

**“A Tremor in the Middle of the Iceberg”:
The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Local
Voting Rights Activism in McComb, Mississippi, 1928-1964**

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*For Dana Lynn Ramsay,
I would not be here without your love and wisdom,
And I miss you more every day.*

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“I am writing this note from the drunk tank of the county jail in Magnolia, Mississippi. Twelve of us are here, sprawled out along the concrete bunker ... In the words of Judge Brumfield, who sentenced us, we are “cold calculators” who design to disrupt racial harmony (harmonious since 1619) of McComb into racial strife and rioting; we, he said, are the leaders who are causing young children to be led like sheep to the pen to be slaughtered (in the legal manner).... This is Mississippi, the middle of the iceberg. Hollis is leading off with his tenor, ‘Michael row the boar ashore, Alleluia; Christian brothers don’t be slow. Alleluia; Mississippi next to go, Alleluia.’ This is a tremor in the middle of the iceberg—from a stone that the builders rejected.” – Robert Moses, November 1, 1961.¹

¹ James Forman, *Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, DC: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 223.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis tells the story of McComb, Mississippi, a rural town that for four months during the summer and fall of 1961 rose up in support of black residents' right to vote against a local government and white society that for decades had denied them any progress towards political and social equality. A movement emerged out of a coalition activists from McComb and elsewhere in Southwestern Mississippi and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a South-wide civil rights organization of student activists, to engage every segment of the black community through a broadly based voter registration drive. While these two groups did not always agree on tactics, they built an organizing infrastructure with the knowledge, capacity, and credibility to mount the most serious challenge to white supremacy that this town had ever seen.

The McComb voter registration drive of 1961 was neither the first nor the largest civil rights program organized in the South during this period. Before 1961, major hotbeds of activism like Montgomery, Alabama and Nashville, Tennessee built up powerful local movements that forced concessions from city governments that included the desegregation of many public accommodations. Yet, Mississippi's high level of organized white opposition to civil rights work presented a fundamentally different challenge to activists. More so than any other state in the South, Mississippi utilized a brutal combination of legal and extralegal methods to ensure meaningful resistance would not emerge to the Jim Crow system, from either local blacks or out-of-state activists foolish enough to get involved. Even in regards to voting rights, technically guaranteed to blacks by the 15th Amendment, Mississippi registrars used subjective literacy tests and questionnaires to reject nearly all qualified black applicants. The civil rights movement appeared "frozen" in Mississippi, as most statewide and local

organizations had been effectively hamstrung by a combination of police intimidation and violence from white vigilantes. Many blacks had no choice but to organize in secret, but years of quiet organizing by local civil rights groups had led to few gains. The black community in McComb continued to lack any political influence to push material and social improvements to their condition.

While Mississippi as a state proved difficult to organize, McComb itself presented activists with a number of unique challenges and conditions for voter registration work. In 1961, McComb was a city of 12,000 residents nestled in the middle of Southwestern Mississippi, the largest city of a region known for racial violence and tension. Distinct from the nearby Mississippi Delta, where rural blacks heavily outnumbered whites, McComb had a racially mixed population and an economy based in industry. McComb itself was a railroad town, founded in 1872 as a repair station for the Illinois Central line, which afforded both blacks and whites higher paying jobs than their counterparts in the area and the chance to form a join labor unions. Still, like elsewhere in Mississippi, many blacks continued to work as sharecroppers, independent farmers, and domestic laborers, desperately poor paying jobs.¹ Whites dominated all positions of political and economic power, but few places could claim such as hostile or organized opposition black voting rights. Not only did the town consistently elect white racial extremists to all levels of government, but the city was a hub for Ku Klux Klan activity for the entire region.² Both proved successful in preventing blacks from registering in significant numbers. While seven percent of Mississippi's black population managed to register to vote by 1960, McComb's Pike County had only 38 black

¹ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 100.

² Dittmer, *Local People*, 101-102.

registered voters out of a voting-age population of 6,939, less than one percent.³ With such small registration numbers, McComb blacks had virtually no influence in their local government, and under the status quo they would be at the mercy of the town's white police and vigilantes.

In this community, SNCC saw the chance to build a program that could be the beginning of a wave of voting rights activism for the whole of Mississippi. SNCC was a civil rights organization of Southern students created in the wake of the 1960 sit-in movement as a forum for discussion, planning, and training of young activists. Soon the organization began hiring field staff and started independently launching its own programs using sit-ins, boycotts, and large protests. While these tactics were effective in briefly capturing the nation's attention to civil rights issues and winning some concessions from local governments, locals had few tools to capitalize on that momentum after SNCC moved on to the next fight. Increasingly, the organization began to turn to voting rights activism as a way engage black communities.

