

Excerpts from
'Troublemaker' Memories of the Freedom Movement
Marching Through Mississippi 1966

Contents:

Welcome to Mississippi ~ 1966	1
The Meredith March and Black Power ~ 1966	4
Tear Gas and Rifle Butts ~ 1966	11
On the Streets of Canton ~ 1966	16
Marching on the Capitol ~ 1966	20

Welcome to Mississippi ~ 1966

After the primaries in May, SCLC staff who had been temporarily brought in from other states returned to their regular assignments, leaving only a handful working in Alabama under SCLC State Director Albert Turner. Once again I was based in Selma and staying with the same family on Green Street who had cared for me before.

Turner assigned me responsibility for Hale, Perry, and Marengo Counties. In the weeks immediately after the election we had no clear SCLC program, so my role was simply keeping in touch with Movement activists and county organizations — letting them know that SCLC hadn't forgotten them and encouraging them to continue registering voters — while reporting back to Turner and through him up the chain of command to Hosea Williams in Atlanta. Given our total defeat in the May primaries, SCLC's lack of direction wasn't surprising. It would take a while to regroup and plan a new campaign or organizing strategy.

SCLC's orientation had always been direct action campaigns and supporting the activities of their local affiliates as opposed to SNCC's orientation towards deep community organizing. But by mid-1966 the protest fires had run their course in the Alabama Black Belt which had seen fierce, dramatic, and violent struggles in 1965. What was needed now was community organizing, but a lone activist responsible for three entire counties couldn't possibly do that effectively.

Though I wasn't aware of it at the time, while I was staying in touch with local activists in my assigned district and other SCLC field staff were doing the same elsewhere, Turner was doing some deep thinking. Thinking and planning that eventually led to organizing the Southwest Alabama Farmers Cooperative Association (SAFCA), an economic empowerment coop that eventually covered ten Black Belt counties — a kind of deep-rooted community organizing and a sign that SCLC was slowly changing its focus from protesting segregation to addressing poverty and economics.

Few Afro-Americans in rural Alabama could afford a phone, so maintaining contact with local leaders and groups across three counties required a car. The other SCLC staff members in the state also had responsibility for multiple counties and they too needed transportation. An Afro-American church in Hartford, Connecticut offered to donate four used cars to SCLC and I was sent with three others to drive them down to

2 Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966

Selma. I went up by bus a few days early to spend some time with my parents in New Haven, and on the morning we were to pick up the cars, my dad drove me up to Hartford, a city I knew nothing about and had never visited despite its possible connection to my family name.

We found the church easily enough. I was eager to go and connect with the other SCLC guys and carry on my Movement activities. I could tell that my father wanted to meet them too. And that made me really uncomfortable. As a young man of 22, filled with a sense of my own independence, I didn't want my Movement peers to think I was still dependent on my parents. The thought of the other guys seeing me arrive in the company of my dad embarrassed me, so I fobbed him off with some excuse. I realize now, of course, that he understood me far better than I knew myself. He acquiesced with good grace, though I suspect he did so with inner sadness.

What a stupid jerk I was! Thinking only of myself. I realize now that he wasn't trying to control or limit me, but rather he must have been remembering his own decade of hard, dangerous, work as a union organizer in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. How he must have wanted to meet young activists and organizers now engaged in similar work a generation later, taste once again the kind of comradeship he shared with my mom and the other young CIO organizers of his day, maybe swap some stories and reminisces comparing the two struggles.

And I know now that rather than thinking of me as less-than-adult, they would have been impressed by this Kentucky white man of their parent's generation who had confronted the Klan and endured the same kind of dangers that we were experiencing. To this day, I deeply regret not taking that opportunity to share my Movement work with my father — and perhaps learn more of his own experiences as a union organizer in the South. What's that old saying? — "The saddest words in the English language are 'if only'."

While I was driving back to Alabama on June 8 in one of those donated cars, the radio reported that James Meredith had been shot and wounded while trekking through Mississippi on his "March Against Fear" to encourage Afro-American voter registration. When I reached Selma and reconnected with SCLC I was told that the local police and Mississippi State Troopers who were accompanying Meredith's small band of protesters had made no move to protect him from a white racist with a shotgun.

SCLC, SNCC, and CORE, the main organizations of the Freedom Movement's direct action wing, quickly came together to continue the 200 mile march, which became known as the "Meredith Mississippi March." They sent in staff and mobilized resources, and their organizational heads — Dr. King, Stokely Carmichael, and Floyd McKissick — became the march leaders. The Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR) provided medical teams, and lawyers from the ACLU and Lawyers Guild gave legal support.

The Deacons for Defense and Justice from Louisiana accompanied the March to protect it from Klan assassins and violent white racists. The marchers themselves did not carry weapons (or at least they weren't supposed to), but everyone — white and Black — understood that armed Deacon guards were in the vicinity watching over the campsites at night and protecting the march from snipers and assassins while on the road.

For some reason, Turner's western Alabama staff was one of the last SCLC teams dispatched to support the march. On June 21st, Dr. King led a side march of several hundred people in Neshoba County, Mississippi to memorialize the lynching there of

James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andy Goodman two years earlier during Freedom Summer. They were savagely attacked by a white mob in Philadelphia, the county seat. The next morning, June 22, six of us headed for Mississippi with Turner at the wheel.

It was about an hour and a half from Selma to the Mississippi line and we were all uncharacteristically quiet. The truth is we were scared. Other than Annell Ponder and the Citizenship School teachers, SCLC had never had much presence in Mississippi and we knew it only by reputation. We were familiar with Alabama and its dangers and we were confident in our ability to handle them. But Mississippi frightened us. There's another old saying, "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," which I guess is also true in reverse — distant dangers seem scarier than those you face every day. What I didn't know then was that while Blacks in Alabama were telling each other that bad as Alabama was, Mississippi was worse, Blacks in Mississippi were saying, "It's really bad here, but thank God we don't live in Alabama."

About the time we crossed over into Mississippi we found ourselves driving along a stretch of I-20 which had recently been completed. As we were approaching Meridian we saw that the lanes ahead of us were blocked off by Mississippi State Highway Patrol cars slewed across the freeway with their lights flashing. All traffic was being directed into a highway rest stop.

"Oh shit," I thought. "They must be looking for people coming to join the march." I could see that Turner and the other guys in the car had come to the same conclusion.

Yet when we entered the rest stop parking lot, instead of a posse of grim-faced cops with billy clubs and paddy wagons we discovered a temporary pavilion decorated with red, white, and blue bunting and state flags waving in the breeze. Beautiful, blonde, Miss Mississippi was there greeting visitors in her white gown with a sparkly tiara on her head. Pretty girls in cheerleader-type outfits and straw boater hats were going from car to car handing out free Cokes and "Welcome to Mississippi" buttons — I kid you not.

Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson was caught between a rock and a hard place. He had run for office on a platform of both preserving segregation and the "southern way of life," which appealed to hardline racist voters, *and also* attracting new business opportunities into the state's pathetic economy, which appealed to business-oriented "racial moderates."

Some of those white moderates were affluent businessmen who wanted lucrative national franchise opportunities like Burger King, Holiday Inn, 7-11, and the like. But those chains now insisted on full compliance with the Civil Rights Act because they'd face consumer boycotts in the North if they tolerated segregation in the South. Yet any consumer-oriented business that tried to operate on an integrated, desegregated basis in Mississippi faced economic boycotts by the White Citizens' Council and the threat of KKK violence. For those businessmen focused on their personal bottom line rather than the ideology of white supremacy, the old Jim Crow system of racial violence and segregation was now a hindrance.

And because of mechanization, cotton planters no longer needed large numbers of impoverished field hands to chop, weed, and pick for starvation wages. Now the South's wealthy power brokers — the men Dr. King referred to as "Bourbons" — were eager to attract large-scale investment in new industries, but the region's reputation for racial strife, lawless violence, corrupt courts, and crooked politics stood in the way. The

4 Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966

previous year, for example, Hammermill Paper had canceled plans to build a huge multi-million-dollar factory in Selma because they didn't want to be associated with Selma's image.

Of course, with one of the worst education systems in the nation, few mineral resources, poor roads, and an impoverished and stunted domestic market, what made Mississippi attractive to northern industry were mainly its low wages, anti-union laws, and low taxes. Policies that could only be maintained by suppressing progressive political and social movements.

