

SCOPE – the Summer of 1965

Phil McKenna, Santa Barbara, CA, September 2022
(Thanks to Mickey Bennett for the photographs.)

In 1965 the small town of Waverly was a feudal colony within Sussex County, Virginia.

I arrived there in the early summer of that year as part of a group of UCSB students affiliated with the SCOPE project; Summer Community Organization and Political Education. SCOPE was created by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Dr. King's organization. Hosea Williams, a close associate of Dr. King, visited UCSB earlier in the year recruiting students to participate in a voter registration drive targeting selected regions of the South. My college roommate, Lanny Kaufer, attended Hosea's rally and brought home information about the effort. It resonated strongly with both of us. We signed up.

Waverly was a rural town, in southside Virginia by the North Carolina border. It has about 10,000 people now, but it was less populated when we arrived. It is a low-land, flat landscape dominated by what I will call scrub pines. Not the noble conifers of parkland forests, but trees suitable for 2 X 4s or pulp for paper.



The days – and nights – were hot and sweaty. I remember the torment of a sleepless night that drove me to take a sheet into the kitchen, spread it on the cooler tile floor and suffer the unforgiving tile rather than the stifling heat.

Waverly, Virginia, Main Street, 1965.

As I remember, its principal animal life was the mosquito, or more accurately, billions of them. They were such a pest that at night the locals would burn tires in the street and stand in the smoke to gain relief from the buzzing and biting of the bug.

Waverly was not a “money center” but the town and Sussex County was a cash cow for one man, Garland Gray; State Senator, owner of the Bank of Waverly, the Gray Lumber Company, tens of thousands of acres of scrub pine habitat, and the housing of his

Negro employee's. ("Negro", it's an old word, but in 1965 it was current. Stokely Carmichael's "black power" movement in 1968 supplanted it.)



I never met Garland, never heard him speak, never even saw him. But I did know where he lived.



Negro employee housing owned by Gray Lumber Co. The tracks serviced the mill.

Garland was well connected and evidently a true "southern gentleman". He was born in Sussex County (the town of Gray) in 1901. At age 21 Garland received a master's degree in Southern history from Washington and Lee University. He joined the family business, Gray Lumber, in 1922. Gray Lumber was the largest employer in low-land Sussex County. Waverly was his company town.

James Jordan, a Negro employee of Gray Lumber, was lynched in Waverly in 1925, one of the last lynchings in Virginia. It was a ghastly public execution. Was Garland there? Being a "master" of Southern history, I would assume he was. How could he not witness living history? In the South, history is "sticky".

Garland developed a political career which elevated him above the status of a baron of his backwood community. As a State Senator he chaired the Gray Commission which developed a plan in 1955 to exclude whites from attending desegregated schools by

creating “segregation academies”; a racist reaction to *Brown v. the Board of Education* which declared segregated schools were unconstitutional in May 1954.

So, the scene is set.

We arrived in Waverly in mid-June 1965 after a non-stop cross-country drive and a three-day orientation meeting in Atlanta that introduced the SCOPE volunteers from across the nation to the tactics to be utilized in our community organization and voter registration work. We were a group of eight individuals from UCSB, all white, 20-ish with little experience other than the white middle-class culture of California, but open and eager.

The regional field director of the SCLC, Herbert Colton, facilitated our arrival in Sussex County, introducing us to Willy Mitchell, the Negro undertaker for the community. The South was firmly segregated, Negroes buried Negroes; Willy had a monopoly. He was well educated, lived in a brick house that he owned, and was independent of the economic grasp of Garland. He could speak his mind, but did so quietly and he could act, but did so behind the scenes. Willy had arranged for us to be housed in the homes of Negroes for a week or so, generally two to a family.