Instead of launching brief demonstrations against Jim Crow laws that deprived blacks of meaningful political and economic power in the South, SNCC wanted to build a lasting movement within McComb around voter registration. To SNCC, previous civil rights movements had failed because they could not build an organizing infrastructure that locals could continue to utilize after organizers left the community to work elsewhere. In McComb, SNCC prioritized partnerships with established local civil rights groups and the development of new local leadership to give direction for the movement that resonated with and gave voice to the whole community, attracting an unparalleled level of support from blacks that

³ James Marshall, *Student Activism and Civil Rights in Mississippi: Protest Politics and the Struggle for Racial Justice, 1960-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 16.

put sustained pressure on the local government. While other activist groups such as the Highlander Folk School had already experimented with such models before, SNCC wanted to develop and refine a program that could be replicated across the state. SNCC would go beyond any previous work in McComb by using innovative tactics to engage with sections of black society that had been ignored by previous activism, including students, sharecroppers, and the poor, to bring them into the movement and give them meaningful say over its direction.

McComb blacks offered SNCC a willing partner for a voter registration drive and a productive ground to conduct their work. Even in McComb, an area where virtually no blacks were registered to vote and public and private accommodations remained segregated, a movement existed that for years had organized voter registration drives and group trips to the registrar's office. However, most blacks in the community were vulnerable to economic reprisals from whites for civil rights work, and so they lacked the man power to sustain any longer term registration effort without facing the wrath of the whites. SNCC not only gave local activists "boots on the ground" to conduct this drive, but the attention SNCC held from national news outlets and the Justice Department provided some protection from white officials who feared federal intervention if violence became too visible or heinous.

Ultimately, the success of this movement could not be judged only by the number of individuals who managed to register to vote. Despite getting scores of people from town to the county seat to apply to register, very few were approved for the voter rolls. After SNCC's four months of work, McComb blacks still did not form a significant voting bloc in the city and all power in the community continued to rest firmly in white hands. Instead, it is critical to examine the role McComb played in the continuing Mississippi civil rights movement. I

will argue that the 1961 McComb succeeded as a first step in the larger process of awakening a political consciousness among black Mississippians. Through the McComb registration drive, local activists and SNCC brought in hundreds of people who had never before participated in activist work or had even imagined that they could become political actors in their own rights. These people would no longer quietly suffer at the bottom of the southern racial hierarchy, but they would continue to participate in civil rights work in the community going forward. Leaders emerged from the registration drive, particularly students, who became influential figures within the Mississippi civil rights movement and used their experiences to improve how SNCC trained and interacted with local black communities. This partnership had its flaws, culminating with local NAACP president C.C. Bryant throwing SNCC out of McComb, but even then both groups continued to cooperate for years afterwards.

Chapter One explores the origins of voting rights activism in McComb and in national civil rights groups, in order to frame two questions central to this thesis: Why did a voter registration movement begin in McComb, and why did this occur in 1961? This section begins in 1928, the year when McComb resident Nathaniel Lewis and his father founded the Independent Lodge of the Benevolent Order of Elks with the purpose of registering blacks to vote in the city, and examines the work of local black activists in the Pike County Voters League and the Pike County branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1940s and 1950s. While these groups fought bravely to give blacks a voice in the political process, they struggled to expand their base beyond union members and veterans and had only brief success in registering residents of McComb to vote. However, this early organizing in McComb built up a cadre of local activists experienced in

civil rights work, who even though their actions were constrained by violence and intimidation from local whites, stood ready to take part in a voter registration drive if only given the opportunity. McComb needed a partner that could both withstand attempts by whites to quash the movement and help local activists reach out to every segment of the black community, and this need caused local NAACP president C.C. Bryant to invite SNCC to McComb. SNCC attempted to convince a number of Mississippi towns to host such a program, but McComb was the first to actively seek out SNCC's help in conducting a registration drive of their own.

SNCC itself had only just by 1961 begun to involve itself in voter registration activism. Starting in the 1950s, influential civil rights organizations began experimenting with new tactics for the voter registration effort. The Highlander Folk School and Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) sponsored educational and community programs meant to improve black voter registration in the South, which included literacy programs and building alliances between activists and black community institutions like the church. While these efforts were flawed, in part due to a lack of coordination with local movements, both projects provided insight for activists in how to work within communities to ensure widespread participation. By 1961, SNCC, which had previously concerned itself mostly with sit-in protests and boycotts, turned towards conducting voter registration programs in the mold of Highlander's and the SCLC's program. Still, this decision was contentious and would lead to two separate SNCC programs operating out of McComb simultaneously in 1961.