Which meant that many of the moderates who were putting pressure on Governor Johnson to curb Citizen Council opposition to integration of public facilities and consumer-oriented businesses and to clean up the state's image by halting the kind of dramatic KKK violence that made headlines in the North essentially wanted to maintain the state's basic socioeconomic structure without the bad publicity. In essence, both the segregationist hardliners and the racial moderates wanted to keep Afro-Americans "in their proper place." The difference being that the hardliners saw that place as a kind of slave-like social inferiority, while the moderates saw the proper place of Blacks as dollar-spending customers and low-wage workers for white-owned businesses.

Yet while Mississippi business leaders were putting pressure on Governor Johnson to clean up the state's image and crack down on the kind of overt, violent racism that made headlines in the North, the majority of the state's white voters still adamantly opposed civil rights and any sort of social advancement for Afro-Americans. Politicians who failed to keep the "nigras" in line were doomed to electoral defeat. So Governor Johnson was trying to do the impossible. He was trying to enforce segregation with police clubs and arrests to appease white voters while simultaneously trying to improve how northern investors viewed the state. Hence the state troopers forcing us off the freeway for a heavy-handed "Welcome to Mississippi."

A couple of the cheery cheerleader girls, all smiles and pearly teeth, came over to our car. They saw me, "white as rice," sitting in the front seat next to Albert Turner, "black as coal," along with four other Afro-American men, and there was no mistaking who we were. For a moment their faces kind of dropped, but I give 'em their due props, they recovered. They had their job to do and they did it well. They gave us our free Cokes with a smile and a friendly "Welcome to Mississippi, y'all."

Once we realized this wasn't an ambush and we weren't about to be beaten down or arrested on some phony charges, we enthusiastically played into the game with gusto, laughing and grinning like crazy, and taking their Cokes and buttons and whatnot. I still have the "Honorary Citizen of Meridian" pin one of them gave me.

Weird shit, weird shit indeed

The Meredith March and Black Power ~ 1966

After escaping the siren allure of Miss Mississippi and her court of cheery cheerleaders, we drove across the state looking for the Meredith March. We knew the march was somewhere near Yazoo City — a small town of about 10,000 people on the southern edge of the Delta. The great majority of its inhabitants were Afro-American but all

economic and political power was in white hands (today the mayor is a Black woman and three of the four aldermen are also Afro-American). As we drove down its main street Turner took one look at the Black folk on the sidewalk and knew that the march had already passed through. He could literally see it in their faces and the way they carried themselves. So we turned around and caught up with the march a few miles short of the tiny, unincorporated hamlet of Benton.

While Turner drove on ahead, the rest of us got out and started marching in the muggy heat. I guess there were maybe 100 marchers, about 15 of them white, the rest Afro-American. The great majority were local Mississippi Blacks, the rest were staff and volunteers from organizations like SCLC, CORE, SNCC, MCHR, MFDP, Delta Ministry, and other groups, or supporters from the North.

We had to walk on the poor footing of the muddy soft shoulder, the awkward down-slope of the roadside drainage ditches, and the thin curbs of bridges and culverts because the cops refused to let us step on the pavement. This because the free flow of traffic must never under any circumstances be impeded (except, of course, for state-sponsored welcome ceremonies that force everyone off the freeway into a rest stop).

Despite Miss Mississippi's welcoming smile, I was scared. This was the Mississippi Delta, stronghold of the KKK and birthplace of the White Citizens' Council. The whites who passed us in their cars or stood by the side of the road glowered and shouted their hate. Some cars swerved as if to run us down so we had to be in a state of constant alertness, ready to dodge aside at any instant. The cops and state troopers — themselves all white, of course — were no less hostile than the bystanders.

Our fellow marchers were also seething with anger over the white mob that had viciously attacked the Chaney-Schwerner-Goodman memorial the day before in Philadelphia. Along with Dr. King, a contingent from the Meredith March had driven over to Neshoba County to participate and some of those now marching had barely escaped serious injury — others had not been so lucky and were off the line still healing up.

From time to time someone would start a freedom song and everyone would join in, but mostly we talked as we walked — the march line was a moving agora of debate over the Deacons for Defense and nonviolence, the role of whites in the Freedom Movement, and Black Power. Discussions that expanded and intensified when we reached the Benton campsite that evening, and continued the next day on the march from Benton to Canton.

I was 22 in 1966, and utterly certain of all of my many, many convictions. What's that Dylan line? "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." Most of the CORE, SNCC, and SCLC field staff were also in their twenties and all of them equally sure of their own beliefs. Which meant we had some lively discussions and arguments because there was no agreement or consensus on those three issues — not even close.

Given all the media hype about gun-toting Deacons, I had expected Afro-American desperadoes armed with rifles and pistols stalking about like angry panthers. No one I saw fit that description. No one was aggressively waving weapons around or swaggering about in any kind of hostile or threatening manner. Not along the march nor at the camp. There were some Black men driving by or sitting in cars — some of them might have been Deacons but most of them were simply local folk come out to see the spectacle. Those

who actually were Deacons no doubt had pistols concealed on their person or in their car and probably some hidden shotguns and rifles for use if need be, but so did most of the locals, because carrying heat was a normal way of life for Mississippi Black folk living in Klan country.

Scared of Mississippi as I was, I was glad to know the Deacons were somewhere nearby, even if I couldn't identify who they were. Yet as we marched through Mississippi the debates around the Deacons and nonviolence were endless and complex. Some marchers — mostly but not entirely northern whites — were arguing against the presence of the Deacons on grounds of Gandhian Philosophical nonviolence. At the other end of the spectrum, some super-militants — mostly but not exclusively Black northerners — were proclaiming their allegiance to "eye-for-eye" retaliatory violence and lauding the Watts explosion of the previous year as a model that should be widely emulated. Most marchers, both Afro-American and white, fell somewhere between those extremes.

My attitude was that Tactical nonviolence was necessary on protests. In the South of the 1960s demonstrations that turned violent would have been quickly and ruthlessly suppressed by overwhelming police power. And the resulting lengthy prison terms for participants would have killed any hope of a sustained political activity. Yet allowing Klan assassins to kill activists and leaders would have the same effect, so self-defense against white terrorism outside of protests was not only morally justifiable but politically essential.

The only way to achieve progressive reform in America against the status quo's money-power and violence-power is through "people-power" — mass movements of people demanding social change. By definition, "mass movements" have to include a wide range of people far beyond dedicated social activists. Activists are few in number and they are the crucial catalyst, but they succeed only when they win support from the many. And the truth is that while our modern culture glorifies and glamorizes violence as entertainment, the overwhelming majority of Americans are frightened and repulsed by actual violence — even verbal violence. Only a small fringe element will participate in or support aggressive violence. Violent rhetoric and violent deeds may appeal to young macho males, but they alienate almost everyone else. Which is why nonviolent direct action has been successful in building mass social movements but violent street action and violent rhetoric have generally had the opposite effect.

Details and nuances of nonviolence were topics of intense debate and discussion, particularly among the SCLC, SNCC, and CORE field staffs. One ongoing argument I recall was around the premise, *I'd rather be caught with it than without it*, regarding whether or not activists should carry weapons while *not* on protests. Should we keep pistols in our pockets? Should we drive with guns in the glove compartment? Should weapons be kept in freedom houses for defense against Klan attacks?

We all knew that if cops caught us with a gun they could and would charge us with concealed weapons felonies or other gun-related charges. And if there were no witnesses about they could, and very well might, shoot us down in cold blood and then claim "self-defense," citing the gun as evidence. On the other hand, if caught in a Klan ambush without weapons there was no way to fight back, and by 1966 a lot of civil rights workers, particularly in SNCC and CORE, had decided they wouldn't go the way of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman — not without a fight.

For me as a white civil rights worker, my daily presence was in some ways a permanent ongoing protest. Without question I was more likely to draw police scrutiny while going about my daily business or driving on the back roads than were Black organizers. Since I was so often stopped and singled out for harassment by cops I usually chose to go unarmed. But not always. There were some short periods later on when threats from the Klan were so immediate and so intense that I carried a pistol in an attaché case that I kept on the car seat beside me and by my bed at night. Fortunately, I never had to use it. But had the occasion required, I would have.