In our first full day in town, we introduced ourselves to the local kids, inviting them to a “parade” in the late afternoon with cookies and lemonade afterwards. We asked them to talk to their parents, giving them a flyer about SCOPE. To the kids, we must have appeared to be extraterrestrial beings, speaking a strange dialect, arriving as if from the sky. But, we had guitars and could sing. Atlanta had taught us freedom-songs, gospel-based tunes of struggle and striving, easy to learn, filled with energy. We started our parade at the bottom of the main street in the negro community – the street in the photo above with the railroad tracks – and played, sang, clapped, and hollered down its length. The kids were into it. The parents were curious. We had a crowd at the end of the street. The kids were the messengers, everyone knew we were there. It was that simple.

We held our first mass meeting on June 27 with over 50 people attending and secured housing from numerous families. The following day in a meeting after dinner the kids formed their own Student Organization. Walking home after the meeting, Lanny and I could hear the students singing “O’ Freedom” from a block away. In a letter to my parents, I described that moment as “inspiring, a revolution”. We were imbedded.

We were not the leaders of the summers’ effort, but the catalyst. We were instructed in Atlanta to help the locals form an organization for their community that was founded and led by them. I always assumed that Willy Mitchell talked to Mr. Roland Parham, asking him to become the leader of the new Waverly Improvement Association. Mr. Parham was a logical choice; he owned his own home and was employed outside of Waverly. He could act independent of Gray without fear of reprisal. He was a quiet man, active in the Baptist Church and respected in the local Negro community. He was a good choice for president.



Our objectives for the summer were to educate Negro voters on their civic rights and register them to vote

Lanny and the Crew

Virginia had a poll tax in 1965 effectively designed to disenfranchise Negro voters. The following is taken from the Virginia Pilot, 2/21/20. [The poll tax kept black Virginians from voting. Half a century later, it's finally being stripped from the books. – The Virginian-Pilot \(pilotonline.com\)](#)

Nearly 90 African Americans were elected to the Virginia General Assembly between 1867 and 1895, the period of reconstruction. After that, there were none until 1968. The impact of the poll tax and other repressive measures was complete disenfranchisement.

The 1901-1902 Virginia constitutional convention was held in part to figure out a way to prevent black people from voting without violating the 14th and 15th amendments. Out of that came the poll tax. The tax was \$1.50 a year, payable six months prior to the election, but three years of the poll tax was required from new voters. This was a steep price for most negroes.

The poll tax was in place in Virginia until 1966, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it violated the U.S. Constitution.

We soon realized that Sussex County added additional barriers to voting. The county courthouse, the location of the voter registrar, was located in the middle of the county (miles from Waverly), divorced from any community, surrounded by piney woods. It was open one weekday a month for a couple of hours. It was a lonely outpost of Democracy, that was effectively off-limits to the Negro community, guarded by a confederate hero on a pedestal.



Congress was considering the Voting Rights Act of 1965 when we arrived in Waverly. The Waverly Improvement Association wanted to expand Negro voting. We wanted to help. Our immediate job was to register Negro voters.

Marching

Community organization, the “CO” in SCOPE was persistence defined; identify your objective and work every angle. It’s walking, talking,

sweating, singing. It’s playing baseball with the kids, going to church, walking, talking. It’s discovering illiteracy, hanging at the poll hall, enjoying thunderstorms. Organizing community meetings, writing flyers. It’s walking and talking – relating, listening, smiling, laughing; being human with a purpose. Seeking justice where the motivation is true.

We spent the month of July in active “CO” mode. The “civic geography” of Waverly was of assistance. The Negro community was concentrated by segregation, it was easy to reach. We lived in the middle of that community and could not be ignored. We approached everybody and alienated none. And the timing was impeccable; the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was being debated in Congress as we were walking the streets. People were tired of their past, the kids were eager for the future, their elders were not far behind.

Monday, July 26, 1965

100 Negroes attended this first organized civil rights protest staged in Sussex County.

The Waverly Improvement Association, the kids, and the SCOPE workers organized a County-wide protest at the courthouse. The object of the protest was to demonstrate against the inadequate location and time to register to vote.

