at us and we looked at them. Nobody said nothing. Our faces were set like stone. We didn't make any threatening gestures, just tracked them with our eyes. Another carload drove by. They looked at us and we looked at them. They looked at us and we looked at them. A third carload drove by. Then the first carload came around again. Then a fourth carload. Them looking at us we looking at them. They came around again. And again. And then after a while, they stopped driving by.

The people who had been hunkered down and hiding realized that the mob wasn't coming back. Not that day. Not when we were ready for them. We had stared 'em down. They were up for ambushing someone by surprise — that was the Klan way. But against people standing ready for them it was they who weren't ready.

Suddenly the whole Afro-American community came pouring out into the street. Abruptly, without planning or preparation, there was a party going on. Women were there with food, people had beer, everyone was talking fast and grinning — exuberant with relief. The next registration day, August 16th, some 35 people from Brantley went up to the courthouse to register. The biggest single group we'd ever had from that section of the county.

As it happened, August 16th was the last registration day for our SCOPE project. Over the next week we began winding things down and the volunteers, both local and northern, began leaving for college. I too left the South at the end of that month, returning to Los Angeles for yet another N-VAC trial.

Hale County Primary ~ 1966

Shortly after being released from the Wayside Honor Ranch in Los Angeles County, I rode Greyhound back to Alabama and resumed work as one of the few whites on SCLC's Alabama field staff. Albert Turner assigned me to Hale County, which is about an hour northwest of Selma. My job was to prepare for the May 1966 primary election.

The Alabama elections of 1966 were the first real test of the Voting Rights Act (VRA). All across the Alabama Black Belt Afro-American candidates were running for office. SCLC mobilized almost its entire southern staff to support those who were campaigning in the May 3rd Democratic primaries. SNCC,

meanwhile, was supporting independent Black candidates and parties who would run in the November general election. Statewide, an estimated 180,000 Black voters cast ballots that May, and even more voted in November, a huge increase in the number of Afro-American voters.

Yet despite that increase, out of close to one hundred Black candidates only five were elected to public office. All the others, both in the primaries and the general election, were defeated by fraud, white intimidation, economic retaliation, and crooked counts. The 1966 Alabama elections were the first real test of the VRA, which had allowed nonwhites to become registered voters but failed to protect their right to fair, free, and honest elections. The VRA failed to prevent election fraud because the federal officials responsible for enforcing it chose not to do so. Hale County was no exception.

In Hale County, 70% of the population were Afro-American. The Rev. Henry McCaskill, a Black man, entered the race for sheriff. Prior to the VRA, less than 3% of eligible Blacks were registered in Hale and few, if any, dared show up at a polling place. Shortly before the 1966 primary — seven months after the VRA went into effect — the local paper published a list of registered voters: 4605 white and 4057 Black. The local people we were working with told us that almost 1,000 of the whites on that list were either dead or had long since moved out of the county. If those whites returned to Hale or somehow rose from the grave to cast their ballots (a common occurrence in Alabama elections) whites would have a majority and McCaskill would certainly lose. But if federal election monitors enforced a fair election and an honest count, potential Afro-American voters would outnumber whites by about 450 and McCaskill had a decent chance of victory.

Initially I was working Hale County alone, but soon a small SCLC team led by Leon Hall, a more experienced staff member, arrived to take command. We set up an office in Greensboro, the Hale county seat. Along with some local volunteers, the half dozen of us from SCLC were McCaskill's campaign staff. During April and into May we canvassed, held mass meetings and small house gatherings, recruited and trained poll watchers, distributed flyers, put up posters, and prepared for getting our supporters to the 16 polling places scattered around the county, one for each of the 16 beats (voting districts were called "beats" rather than precincts). We also tried with limited success to form permanent beat committees. It was intense and exhausting work lasting from dawn to well into the night but we were energized by hope that the VRA would be enforced and we'd be able to elect a Black sheriff for the first time in living memory.

While we were running our political campaign, white plantation owners were evicting Black tenants and sharecroppers to force them out of the county before they could cast their ballots, and white employers and landlords were engaged in economic retaliation and intimidation towards similar ends. And white residents were urging distant friends and relatives to return from wherever

they currently lived to vote on election day. Federal election monitors ignored our reports and complaints about voter intimidation (a federal crime) and voter fraud (also a crime).

May 3rd was voting day. Officials misdirected many Black voters to the wrong polling places where they were barred from voting. And a number of Afro-American voters who did reach the right place were blocked from voting on one flimsy pretext or another. Our poll watchers were harassed both by election officials and white thugs who lurked in the vicinity. Observers from the Justice Department kept themselves busy noting down everything in their little books — with no discernible result.

After the polls closed, the counts were posted outside each beat's election station. That night our SCLC team drove from one to the other to tally the results. Like many other rural counties in the South it was the custom in Hale for a crowd of white men to gather at the courthouse on election night to drink whiskey and hear the returns announced. The courthouse, of course, was also a polling place and someone from SCLC had to walk through that throng, find the bulletin board, and record the tally for that beat. I was the only white person on the Hale County SCLC team so that honor fell to me, on the theory that I would be less noticeable and my presence less provocative than a Black civil rights worker. Personally, I didn't find that reasoning persuasive, but it was Leon's call.

Once again my nonviolent training served me well. The courthouse was our last stop. It was full dark and the area wasn't well lit but from what I could see there were at least a hundred or more white men hanging around on the lawn. They weren't densely packed, mostly they were standing in loose groups, smoking, talking, and discreetly sharing hip flasks and bottles in brown paper bags. While the other SCLC workers waited in the car with the motor running, I strode briskly through the crowd as if I had every right to be there while projecting a demeanor of placid calm. I was also careful to avoid all eye contact, a skill I had honed on the New York City subway system during visits to Manhattan.

When I got up to the bulletin board by the courthouse door and began noting down the tally I could hear some surprised muttering behind me, but since we were only interested in a few races I completed my task and was on my way out before they had a chance to recover from their surprise and mobilize their hate against me. I reached the car and we sped away — to my great relief.

McCaskill got 2,651 votes on May 3rd, which was enough to make the May 30th runoff. But he was 900 votes shy of the total won by his multiple white opponents.

The runoff at the end of the month was a repeat of the first balloting — harassment, intimidation, economic retaliation, and federal indifference. With

only a single white candidate for each office receiving the entire white vote plus a small portion of the Black vote, all of our Afro-American candidates lost. Our hopes going in had been high, our disappointment at the outcome was deep and bitter. The pattern of intimidation, deceit, and fraud that we encountered in Hale was repeated in county after county across the state, as was the utter failure on the part of the federal government to enforce the law.