Some of the Black SNCC and CORE marchers, and some of the Black northerners who had come down to support the march, fiercely opposed the presence of white marchers and white participation in the Freedom Movement in general. A sentiment that had been growing ever since the Freedom Summer campaigns of 1964. A few of them were overtly hostile and quite hateful, accusing white civil rights workers of consciously trying to usurp Black leadership and deliberately subverting and sabotaging the Movement — either from ingrained habits of white supremacy or from deliberate nefarious intent. On a personal level, it was bitterly hurtful to be slapped with enmity, antagonism, and accusations from people I had thought of as fellow freedom fighters.

But opposition to white participation was far from unanimous — not even close. Many Black marchers, including the majority of the local folk, retained their firm commitments to integration and interracial solidarity. Beliefs that had formed the foundation of the Freedom Movement for years. Most of local folk went out of their way to make outsiders standing with them as allies welcome — regardless of race. A reality I took comfort from.

These were complex and emotionally charged debates. Compared to Afro-Americans, most (though not all) white activists did in fact come from backgrounds of relative affluence that gave them a kind of self-confidence that often resulted in paternalistic or “missionary” attitudes that justifiably infuriated Black freedom workers. And most (though not all) white civil rights workers tried to overcome such conditioning with varying degrees of success.

As I saw it, racism was so inherent in our society and culture that all Americans of *all* races were (and still are) infected from childhood with varying aspects and degrees of it. It’s incumbent on socially conscious people of all races to oppose and resist racism, bigotry, and stereotyping as it manifests in themselves. Obviously, whites who derive social and economic benefits from racism face a more difficult internal struggle than do nonwhites. But no one is automatically immune from racism because of their skin color, class background, ethnic history, political ideology, or moral fervor.

As a deeply involved white man, I obviously supported white participation in the Freedom Movement. My argument was that racism is a white problem, not a Black problem. It wasn’t Afro-Americans who created segregation and white-only lunch counters, it wasn’t Blacks who forced themselves to ride at the back of the bus, it wasn’t people of color who denied themselves the vote or perpetrated racial lynchings. But if racism is a white problem then at least some whites have to be involved in solving it — under Black leadership.

The SNCC and CORE workers who opposed white participation in the freedom struggle also viewed racism as a white problem. They argued that whites should address

it by organizing in white communities, not working in Black communities. But in the violent and racially-polarized South of that time, anti-racist organizing among southern whites was at best ineffective and at worst impossible. Less effective, in my opinion, than the political value of providing visible interracial support for Black-led struggles.

Furthermore, I believed that white racism could only be confronted on an interracial basis. A model of Blacks organizing Blacks might very well build Black pride and confidence, but a segregated strategy of whites alone trying to organize other whites would end up perpetuating rather than challenging ingrained white racism. As I saw time after time, without direct confrontations by Afro-Americans, discussions about white racism among whites by themselves became abstract, theoretical, and devoid of transformative power.

Another factor that needed to be taken into account was that the presence of white activists made it impossible for racists and segregationists to frame the issue in exclusively racial terms or simply define it as "Blacks against whites" — a formulation that would leave Afro-Americans outnumbered, outgunned, and out-monied. The presence of white allies forced people North and South to confront questions of "right versus wrong" rather than "white versus Black."

Many Black staff members opposed white involvement in the Movement because they believed that Afro-Americans needed to rely on their own skills and resources. A valid point, I thought. Many white activists did have skills and experience not available to southern Afro-Americans and that did sometimes result in local Blacks deferring to them. But not always. Furthermore, that argument about deferring to outside skills could also be made on the basis of class rather than race. Some of the college-educated Blacks had the same advantages as northern whites, and less-educated locals often deferred to them on a class basis — race notwithstanding. A reality that some Afro-American activists such as Andrew Young of SCLC were willing to acknowledge:

The role of white people on the march began to be discussed. There was a decision on the part of some of the blacks in SNCC that we don't just want to get people free, we want to develop indigenous black leadership. And one of the ways to force the development of indigenous black leadership is to get rid of all this paternalism. Now, they and we were paternalists ourselves in many ways, because we were outsiders just as whites were. That's the reason SCLC never went along with that. We felt yes, we have to develop local leadership, but you don't want to blame the frustrations of local leadership development on whites alone. We were also partially responsible for usurping some of the leadership.

18

By virtue of their backgrounds, white allies brought access to outside economic and political resources that the Freedom Movement desperately needed, particularly at the grassroots level where the ability to bail some kids out of jail, obtain food for evicted families, or scrounge up a typewriter, made a significant difference.

Black activists who were opposed to white participation argued that Afro-Americans had to see that they could build a political movement on their own without relying on whites. A position I agreed with. But I didn't buy the argument that the presence of a few white supporters was inherently detrimental to the development of Afro-American leadership. Blacks had been building and leading such movements for years and were continuing to do so. Local movements like Albany, Birmingham, Greenwood, Nashville,

Durham, Orangeburg, Selma, and so on were built and led by Afro-Americans. Some of those movements had some white participation, others didn't, but they were all Black-led.

Much of the passion over this issue came from Afro-American SNCC and CORE activists who resented white activists who, they felt, challenged or threatened their status and position within their organizations. Yet SNCC and CORE's southern wing had always had some white participation, yet so far as I could see they were, and clearly remained, Black-led.

In SCLC, white allies like me were generally welcome without the arguments that were roiling SNCC and CORE because unlike the other two groups SCLC was a hierarchical organization with leadership clearly, firmly, and permanently in the hands of Black ministers. There was no possibility of whites pushing Afro-American leaders aside. If you wanted to rise in SCLC's ranks you pretty much had to be Black, male, and a minister — or at least an Afro-American landowner or professional. (A few Afro-American women managed to transcend the gender barrier, but they were rare exceptions to a general rule.) White activists like me were simply seen as foot soldiers. Which didn't bother me at in the least because I never saw myself as any kind of leader in the Black Freedom Movement.

And for me it is telling that while this issue of usurpation of leadership was raised by some CORE and SNCC staff members, I rarely heard any local leaders or local activists expressing any concern that their roles were being usurped or threatened by white activists. Quite the contrary. By and large, local Black leaders almost always welcomed the participation of white allies (though some arrogant and ill-behaved white *individuals* were on occasion told to leave).

Nor did local Afro-American leaders see whites as *political* threats. They knew white supporters were not going to stay and put down long-term roots in their communities. In some cases, however, local leaders *did* fear competition from Black activists who they thought were trying to usurp their position in the community — an issue rarely acknowledged by those arguing the anti-white position.

Those two issues of nonviolence and race were now caught up in, and had become inseparable from, intense debates over the "Black Power" slogan, that had burst into public consciousness just a week earlier when Stokely Carmichael of SNCC publicly called for it during a tense and passionate rally in Greenwood.

As a slogan, "Black Power" had immense impact. But it was difficult to discuss and analyze because there was no specific program associated with it, nor any common understanding or interpretation of its meaning, neither among its supporters nor its detractors. Since there was no consensus on what the slogan meant there was even less agreement on whether it was good or bad. In a sense, the phrase "Black Power" could mean anything to anyone, which made it hugely popular (or fearfully scary) — but elusive. So as it turned out, in some discussions I was a Black Power advocate and in others an opponent, depending on how the people I was talking with defined its meaning.

For the most part, my views on Black Power were shaped by Dr. King, Albert Turner, fellow members of the SCLC field staff, and Black Power proponents such as CORE leader Floyd McKissick who argued that "Black Power is a movement dedicated to the exercise of American democracy in its highest tradition; it is a drive to mobilize the

10 Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966

Black communities of this country in a monumental effort to remove the basic causes of alienation, frustration, despair, low self-esteem and hopelessness."

As McKissick defined it, Black Power focused on economic justice, use of consumer boycotts, fostering self-reliance and Afro-American businesses, opposing police repression and brutality, engaging in independent electoral politics without subservience to the Democratic Party, enforcement of federal civil rights laws, Black pride, and Black leadership of Black organizations and struggles — but not automatic enmity or antagonism to white allies.

Dr. King supported some Black Power concepts, but considered its use as a slogan tactically counter-productive:

Black Power, in its broad and positive meaning, is a call to black people to amass the political and economic strength to achieve their legitimate goals. ... We must use every constructive means to amass economic and political power. This is the kind of legitimate power we need. We must work to build racial pride and refute the notion that black is evil and ugly. But this must come through a program, not merely through a slogan... I had reservations about its use. I had the deep feeling that it was an unfortunate choice of words for a slogan. ¹⁹

As I saw it, the Freedom Movement of the 1960s and the Afro-American movements that had gone before us were fighting to win a fair share of political power for nonwhite people and economic justice for those at the bottom of the economic pyramid regardless of race. For me, that's what the call for "Black Power" meant — and I supported it.