Reporting on the event, the “Progress Index” of 7/28/65, quoted Ralph Owen, the Secretary of the Sussex County Electoral Board, that “since October 1964 only 11 Negroes have attempted to vote and that all had been registered”, the implication being that Negroes were not interested in voting. Mr. Owen continued; “The trouble is coming from outside the county. We have had all the trouble coming up within the past few weeks since these outsiders have been in the county”. A typical “cracker” comment.



A picture of empowerment.

Saturday, July 31, 1965

150 Negroes rallied at the courthouse.



Dr. Milton Reid of the SCLC addressed the crowd saying that Dr. King had sent an "open wire" to the President asking that the Voting Rights Act of 1965, then before Congress, be signed into law in Sussex County.

Building Momentum.

Monday August 2, 1965

183 Negros registered to vote.

In eight days the community peacefully protested their frustration at being disenfranchised since the period of reconstruction after the civil war. On that eighth day, a Monday scheduled for 4 hours of registration at the Courthouse, they overwhelmed the registrar in their enthusiasm for a participatory Democracy. They were eager, disciplined and changed the character of their community.



Group Waiting To Get In To Register



Poll Tax Line Outside Treasurer's Office

Pictures of patience and perseverance.

Photos from "The Progress-Index".

Herbert Colton, SCLC field representative, was quoted in the press; "Negros are still the last to be hired, and the first to be fired in Sussex County. There are still no Negros in county government, no Negro law enforcement officers, no Negros in white collar jobs, and yet the population of Sussex is 66% Negro. We cannot rest until something is done." He continued; "It is very distasteful to go into the Courthouse office and still see signs for 'colored' and 'white' facilities."

I can remember traveling back to Waverly feeling very proud. Proud of the character of a suppressed people, of their stamina and grace. Proud of our effort. The "Times Were a Changing".

Incidents and Engagement

Our group suffered several threatening incidents.

Road Rage

Gary and Elke were accosted one night on a country road. Here is the letter I wrote my parents about the event and the subsequent trial. The trial, in the County Courthouse guarded by the "hero" lasted about 30 minutes.

August 10, 1965

Dear Mom & Dad,

We met up with Southern justice yesterday. I didn't tell you about an incident that happened about three weeks ago because I didn't want to frighten you. Gary and Elke were driving down a road about midnight and they were assaulted by two cars. The cars tried to run them off the road and once pointed a shotgun at them. Gary was able to identify one of the men and had him arrested. Upon arrest the man admitted to the officer that he did have a part in the assault.

Well, the trial was yesterday. Gary was the first witness and he began to tell his story. He was interrupted many times unjustly but the D.A. did nothing to prevent this. After he finished he was pretty flustered. Elke next took the stand and started to testify. The judge (at least 80 and rather senile) interrupted her and this is how his questions went.

Judge; "Where do you live?"

Elke; "With the Andrews."

Judge; "The Andrews on Rt. 301?"

Elke; "Yes."

Judge; "They are colored aren't they?"

Elke; "Yes"

Judge; "Are you white or colored?"

Elke: "White." [Obviously]

The judge provided the basis for the defense.

The defendant's admission was then entered into the record.

The defense lawyer then asked Gary to state the color and make of the automobile that the defendant was riding in. Gary stated the color correctly but could not state the make. This was legitimate as Gary did not have any idea of the kind of car it was. Next Gary identified the defendant.

The defense lawyer then asked for a not guilty verdict because Gary could not identify the make of the car. The judge complied with the request and everybody in the courtroom was all smiles.

Although he confessed to the crime, he was still not convicted.

Am learning a great deal this summer.

Phil

Accosted in a laundromat

Lanny and I took our wash to the laundromat with a couple of the local kids. We were the only patrons and started the wash cycle, talking among ourselves. A middle age white man entered, announced he was the owner and did not want our business. We said we weren't hurting anything and he closed the door, getting more excited. He identified us as the "outsiders" causing trouble and started a rant that was angry. He said he was going to kidnap us if we didn't leave. Lanny said that was not a good idea as that would be a federal crime and we had a good connection with the Justice Department. He railed some more, getting frustrated with his impotence and left, telling us to be gone when he came back. We left with wet clothes.