Chapter Two focuses on the McComb voter registration drive from July to October 1961, where SNCC would work with local leaders in McComb and elsewhere in

Southwestern Mississippi to create a movement dedicated to winning blacks political power. SNCC entered McComb in July of 1961 and immediately began recruiting local volunteers and building relationships with the black elite of the community. SNCC worked with local activists to build voter registration schools and to canvassing neighborhoods to search for aspiring black voters, with the focus of bringing in the sharecropper and working poor to civil rights organizing for the first time. Another SNCC program launched simultaneously in McComb that trained local students in direct action tactics- sit-ins and marches- to help them fight against segregation in the town on their own. Voter registration and direct action tactics created a grand coalition of poor blacks, land owners, union members and students, who all mobilized in support of the local civil rights movement. Still, white registrars and the rest of the local government continued to resist these efforts, and as a result few blacks successfully managed to make it on to the voter rolls. While on the surface SNCC and the local NAACP had a strong relationship, it soured quickly as McComb high school students began to risk expulsion and injury in order to protest against unfair treatment to their classmates involved in the voter registration movement. Tensions over the role of students turned the many in McComb against SNCC, and by November 1961 Bryant made it clear that the protest group was no longer welcome in the city.

Chapter Three looks at the aftermath of the 1961 voter registration drive after SNCC withdrew from McComb in December 1961. In particular, few scholars have looked at the aftereffects of the 1961 voter registration drive on activism in McComb from 1962-1963. The local NAACP regained its spot as the primary civil rights organization in McComb, and it shifted from voter registration to supporting a campaign against school segregation and to raise money for the national NAACP's legal campaigns. However, some elements of

SNCC's style of organizing were retained by local activists, including connecting black history and emancipation to the contemporary civil rights struggle and holding mass events in the community to bring in individuals to the civil rights movement. Further, youth leaders who were first brought into the civil rights movement in the 1961 voter registration drive, such as Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, and Brenda Travis, became key staffers in SNCC. They entered other Mississippi communities and continued their voter registration work, this time attempting to correct for some of SNCC's perceived failings in McComb. In this regard, SNCC was successful in developing local leadership that could continue to carry on the movement in new directions.

SNCC, meanwhile, used the time after the McComb registration drive to restructure its organization and expand its voter registration program. SNCC passed a new constitution in 1962 that put a greater responsibility on SNCC's leadership in setting policy for the movement, in an attempt to better coordinate between the direct action and voter registration wings of the movement in local Mississippi projects. SNCC also developed further programs in Mississippi towns involving voter registration based on the McComb registration drive, growing in scope and size to gain media attention on the situation in the state and provoke the federal government into enforcing voting rights. Such programs had mixed success, and they proved the need for a far larger program to force Mississippi to end their discriminatory practices in voter registration.

Finally, the epilogue discusses the return of SNCC to McComb during the Freedom Summer voter registration project of 1964. For the first time in Mississippi, SNCC brought in massive numbers of Northern, white students to provide support for local civil rights movements in Mississippi. Still, SNCC worked to have its drive perceived as a local project,

and it prioritized using staffers from the McComb to run this new registration drive. This second wave of activism saw a much higher level of violence aimed against civil rights activists, but it also proved more successful in attracting press attention and spurring the federal government to intervene on blacks' behalf than in 1961. SNCC's relative success in McComb during the Freedom Summer came in no small part because of the groundwork laid by the 1961 voter registration drive.

The McComb spark was one of the first signs of a breaking of Mississippi's racial state, a "tremor in the middle of the iceberg." Despite the murders, violence, and economic reprisals against blacks who attempted to register to vote, activists in McComb managed to create a powerful movement by joining together innovative SNCC organizers, well respected local leaders, and excited residents who had never before had ownership over protests in their community. This would be a sign for things to come, as gradually more towns in Mississippi from 1962 onwards adopted SNCC's template of organizing into their own communities, building a state-wide movement that would compel the federal government to enforce black voting rights.