Others interpreted it quite differently. As you might expect, I opposed those who argued that Black Power meant repudiating tactical nonviolence and embracing retaliatory violence and race war as a political strategy for social change — as some proponents did. I may not be a political genius, but I can certainly spot a suicidal strategy doomed to quick suppression and utter defeat when I hear one.

As a matter of both principle and practicality I also disagreed with those who interpreted Black Power as a call for racial separatism and race hatred. I argued for both the moral and the practical necessity of interracial struggles for freedom, equality, and economic justice. I had no problem accepting Black leadership of the Black Freedom Movement and Afro-American organizations, I had always assumed that Afro-Americans were and should be the leaders of the struggle for Black freedom. But as an ally of that struggle I did feel that I deserved to be respected as such, treated as my actions rather than the color of my skin warranted, and have my voice and opinions at least heard and considered.

Looking back now with the benefit of hindsight, one aspect that I think we all gave too little consideration to was the danger that "Black Power" rhetoric would reduce the criteria for leadership in the Afro-American community to simply being Black and expressing passionate affirmations of "blackness." In the years that followed it seemed to me that in some instances opportunists seized personal political power on the basis of posturing — asserting Black pride and anti-white anger rather than demonstrating any real accomplishments on their part against entrenched white supremacy or achieving actual changes in people's lives. The result was that in some places the courageous pioneers who built the Freedom Movement in the hard and dangerous early years were later shoved

aside by loudmouth blowhards grabbing the spoils under cover of militant-sounding bombast.

While we were on the Meredith March we had no access to TV or northern newspapers so we were largely isolated from the national hysteria over Black Power that was being hyped in the national press. It was only after the march ended that I discovered how overwhelmingly negative and alarmist the media's interpretation and description of the "Black Power" slogan had become. I know that fearmongering and exaggeration draws viewers and sells papers, but their sensationalized distortions made it very difficult to rationally develop constructive Black Power strategies and programs or even assess the tactical and strategic advantages and disadvantages of "Black Power" as a slogan.

Media distortion and disparagement of Black Power, however, was part of a broader context. Today, the liberal press pats itself on the back for the supportive and transformative role they feel they played in winning the battle for Afro-American civil rights (a struggle that many of us believe has not yet been won and still continues). But the period of mostly positive media coverage of the Freedom Movement was actually quite short — basically just the two years between the Birmingham "Children's Crusade" in the Spring of 1963 and the end of the March to Montgomery in the Spring of '65.

Before Birmingham, the northern media did provide sympathetic coverage of visually dramatic incidents like courageous nonviolent lunch counter sit-ins, the terrorist attacks on Freedom Riders, the white rioters trying to prevent James Meredith from integrating Ole Miss, church-bombings, Klan assassinations and so forth. But at the same time they simultaneously paired those supportive stories with cautions and fears about "communist infiltration and subversion." They warned that freedom protests were potentially aiding America's Cold War enemies in the global battle for influence between the "Free World" led by the United States and the dark forces of "Red totalitarianism." And they consistently harped on the perceived risk that our use of nonviolent civil disobedience might lead to "social anarchy" or some other form of dangerous social disruption. So at best, before Birmingham they were ambivalent.

After passage of the Voting Rights Act in August of 1965, the Freedom Movement increasingly began to address issues of economic injustice and northern-style segregation. As soon as we started raising those issues, the sympathetic coverage in northern media rapidly cooled. And after the Watts explosion in the summer of 1965 inflamed racial fears among northern whites — particularly northern liberals — the tone of mass media coverage shifted markedly.

By 1966, stories praising the hope and courage of nonviolent protesters in the face of southern bigotry and injustice had largely been supplanted by cautions regarding hate-filled "Black racism," "kill whitey" scare stories, and imaginary threats of race-based urban guerrilla warfare. Pundits, commentators, and editorial writers who had called for racial justice in '63 and '64 now seemed far more concerned with "law and order." Seen in that context, the northern mass media's almost universal condemnation of Black Power was no surprise at all.

Tear Gas and Rifle Butts ~ 1966

After weary, sweltering hours marching in the torrid heat, we camped next to a church on the edge of the unincorporated Benton community in Yazoo County, and local Black women brought food for us hungry marchers. Deep into the night we continued discussing and arguing issues, after which I slept the sleep of exhaustion.

When I awoke the next morning, June 23rd, my mind wasn't "stayed on freedom" (as the song went). I was still scared of Mississippi. So frightened, in fact, that I had not been able to urinate since crossing into the state before noon the day before. As the march slogged down Route 16 from Benton towards Canton, the heavy heat beat down on me and sweat soaked my blue work shirt — and I still couldn't pee. It was too dangerous for anyone to leave the line to use a restroom or convenient bush, so following along behind us at walking pace was a stake-bed truck with a couple of portable toilets. Twice I climbed up the little ladder at the rear of the truck, waited my turn, and entered a port-a-potty to pee — which I really needed to do despite all my sweating — but I couldn't. I was clenched so tight with fear I just couldn't.

This summer solstice had been the day before, so the sun rose around 6am and didn't set till after 8pm and the heavy, muggy heat beat down on us for 14 solid hours. During the lunchtime rest break I explained my situation to an MCHR medic and asked him for some kind of pill to help me urinate. I wasn't aware that except in "emergencies" Mississippi didn't allow out-of-state doctors or nurses to practice medicine without a state license — which they refused to issue to Freedom Movement medical professionals. He told me he'd rather not give me any medication and not to worry about it, I would piss when I was ready to piss. It turned out he was right, all it took was a massive dose of tear gas and a few good whacks from the butt of a police shotgun and I had no further problem.

Welcome to Mississippi, indeed.

My bladder problem aside, the march that day was in some ways quite surreal, a world unto itself. For a car-oriented person like me, time, space, and the walking pace of the march all seemed distorted and diminished. Time in the sense of clocks, deadlines, and appointments had little meaning. We woke in the morning when someone woke us, ate what was provided when it arrived, and then hit the road. There was no way to really mark time — or any reason to — other than the noon lunch stop when we could rest (though there was little shade from the merciless sun), and then the evening campsite as the shadows finally lengthened.

While we were marching, the outside world was little noticed and far away. Vehicles flowed past us, sometimes with Afro-Americans who honked and waved in support and other times with whites who yelled obscenities and occasionally tried to swerve into us with their cars. The rural countryside of cotton patches and shotgun shacks slowly unrolled to either side like a painted background except for occasional clots of supporters or opponents gathered by the side of the road to greet or jeer.

North, south, east, and west had no meaning. Instead we had right and left, front and rear, which formed the boundaries of our perception. We could observe to our left and right, but danger from hostile whites prevented us from leaving the line. "Front" was the press truck with their cameras clicking and whirring, moving at walking speed ahead of the march leaders. "Rear" was the trailing toilet and supply trucks. Preceding the press

truck and trailing behind our supply truck were carloads of cops who we interacted with not at all.

What we did pay attention to was the tight little world of the march itself. Conversation, debate, argument, and of course putting one tired foot ahead of the other beneath a blistering sun. People moved forward and back along the line, nurses from MCHR passed out salt tablets, teenage boys with canteens shared water. Some folk pushed their way to the front to have their picture taken from the press truck with Dr. King, Stokely Carmichael, or Floyd McKissick, while others drifted to the rear to use the port-a-potties on the toilet truck or simply ride for a few minutes to rest their feet.

The Big Black River — actually it was a muddy brown — was the boundary between Yazoo and Madison counties. As soon as we crossed over the narrow two-lane bridge our march line began to lengthen as more and more local folk joined. Afro-Americans made up some 70% of Madison's population and though it was a violent stronghold of white supremacy, over the years CORE organizers had built a solid base of Movement support. By evening local Blacks had swelled our numbers to several hundred.

By the time we reached Canton, a town of around 10,000 and the county seat, I was drenched in sweat and utterly exhausted from walking 20 miles in the muggy heat. And I still hadn't been able to pee.