A movie on the ground floor

If you didn't experience it, it's hard to imagine the impact on a person of segregated facilities; drinking fountains, bathrooms, waiting lines, restaurants, movie theaters. Everything is substandard, continually emphasizing that life for you is second class or worse. This segregation was not a "suggestion", but the law that was strictly enforced.

The Waverly movie theater would sell a Negro a ticket, but the purchaser had to enter the theater from the outside staircase that led to the second story balcony where Negroes could watch the movie in the segregated heat of a summer night. So, an integrated group of us bought our tickets and marched through the front door ignoring instructions to go around the side and up the stairs. It worked, but I could not tell you what the movie was, as I was awaiting the flashlights of the police. The kids thought it was a triumph.

No lunch



Memories

We were instructed by the SCLC to bring a white shirt, tie, and suitable coat and pants for Sunday Services. We were expected to attend church every week, so we became faithful. The main church was a traditional brick structure that I remember mostly for the sweltering heat trapped by the tie and my jealousy of the sleeveless dresses worn by the women. The "Spiritualist Church" was weather-beaten, without adornment, small, maybe accommodating 25 members, but it was mighty in spirit. Music was provided by a quartet - guitar, bass, piano, vocalist – that rocked the faithful into a frenzy of shouts and ecstasy beyond that of the Fillmore Auditorium. It was the real deal.

John Barrow and his family hosted Lanny and I for a week of insight into integrity. John was a big man with one arm, the other being lost in a mill accident. He was deeply religious with a spirit that was forged in discrimination and loss, but that expanded gracefully and powerfully into a being of tolerance and light. It was a meaningful week.

The pool hall, Tom's Place, was a ramshackle affair that served greatly appreciate cold sodas (Mountain Dew was my favorite), and other libations that we foreswore. Foreswore, except for several Saturday dances in a barn where I encountered "white lighting", moonshine that melted the wax on a dixie cup. The dances were a lot of fun as the community was able to "get down" on their own terms, in their own place.

Humidity. I had never experienced it; my Northern European heritage was not prepared for its onslaught. The piney woods provided little relief as they were a monoculture filled only with trees and mosquitos. The thunderstorms, another novel experience for me, were a blessing and curse; the rain cut the heat, but the oven returned immediately after

the rain, fueled with the additional moisture. Watching “Bonanza” on TV, I was wistful for the rolling oak woodlands of home.

The poverty was profound.



Outside of town, shacks on country dirt roads, without the benefit of paint or maintenance were the norm. The people in these circumstances were welcoming, but guarded as they had probably seldom seen a white person in their neighborhood that had a sympathetic ear. It was a revelation for me to experience the hardship of people, as I inherited extraordinary privilege as a young white man at the apex of national prosperity.

On a hot, dusty road I was led to the water hand pump for a glass of cool well water that was the most refreshing drink of my life.

Did the work stick?

I leave you with Lanny’s words written in 2005.

I stayed in touch with John Barrow who kept me apprised of the progress being made. When I returned in 1988 to visit John and the others, I was told over and over what a difference the SCOPE Project and the Improvement Associations had made. To begin with, after we left, the teenagers who had worked with us all summer decided they no longer wanted to be bussed way out into the forest to attend the one school serving all the county’s black students. Under the leadership of Waverly’s young Horace Jones, who later found his calling in the ministry, they organized their own march on the first day of school that fall and successfully integrated the schools. Eventually, with the aid of the votes gathered that summer and in the following years, blacks entered the town councils, the county board of supervisors, the police department, and other historically segregated bodies. Mrs. Maggie Turner, wife of Rev. Jacob Turner and one of the more outspoken and articulate members of the local movement, went so far as to become a magistrate on the local court circuit.

That summer of 1965 informed and shaped the rest of my life. The memories are vivid. The impact was meaningful.



Lanny Kaufer and
myself. Courthouse,
Sussex County,
Virginia.

August 2, 1965