

## Rick Harper in Greene County, Alabama 1966

I met Rick Harper in the late spring of 1966. We were then both undergraduates at the University of Illinois, he a senior and I a freshman. Rick was a campus leader, president of the YMCA and a successful student focused on what he called political philosophy. We met because Rick was recruiting students to go to Greene County, Alabama for the upcoming summer to do civil rights work. Rick had worked in Greene County the previous summer. By 1966, he was the head of a loose organization called the Illini-Alabama Project. I first became aware of the Illini-Alabama Project when my roommate signed me up at the project's recruiting table in the lobby of the student union. I had separately decided to do civil rights work somewhere in the South that summer. Largely because of Rick, I decided to do so with the University of Illinois-based program.

Rick went directly to Greene County at the end of the school year while I took a bit of a detour. James Meredith, the first African-American to enroll at the University of Mississippi, was shot shortly after he entered Mississippi on a proposed march through the state to encourage people to register to vote. Meredith's vicious hate-inspired shooting prompted Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders to carry on what became the "Meredith March Against Fear." I got a ride from my home in Cleveland to Memphis and from there to the march and then walked over 100 miles to the state capital in Jackson where the march ended on a hot Sunday afternoon. Martin Luther King ("I still have a dream"), Stokely Carmichael, Floyd McKissick, and others spoke with the capitol building behind them. Quite remarkably, I ran into Rick amongst the thousands of marchers, press, and bystanders. He had driven over from Greene County to join the final walk into Jackson. He gave me a ride to Eutaw, Alabama, the county seat of Greene County, where we spent the balance of the summer.

In Greene County, we worked on voter registration; organized students in preparation for their integrating Greene County High (the "white school") in September; picketed stores which refused to hire African-Americans, encouraging African-Americans to boycott the stores; worked on the upcoming election to memberships on the local committees which established crop allotments (i.e., who could grow how much cotton and other crops); supported litigation challenging racial discrimination in the conduct of those same elections; organized weekly "mass meetings" in churches around the county; published and distributed each Sunday a weekly newsletter of "movement" news; and organized a community-wide barbecue event we called "Roots Day" for which my aunt, a professor at the University of Illinois, provided the cash to purchase the unlucky pig. Rick was central to all these efforts.

Rick's personality – warm, generous, patient, and smiling – and his prior history in the county gave us credibility and access. The key local leaders were ministers, and Rev. Thomas Gilmore was "first among equals." Rick had a strong trusting relationship with him. Rev. Gilmore was a candidate for Sheriff in Greene County (county sheriffs were the most powerful figures in rural Alabama counties in the 1960's). He would not become Sheriff in 1966, but subsequently he did. My recollection is that he was both the first elected African-American official in Greene County and Alabama's first African-American Sheriff. Without minimizing the contributions and courage of many others, most particularly including Rev. Gilmore, Rick contributed significantly to that accomplishment.

Rick and I shared living quarters. We had a room in a house in Eutaw, a short walk from our office. The room had a bed, which Rick used, and a couch, which I used. We drove around the county together, listening to what was going on and trying to figure out something to do about it.

Greene County was “dirt poor.” “Red dirt poor,” actually. The only paved roads were the highways and the streets in “white areas.” After a heavy rain, the roads in areas where African-Americans lived were a mess of red rutted goo. Food was scarce and not nutritious. Health care was virtually non-existent. The lunch counters, hospital, and jail were all segregated. Schools were yielding slowly and grudgingly 12 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*.

As we drove around the county and as we sat in our room or office, we talked about poverty, racism, fear (ours and others’), and what it would take for Greene County and America to end segregation and discrimination. Dr. King was working in northern cities that summer. The response he received there confirmed that racism was a deep national problem, not a regional one. There was great ugliness to how racism was practiced in rural Alabama, but it was practiced no less effectively elsewhere.

Rick and I also talked about the role of whites in the civil rights movement. The slogan “Black Power” was born that summer. What role whites could properly play in black communities and in organizing civil rights activities was unclear. Discussion of the topic was fraught and had multiple layers of overtones. The argument that racism’s home is in white communities and that whites who wished to “help” to undo the past and present harms of racism should work in those communities was (and remains) powerful.

Rick and I were together when a friend of ours drowned in a gravel pit where all of us had been swimming. The state police – all white and all armed – were called and arrived in full force. We were detained while the pit was dragged and the body recovered. We were allowed to leave after the coroner declared that our friend’s body was in the “classic drowning position.” Foul play was ruled out. There was pain-filled wailing at his funeral in a small wooden church on a sweltering afternoon. People tried to cool themselves with hand fans provided by the local mortician. We joined the crying.

We did not know or even suspect in 1966 that 50 years later racism and discrimination, in all their insidious manifestations, would still cripple our country and shackle millions of our citizens who are the descendants of slaves. The focus then was on undoing Jim Crow-imposed “lawful” segregation. That effort succeeded. Fifty years on, however, progress beyond that has been limited. Jim Crow has shifted his grip, not removed it.

Rick Harper was an engaged citizen. He did his part to help cleanse America of its profound original sin. He moved things forward; he made things a bit better; and a bit fairer. That is a good start which we should all follow and continue.

[Ralph Tyler (c) 2017]