We marched into Canton singing. Over a thousand Afro-American supporters were waiting in the downtown square to greet us on the courthouse lawn. I was so tired I wasn't paying all that much attention, but I knew the plan was to set up our tents that night on the playground of a nearby Colored school. On previous days, marchers had been allowed by local officials to camp overnight at schools and parks, but the authorities in Canton were refusing permission. There was a short, fiery rally and SNCC's Stokely Carmichael told us, "They said we couldn't pitch our tents on our Black school. Well, we're going to do it now!"

We resumed marching through Canton's streets to the McNeal Elementary School, and as we passed through the Afro-American neighborhood folk came off their porches to join us until we numbered several thousand. The cops weren't blocking our entrance to the unfenced dirt schoolyard, so we marched right in. Off to one side was a big posse of lawmen from different jurisdictions in various uniforms. All of them were wearing helmets and those who weren't carrying rifles and shotguns gripped long billy clubs in their gloved hands.

Our large truck drove onto the yard and we were told to surround it so the cops couldn't seize them. It was one of those big box types, and march leaders climbed up on the roof to address the crowd while a work crew began unloading and unrolling the canvas tents and others began to lay out the poles. A caravan of Mississippi Highway Patrol cars pulled up and disgorged almost 100 state troopers in full riot gear. They began lining up in attack formation. So did the local cops.

CORE leader Floyd McKissick had a bullhorn and from the top of the truck he was shouting that we had a right to use a Black school paid for by Afro-American taxes. He called on us to remain nonviolent if the police tried to arrest us on charges of trespass or disturbing the peace — which is what we all assumed was about to occur. Stokely and other SNCC folk were weaving through the crowd leading a chant of "Pitch the tents!

Pitch the tents!" Dr. King then spoke, urging us to stick together and if necessary fill the jails in the state until they didn't have enough room to hold us all.

Then the cops and troopers began donning gas masks and pulling tear gas canisters out of satchels. At that point, most of the local folk in the crowd around the truck intelligently began to drift back and ease on out of the area, but there must have been well over a thousand of us still on the schoolyard. Retreat wasn't an option for me, of course, I was emotionally committed to stand with the Freedom Movement come hell or high water, and as an SCLC staff member my duty was clear. And by now the adrenaline of danger, conflict, and fear was filling me with renewed energy.

It was maybe half an hour before sunset and I remember the sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows. Without any warning at all or any order from the police to disperse, there came the loud sounds of *Pop! Pop! Pop!* Burning, stinging gas was everywhere. A white cloud enveloped me, blinding me with tears. My lungs burned with searing pain. I couldn't breathe. I thought I was going to die. Everyone was running, choking, gasping, fleeing in all directions, bumping into each other in the blinding miasma. A gas canister fired from a shotgun hit a woman near me and exploded — she screamed in agony but I couldn't see where she was.

Some kind of hideous monster with a long black snout — a cop in a gas mask, I realized — abruptly materialized out of the fumes and smashed the butt of his rifle into my shoulder, knocking me to the ground. Someone tripped over me before I managed to get up and continue trying to escape. Every gasping breath was agony. My chest burned, my eyes gushed tears.

More cops appeared and disappeared in the acrid, stinking smoke, flailing with their clubs at anyone and everyone. I could hear the sickening thuds of wood striking flesh, and I must have been hit several more times because the next day I had long, dark, aching bruises on my body. At the time, though, I didn't feel the blows at all. An adrenaline rush can often block out pain — for a short while.

Finally, I managed to make it across a street into someone's yard and collapsed half-hidden by a big bush. All around me people were screaming and vomiting and sobbing. Some were thrashing around on the ground like they were having a seizure. By now it was twilight and the gas clouds were dissipating, though the invisible fumes lingered on. The skin on my bare arms and face burned as if on fire. Someone found a garden hose and we took turns flushing out our eyes, rinsing our mouths, and washing down our flesh with cool water. The water felt good, but my lungs still ached and my eyes were still seared.

Someone near me muttered something sarcastic about the Deacons for Defense failing to protect us from police assault. But I knew that wasn't their job. Their role was to guard us from Klan and other white terrorists like the guy who had shot Meredith in the first place, not engage in armed warfare with the state of Mississippi. They were far too smart to seek a battle with lawmen they couldn't possibly win — lawmen who had the full force of the American judicial system behind them.

To be honest, I was thankful for and relieved by the Deacons' self-discipline. Many of the troopers were carrying rifles and shotguns and all the cops had pistols they were eager to use. Had some fool started shooting there would have been bloody carnage, dozens killed and many more wounded. And all the blame would have landed on "militant black extremists" and the Freedom Movement as a whole.

Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966 15

In the dusky twilight, I followed others who seemed to know where they were going and by the time it was full dark I arrived at Asbury Methodist Church where people were gathering.

The church had a restroom and I finally urinated without any trouble at all.

I found Albert Turner, who was sending SCLC staff out to comb the area. Our orders were to tell people that the wounded should be brought to the adjacent Holy Child Jesus Mission where MCHR was setting up their emergency aid station and that those able to do so should gather at Asbury. Of course, never having been in Canton before, once I had gone a block or two on the now dark streets (no streetlights, of course) I no longer knew where those churches were or how to get back to them. But there were plenty of local folk around who did.

When I got back to the church a mass meeting had started and people were singing. Sandwiches and coffee were being handed out to the marchers, who had been on the road all day. I wolfed mine down while Turner briefed us. We would march that night through Canton's Black neighborhoods to express our defiance and provide a nonviolent channel for the community's rage.

Of all the Movement's nonviolent protest tactics, night marches in the South were the most dangerous. On the upside, they allowed adults with day jobs to participate. But on the downside, under cover of darkness Klansmen could ambush people with thrown rocks, flaming Molotov cocktails — or sniper fire from pistols and rifles. Most TV cameras of that era couldn't effectively film in the dark and flash-equipped still cameras had limited range, so the cops could attack with little fear of being photographed or filmed by the press and they could claim self-defense from imaginary violence on our part.

Along with the other SCLC staff, I was given a colored armband and assigned to act as a march marshal, keeping people moving, defusing trouble, and maintaining nonviolence. Five or six hundred of us marched out of the church into the unpaved and unlit roads of Canton's Afro-American community. This wasn't a lawful, on-the-sidewalk, avoid-blocking-traffic march. Instead we filled the streets singing and calling bystanders to come join us. Block by block our numbers grew as people joined us, but in the dark it was impossible to estimate or count how many were marching.

Seething with anger, for an hour or more we surged through the dark streets, defiantly singing our freedom songs and chanting "Black Power!" and "Freedom Now!" Some of the ultra-militants and the more strident Black Power advocates called for people to go downtown and "get whitey," others shouted that we should challenge the cops who were still guarding the disputed schoolyard. Fortunately, they had little support. Marshals like me urged the marchers to hold together and maintain nonviolent discipline, and since most of them were local folk with a solid grasp of Canton's tactical realities they heeded our call.

I was stationed about halfway down the line, so I never saw who was leading the march or heard what, if anything, was being discussed by the leaders at the front. After a time my adrenaline energy began to flag, as did that of others, and people started dropping away to return home. We ended up at the Holy Child Jesus Mission's gymnasium where those of us from out of town bedded down on the floor, some with a blanket or bedroll, others without. Utterly exhausted, I slept the sleep of the dead.

By the time the turbulent 1960s were over I had become quite the connoisseur of violent police assaults and tear gas attacks on nonviolent protesters. Looking back now 50 years later, Canton was, without question, the worst and most violent single attack I ever experienced.

On the Streets of Canton ~ 1966

After a few short hours of sleep on the hard floor of the basketball court, I woke the next morning to sore muscles and aching bruises. My eyes immediately began stinging and tearing from the gas chemicals still on my clothing. I couldn't move my shoulder without shooting pain, and my ribs hurt if I drew a deep breath.

Oh, yeah, most definitely welcome to Mississippi.

Again local people provided us with hot coffee, bacon, grits, and biscuits covered in delicious thick gravy. While we ate, Turner briefed the SCLC staff. Our tactical situation was complex. The overall strategic plan called for the last stage of the Meredith March to be from Tougaloo College on the outskirts of Jackson through the city to the Capitol for a mass rally. For maximum political effect the rally had to be as large as possible. If 10,000 Mississippi Afro-Americans assembled in protest at the Capitol building it would be a major political milestone — the first Black protest ever allowed at the Capitol, the largest civil rights demonstration in the state's history, and visible proof positive against segregationist lies about "outside agitators" and "just a few malcontents."

To achieve maximum participation by local Blacks, the rally was scheduled for after church on Sunday the 26th, two days hence and out-of-state supporters had made travel plans accordingly. So the rally date could not be changed. Therefore, in order to ensure that the march was symbolically continuous from Memphis to Jackson a contingent had to reach the Tougaloo campus no later than Saturday evening which meant that at least some of us on this Friday morning had to march out of Canton headed south on Highway 51.

Yet after the Chaney-Schwerner-Goodman memorial had been so viciously attacked in Neshoba County on the previous Tuesday, Dr. King had promised to lead a return protest in the county seat of Philadelphia to express the anger and defiance of local Blacks and to show the world that the Freedom Movement would not be stopped by mob violence. The date for that return had been set for this same Friday.

Movement supporters from Mississippi, Alabama, and elsewhere were already on the road, as were car caravans from Afro-American communities in Meridian, Hattiesburg and Jackson. And in Neshoba County itself, Black folk were mobilizing. If King didn't show up it would appear as if he had surrendered to fear of white violence and the courageous Neshoba community would feel abandoned and betrayed — no way in hell that was going to happen. So King, accompanied by a portion of the SCLC staff and a contingent of marchers from Canton, had to leave within the hour and drive east to join the Philadelphia march.

Meanwhile, local Afro-Americans and the Meredith Marchers in Canton were still enraged over the savage gas attack and beatings of the evening before. Many had been injured, a number of the wounded rushed to Jackson hospitals, and just as we couldn't let white violence in Neshoba deter the Movement neither could we allow police repression to

Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966 17

do so in Canton. So that meant that in addition to marching south towards Jackson and resuming the protest in Neshoba we also had to take to the streets of Canton.

But the cops in Canton, particularly the state troopers who had been reinforced overnight, were now even more heavily armed and clearly eager for any excuse to again whip heads and stomp us troublemakers into the ground — Black and white both. So the plan was for a day of disciplined nonviolent protest in Canton as a show of determination and defiance. Since more injuries and arrests — or worse, wounds or deaths from police gunfire — would not strengthen the Freedom Movement and might derail the mass rally in Jackson, it was essential that the protest be as loud and militant as possible without edging over into violence on our part that the cops could use as an excuse for a second brutal attack.

Turner divided the SCLC staff into three teams. He led one south on Highway 51 towards Tougaloo with about 50 marchers. A second accompanied Dr. King back to Neshoba County. I was assigned to the third team, which would march through Canton.

The road contingent made an 18-mile forced march all the way to Tougaloo in just one day without incident. The Neshoba County group led by Dr. King was again met with mob violence. As on the previous Tuesday, they marched into the little downtown area from Mount Nebo Baptist Church in the Afro-American neighborhood. A throng of angry whites — Klansmen, teenagers, and local farmers — were waiting for them. A force of Highway Patrol officers provided protection from physical assault but not from thrown bottles and rocks. Some of troopers “guarding” the protest were the same ones who the evening before had gassed and beaten us in Canton.

To segregationist fury, local Black leader Rev. Clint Collier, Stokely Carmichael, and Dr. King all addressed a protest rally from the courthouse steps. For many of the enraged whites, allowing Blacks to demonstrate at the courthouse and actually stand on the steps to speak against white supremacy was a kind of social desecration. “Go to hell!” they screamed. “Nigger, nigger, nigger! Wait till tonight, you black bastards, we’ll find you then! We’re gonna kill King! Kill King! Kill King!”

Back in Canton where I was, the Afro-American community was still seething with fury and boiling with energy. Local leaders were urging a general strike and a “Blackout for Black Power,” meaning a boycott of white-owned businesses. By mid-morning, members of the Madison County Movement were already picketing downtown and deliberately tying up traffic. Simultaneously, there was a voter registration march to the courthouse and almost 50 people were registered by federal registrars under authority of the Voting Rights Act.

While all that was going on, more than 500 singing and chanting marchers were snaking through the streets of Canton. In the Black neighborhoods we walked two by two on the side of the dirt roads next to the drainage ditches. In the white neighborhoods we strode on their well-kept sidewalks. Marching into white areas was a bold move, a decisive declaration that defiantly rejected the deferential subservience of the past. It also risked spontaneous violence from furious whites.

I was once again acting as one of the march marshals and I remember nervous rumors passing up and down the line — that a parked car we were about to pass concealed a dynamite bomb, that in the next block they had a pack of dogs waiting to attack us, that that old white woman scowling at us from her porch had a big pistol

hidden under her apron as she rocked back and forth on her rocker and that she'd sworn to shoot anyone who stepped on her lawn.

Since I had never been in Canton before, I had no idea where the leaders at the front of the march were taking us, except that we were deliberately avoiding the McNeal Elementary schoolyard where a swarm of heavily armed state troopers were guarding that disputed turf like rabid dogs. Not only were they patrolling the perimeter, they had snipers with rifles on the roof and they were setting up spotlights for the coming night so the riflemen could see their targets in the dark.

Black Power advocates and other militants were stridently calling for returning to the school and pitching a tent in defiance of cops and officials. I agreed with them. I wanted to publicly defeat those who had beaten and gassed us. I wanted to force our tent down their throats. Of course, that risked another bloody confrontation and more people injured. And people would certainly be killed if some fool started shooting. But I didn't care. I was angry, and pumped up with battle adrenaline. I wanted to win regardless of potential cost. Fortunately, older and wiser heads were in charge rather than me. And as a march marshal, I accepted my assignment to maintain discipline and nonviolence even though I personally agreed with the hotheads.

Years later, I learned that while we were marching through the streets of Canton, fierce political battles were raging among Black leaders and also within the white power structure. The downtown (white) merchants didn't want to go through another Afro-American boycott — they'd been there and done that in previous years and they didn't want to endure another one. Boycotts were particularly effective in Canton because local merchants were in competition with the larger, better-stocked stores of Jackson just 30 minutes down the road.

And at both the local and state level, members of the power elite were urging some compromise that would avoid a renewed outbreak of violence which might trigger federal intervention which they greatly feared. They also wanted to avoid yet more negative publicity for Canton and Mississippi both of which were trying to attract northern investment. Investment like the huge Nissan auto plant that today is Canton's largest employer. Hard-line white voters, however, stood adamant against any concessions that might be interpreted as "rewarding" defiant Blacks.

On the Afro-American side, local leaders like C.O. Chinn and national figures like Stokely Carmichael argued for challenging the police state by finding a tent (the cops still had the ones they had seized the night before) and defiantly pitching it on the playground, come what may. But led by Mrs. Annie Devine, most of the community's Black leaders feared the long-term consequences of renewed violence that might easily spin out of control. Consequences that would be borne by the Afro-American residents of Canton, not us outsiders. There was a real and legitimate fear that if someone lost their head and assaulted a cop an avalanche of legal repression for "inciting violence" might come crashing down on local Black leaders and crush the Madison County Movement with lengthy felony trials and long prison sentences. Dr. King agreed with Mrs. Devine, seeing no advantage and substantial risk in another violent confrontation.

Local leaders also sensed an opportunity. They wanted to use the tent crisis to force open lines of communication with white authorities. For years, white politicians and power brokers had consistently refused to meet with Afro-American movement leaders. They had

Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966 19

met with so-called "Negro leaders" who they themselves had handpicked, but never with spokespeople chosen by the Afro-American community itself — real leaders who might force them to acknowledge that Blacks had interests that white elected officials were obligated to address.

In Canton, in Mississippi, and throughout the Deep South the prevailing attitude of most white officials was, *You don't sit down with your mule and negotiate. You point it in the direction you want it to go, and if it balks, you beat it till it obeys.* That's why forming a biracial committee of the real leaders from both communities was usually one of the first demands a local Freedom Movement made and why it was bitterly resisted by white officials.

On that Friday though, the tent crisis forced Canton's white power structure to open negotiations with Afro-Americans who spoke for the Black majority. They offered an alternate campsite and a promise of an ongoing dialogue as concessions, but Black leaders knew that their community needed some kind of return to the disputed McNeal schoolyard. Though we who were protesting in the streets knew nothing about any of this, just before the evening mass meeting a stormy summit of local and national Freedom Movement leaders agreed to a compromise with white officials.

The mass meeting in the gymnasium that night was packed. Between local folk and a couple of hundred Meredith marchers from outside the area there were close to a thousand of us in the sweltering heat. Local leader Annie Devine stood up and announced, "We're going to the schoolyard." Before she could say anything more, everyone erupted in cheers and applause and began surging out of the church to form up for a march.

Like me, most people were spoiling for another confrontation. I soaked my blue bandana in water to be as ready as possible for more tear gas. Others were doing the same with rags and towels. With militant pride we strode through the Afro-American neighborhood, singing and calling on bystanders to join us — and a large number did.

By the time we reached McNeal there were probably more than 1,500 of us. The state troopers were formed up nearby, but they weren't blocking our entrance. The spotlights had been removed and we didn't see any snipers up on the roof. But there was no truck and no tents. And the cops had flooded the field with water from fire hydrants so it was now ankle-deep in gooey mud.

A stepladder was set up, and while someone held it steady Mrs. Devine climbed up a few rungs to address us. She explained the compromise — we could hold a rally but not erect a tent. In return, white leaders had agreed to open up dialogue and communication with the Afro-American community and a meeting was scheduled with the mayor and city attorney.

We were all taken by surprise. I felt angry and betrayed. Someone yelled, "We been sold out!" Many shouted their agreement. King and McKissick were absent. Stokely didn't speak, but anyone looking at him could see he disagreed with the decision. SCLC was represented by Rev. Ralph Abernathy who tried with little success to portray the compromise as a victory. As did John Lewis, who had recently been replaced as SNCC Chairman by Stokely. But none of us marchers felt victorious.

"Get the tents!" people shouted. But there were no tents, the state troopers had them. A few SNCC and northern militants shouted that we should somehow set up a symbolic tent and force a confrontation in the name of "Black Power." But they were few, with scant support among local Afro-Americans, and what support they did have was mostly from high school boys and young men in their twenties. Though I was disappointed too, I did not join or support them in their call to disregard the local leaders. This was a decision for Canton's Afro-Americans to make, not outsiders like me who would soon be marching on to Jackson and then returning to wherever we came from.

Our march back to the church had none of the earlier spirit and exuberance. Again we gathered in on the basketball court, this time with reporters barred from attending. Local leader C.O. Chinn, Stokely, and other militants roundly condemned the compromise. Mrs. Devine and others defended it as an important step forward and the only alternative to another round of savage violence from the cops, which would help no one.

I could see that most of the local adults with families were relieved by the compromise, but many of Canton's young Black men were disappointed and disgruntled. Yet they respected Mrs. Devine and the other local leaders who had been in the forefront of the struggle for years at great personal risk. Most crucially, almost everyone understood the need for unity and discipline in the face of white hostility. They knew that if they split against each other over the compromise, whites in power would divide and conquer as they had so many times in the past.

The arguments continued long into the night. Over the course of that long discussion, I came to understand and accept the reasoning behind the compromise, though it still didn't sit well with me emotionally and I felt no sense of victory. The meeting finally came to an end well after midnight, and we marchers again slept for a couple of hours on the floor.

From my personal knowledge and observation, I believed then — as I still do — that all, or almost all, of those most stridently pushing for another confrontation were sincere. Back then in 1966, none of us knew about the FBI's COINTELPRO campaign of targeting the Freedom Movement with disruption and sabotage. But my leftist upbringing caused me to wonder if there might not be among them a few deliberate provocateurs sent in to create internal dissension and foment violence that could be used as a pretext for cracking down on the Civil Rights Movement with arrests, prison sentences and mass media scare stories. Now that the true scope of the FBI's tricks has come to light, it's reasonable to ask if the Meredith March and Canton had been targeted by COINTELPRO provocateurs. I don't know the answer. But I do know that if provocateurs *were* active that night they failed to break the Movement's discipline and goad it into self-destructive acts of aggressive violence.

Marching on the Capitol ~ 1966

On Sunday morning, June 26th, the Meredith March assembled on the grounds of Tougaloo College for the final leg to the Capitol building. Tougaloo was one of the rare Black colleges in the South where both administration and faculty fully supported the Freedom Movement. Students who had been expelled from other Black schools because of their civil rights activities were welcomed by Tougaloo. For years it had been a crucial

Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966 21

Movement base and a steadfast sanctuary for activists — one of very few in Mississippi. And for that reason it had been forced to endure legal harassment, legislative hostility, and terrorist violence. Now its tree-shaded campus sheltered marchers arriving from all over Mississippi and around the nation — mostly Afro-American, some white.

The day was sweltering hot and so muggy it felt like a sauna. Salt tablets handed out by MCHR medics didn't seem to help much. An hour or so before noon several thousand of us marched out through the Tougaloo gate and started down North State Street — Highway 51 — towards the Mississippi State Capitol in the center of the city. No longer were we marching on the edge of the road, now we had a permit and filled the lanes. I was a marshal again, working the middle of the line as usual.

At first we marched through Afro-American neighborhoods where local Black folk waved, cheered, and handed out glasses of cool water and cold lemonade. Many of them joined the column.

The hot sun beat down on us out of a cloudless sky. Thermometers read mid-90s, but it felt so much hotter. At every gas station we passed the soda pop machine was already sold out by the time my section of the column passed by and the heat was making me woozy. I'd endured hot days in Alabama, but this was worse — maybe because of lack of sleep and tension or perhaps residual effects of the tear gas. I felt like I might pass out.

In a parking lot by the side of the road I spied a shed housing a coin-operated ice machine. I inserted a quarter and with a loud *thunk!* out came a five-pound block of ice. I lifted it up over my head and smashed it down on the pavement, breaking it into pieces, then wrapped a cold chunk in my blue bandana and pressed it against the back of my neck. What a blessed relief! For all I know, that might have saved me from the heatstroke that other marchers were already succumbing to. Folk saw what I had done and rushed over to grab up pieces of ice for themselves. As I continued down Highway 51, people were feeding their own quarters into the machine.

By now it was past noon. As local Afro-American churches ended their services, people formed up at eight designated assembly points to join the column moving down State Street. The number of marchers steadily swelled — 5000 — 7000 — 9000. As *Village Voice* journalist Jack Newfield later described it:

The ragged band that had begun as one mystical prophet in Memphis, that became 100 in Hernando, that became 1,000 after the baptism of spite in Philadelphia and tear gas in Canton, had become 15,000 on Sunday afternoon. ²⁰

By now we knew for certain that we were part of the largest civil rights protest in Mississippi history, something only dreamed of by Freedom Movement pioneers in the hard, lonely, dangerous days of the early '60s. The Highway Patrol estimated 10,000 marchers, the U.S. Justice Department reported 15,000, Movement supporters claimed 25,000. From my assigned position in the middle of the march I could see neither its front nor rear so I had no idea how many of us there really were, just that it was a huge turnout that decisively countered Mississippi's claim that the Civil Rights Movement was nothing more than a few outside agitators and local malcontents seeking publicity in the northern media.

Overwhelmingly the marchers were Black Mississippians — students, maids, farm hands, laborers, and sharecroppers, with a leavening of preachers, teachers, and business

owners. And the obvious reality that almost all of the marchers were local Blacks gave the lie to segregationist's self-serving myth that their "nigras" were contented and happy.

Some 500 local cops from a variety of jurisdictions and almost the entire force of state troopers had been mobilized to guard us — or more was it to protect the southern way of life *from* us? Judging by the way they scowled and fingered their clubs it was clear how they felt — except for the dozen or so Afro-Americans who had only recently (and very reluctantly) been hired by Jackson in response to a court order and intense political pressure.

As we approached downtown we began passing through a poor white neighborhood. Now instead of smiles and lemonade we were met with snarls of hate and white teenagers waving Confederate battle flags. In a marked shift from the nonviolent discipline of previous years, some marchers shouted their own insults back. Others chanted, "Black Power!" and "Freedom!" in defiant counterpoint. And I guess some of the Confederate flags must have been grabbed from the whites because later at the Capitol militants set one on fire.

My job as marshal was to prevent brawls from breaking out by keeping the line moving past the hecklers. "Keep moving, keep marching, keep marching." When the next marshal behind me arrived to relieve me, I trotted (it was too hot to run) forward to regain my assigned position until I had to halt at the next potential trouble spot.

As afternoon shadows began to lengthen we entered the downtown business district, still singing freedom songs, still chanting "Freedom!" and "Black Power!"

A block or two from the Capitol building someone handed out small American flags for marchers to carry. Most people took them eagerly — disregarding the passionate denunciations of a few Black Power militants. Personally, I didn't feel like waving the "Stars and Stripes," I was too angry and bitter at the complicity and failures of Washington in regard to voting rights and segregation, to say nothing of LBJ's expanding war in Vietnam. But I understood why Afro-Americans who had been excluded from full citizenship for generations and had just marched past hate-filled whites waving the "Stars and Bars" of the Confederacy would see carrying a U.S. flag through the streets of Jackson as both a powerful affirmation and a defiant protest. And it was obvious that white segregationist onlookers were as enraged at Blacks protesting with the American flag as they were at my "race traitor" presence among the Afro-American marchers.

Police presence became more pronounced as we approached the Capitol building. Even more so than county courthouses, the Capitol was holy ground for Mississippi whites. It was a symbol of their supremacy, never to be profaned by Black protesters. Governors were inaugurated on its front steps, ceremonies of white pride and power took place in its halls, and on the expansive tree-shaded plaza was a monument to women of the Confederacy, dedicated to "Our Mothers, Our Wives, Our Sisters, Our Daughters." For whites, it was unthinkable that Afro-Americans would be allowed to "defile" this monument to sacred white womanhood.

Just a year earlier, in June of 1965, demonstrators had tried to march towards the Capitol to protest actions being taken by the legislature to subvert the Voting Rights Act. Almost 1000 had been arrested and held in cattle barns at the state fairgrounds under brutal conditions. More recently, a clearly unconstitutional law had been enacted prohibiting political demonstrations of any kind on the Capitol grounds.

Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966 23

Yet now the all-white state government was in a bind. Their white constituents wanted the Capitol "protected" from the presence of defiant Blacks, but if the state arrested thousands of peaceful marchers for violating an unconstitutional law in the glare of national publicity, they'd be exposed as the racist bigots that they were. More importantly, as a practical matter they didn't have any place to hold so many prisoners — not even the fairground buildings were big enough — nor did they have the funds to feed us.

If they used tear gas and billy clubs to violently drive us off the Capitol grounds — as they'd done to our vastly smaller number in Canton — we'd be dispersed into the downtown business district, the state's premier shopping mecca jammed with white-owned stores, plate-glass windows, and buildings filled with expensive flammable merchandise. A Watts-type spasm of urban arson and looting could easily result — to the great displeasure of important white business leaders. And either mass arrests or mass violence would be a huge black eye for the state, the kind of investment-discouraging publicity they were trying to counter with ploys like the "Welcome to Mississippi" roadblock we had encountered outside of Meridian.

There was also a new factor just beginning to be felt in the halls of power. When SNCC had started trying to register Afro-American voters back in 1961, fewer than 4,000 of the 36,000 eligible Blacks in Hinds County were registered, and little progress had been made until passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. But by mid-1966, the number of Afro-American voters had quadrupled to some 16,000, representing roughly 20% of the county's total electorate. That was not yet enough to elect Afro-Americans to office, but it was sufficient to swing an election between rival white candidates and therefore enough to cause at least a few white politicians to begin adjusting their rhetoric, policies, and behavior to the new political realities now looming on the horizon.

Freedom Movement leaders, however, were also in a bind. We marchers were determined to protest at the Capitol, which had been the goal and focus of the entire trek from Memphis. We had a constitutional right to peaceably assemble and demand redress of grievances and we were in no mood to obey any unconstitutional limitations on our political freedoms. But SCLC, CORE, and SNCC were all flat broke and deeply in debt from the costs already incurred by the march. There was no money to bail out hundreds of arrestees, let alone thousands — or tens of thousands.

If the cops attacked the march and dispersed the throng into downtown, there was no hope whatsoever of maintaining nonviolent discipline. If looting and arson broke out there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the cops would open fire with all the weapons at their command. Dozens would be killed, hundreds wounded. Hundreds more would be arrested for violent felonies, be tried by all-white juries and face long prison sentences. And, of course, there would be enormous negative political ramifications if a nonviolent demonstration "led by Martin Luther King" turned into a violent urban riot — regardless of the provocation.

So another compromise was worked out by march leaders and white officials. The new "no-protests" law would be quietly ignored and we could hold our rally in the large Capitol parking lot — so long as we did not get too close to the actual building itself. In other words, we could protest on Capitol grounds but not *touch* the holy building or *defile* the grass lawn around the monument to white womanhood.

As we poured onto the Capitol grounds an army of cops armed with rifles and tear gas grenades — state troopers, county sheriffs, Jackson police, and state game wardens — formed a shoulder-to-shoulder ring around the building to prevent us from encroaching on their sacred space. Mississippi National Guard soldiers with rifles and fixed bayonets protected the front lawn and the Confederate-women memorial from our vile selves.

Today, when I think about that sick and obsessive effort to prevent us from “profaning” the Capitol with our very presence — a Capitol built in part with Black labor and Afro-American taxes — the insult still makes me angry. Yet, now with the benefit of years and wisdom, I know that the march leaders who engaged with the white power structure and made mutual compromises did the right thing (though I would not have said so at the time).

Violent confrontations and police outrages are not the goal of nonviolent direct action, though enduring them may sometimes be the price of moving the struggle forward. We were trying to accomplish real social change, and forcing the state of Mississippi to accept our right to protest at the Capitol was an important advance. Provoking a bloodbath by trying to push our way through the cops and guardsmen to reach the steps or rally on the lawn would have gotten a lot of people hurt — possibly killed — an irresponsible action that would have been seriously detrimental to the Freedom Movement’s long-term goals.

At the time, though, I was simply too exhausted and enervated from the heat to give a damn one way or the other. My chunk of ice had long since melted, the late afternoon sun was harsh, and my feet were swollen and sore. I think most of the other marchers felt the same. I sat down in the shade of a tree and rested against the trunk. I’m sure the rally speeches were great and inspiring, but the sound system was so inadequate I couldn’t understand what was being said and I was woozy from the heat. I just dozed off.

To the American mass media, the only lasting significance of the Meredith March was the emergence of “Black Power” as a controversial slogan that they proceeded to demonize. As *Newsweek* put it, “Freedom Road has taken a disconcerting turn.” Yet for myself and other civil rights activists whose boots were on the ground, it was the liberal mass media who had taken a “disconcerting turn” over the previous year. A turn away from objective reporting and towards stoking white fears of urban violence and “Black militants.” A turn towards hyping the “white backlash” of resentment against civil rights and Black social and economic gains.

To this day, some historians still echo the mass media and dismiss the Meredith March as of little interest or consequence because it did not become the tipping point for new national legislation like Birmingham and St. Augustine or Selma and the March to Montgomery. But those specific events did not, in and of themselves, force Congress to act. It was the cumulative effect over time of the Freedom Movement as a whole that won new legislation and court rulings. Yes, those famous tipping point events were important, but so were hundreds of other efforts, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, lunch counter sit-ins, Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer, and local campaigns across the South in places like Greenwood, Gadsden, Orangeburg, Durham, Cambridge, Danville, and dozens of other locales.

Moreover, the real power and ultimate effect of the Freedom Movement can’t really be measured in legislation and judicial rulings. There had been laws and court orders in the

Excerpts From "Troublemaker:" ~ Marching Through Mississippi 1966 25

past, but the realities of Afro-American life in the South had not changed. What transformed race relations in Dixie was the effect of the Freedom Movement on the people themselves — both Black and white. Segregation ended because Afro-Americans simply refused to accept it any longer and the Movement brought them together and gave them political and legal tools to make that refusal stick. In that sense, even though our Luverne, Alabama sit-in and Brantley confrontation had received not one sound bite or column inch in the media, they were as important to forcing changes in Crenshaw County as were the laws passed in Washington DC — maybe more so.

When evaluated in that context, the Meredith Mississippi March was just as significant and important as any of the other large-scale campaigns and protests of the era because it directly affected those who participated in it, observed it, and had to respond to it. And that includes members of the white power structure who were forced to meet with, negotiate with, and make concessions to Afro-American leaders whose power derived from the Freedom Movement.

The Meredith March also directly sparked a Grenada Freedom Movement, provided a jolt of activity for the MFDP in Greenwood and throughout the Delta, revived movement activity in Canton where the boycott of white merchants continued through the summer along with weekly protest marches, and it spurred Black voter registration throughout the state. The following year, 1967, was an election year, and more than 20 Afro-Americans were elected to public office for the first time since Reconstruction, including MFDP member Robert Clark of Holmes County in the Delta, who became the first Afro-American elected to the state legislature in living memory.