CHAPTER ONE: MCCOMB AND THE BEGININGS OF VOTER REGISTRATION

For a brief moment in 1961, McComb made headlines across the country as a battleground in the struggle for black voting rights, but this was the culmination of years of training and planning by activists within the community and far beyond. This initial chapter examines the methods of organization and training by local blacks in McComb and by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the years leading up to the voter registration drive of 1961. These experiences contextualize the direction and planning that drove the events of 1961, though all participants would be required to adapt their tactics quickly to the unique situation that sprung up in McComb.

The early civil rights movement in McComb, which from its beginnings focused primarily on voter registration, created an activist infrastructure that could be used for future voting rights work in the region. Organizations such as the Independent Order of the Benevolent Elks and the Pike County Voters League, driven by military veterans and union members, pushed small but dedicated groups of blacks to advance their rights by registering to vote. It was no accident that these two groups dominated the early civil rights movements, as union members brought with them a wealth of tactics previously used to expand workers' rights and experienced black leadership for the movement, and veterans had a unique status in their community and a drive inspired by a democratic ideology developed during their time fighting in World War II. These groups worked to educate and embolden their neighbors to organize resistance against the white power structure. In part, the movement became attractive to many in the community because it was a neighborhood event; activists would meet at each other's homes, and together they would practice the test required by registrars to vote. By the mid-1950s, the NAACP under Webb Owens and C.C. Bryant

became the premier civil rights group in the area, but open violence by the Ku Klux Klan heavily constrained their actions.

By the 1950s, major civil rights groups tested pilot programs to improve black voter registration rates through education and community empowerment. While small scale voter registration drives occurred around the South in this period, it was not until the 1950s that national civil rights organizations began seriously using voter registration as a tool to advance black rights. The Highlander Folk School in particular experimented with how to maneuver around existing legal barriers for blacks to vote, such as literacy tests. Highlander was originally set up to train union activists within the South, but by the 1950s it became the prime training center for militant civil rights activists. The Sea Island Citizenship School run by Highlander in South Carolina used innovative methods revolving around practicality and political education to teach voting age black men and women how to read. The Sea Island program had a profound impact on the direction of national civil rights organizations, as the school provided a framework to engage areas of the black community that had the highest difficulty in registering to vote. Many of the young activists within SNCC, including future chairman John Lewis, attended the Highlander school before and during their time in SNCC, and Highlander went on to hold several major conferences for SNCC. In the wake of the success on Sea Island, the NAACP launched one of the first South-wide voter registration drives under their “Campaign for Citizenship” in 1958, but they failed to rally large numbers of blacks to join the movement. While the program had lofty aims, it provided few resources to local movements to actually register black voters, and without much support the effort crumbled quickly. Neither of these two projects involved McComb directly, but they became the “standard” for voting rights activism up until the McComb movement. These experiences

provided the foundation of SNCC's knowledge on the voting rights movement, and eventually SNCC integrated many of these tactics used at Sea Island or the Campaign for Citizenship to formulate their voter registration classes and strategize how to work with local leadership in the city.

Finally, internal debates within SNCC pushed the organization to turn voter registration as a tactic for a new project in Southwestern Mississippi. In the immediate aftermath of its foundation in 1960, SNCC used primarily direct action methods such as sit-ins, boycotts, and protests, to challenge segregation and discriminatory laws around the South. This strategy made SNCC one of the fastest growing groups in the country, as it took little for disaffected students to replicate SNCC's successes in their own communities to desegregate the local lunch counter. However, powerful figures in the Democratic Party like Attorney General Robert Kennedy made it clear that they preferred for civil rights groups to turn their attention to voter registration as a less disruptive way to support black rights and build up longer term political power. Kennedy promised SNCC vast resources would be made available to conduct such a drive, and soon a large number of SNCC. . This position was not without controversy, as a strong faction within SNCC perceived voter registration as a compromise with untrustworthy liberals, and they preferred to stick with the direct action tactics that first brought SNCC to prominence. Robert Moses, a strong proponent of voter registration, connected with local leader Amzie Moore to find a community willing to be part of SNCC's first registration drive.

Voter Registration in McComb 1928-1961

The voter registration movement in McComb commenced with the founding of the a local branch of the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks of the World (IBPOE

of W) in 1928 by father and son Meredith and Nathaniel Lewis, with the express purpose of registering African Americans to vote. The organization did not engage in any largescale projects on its own, and it served as a forum and meeting place for those committed to advancing blacks' political rights in Southwestern Mississippi.¹ While some brief action was attempted in early 1940s, it was not until after a larger wave of black veterans returned from World War II, including Nathaniel Lewis, that civil rights action began taking off in the county. With the Lewises leading the way, black veterans from McComb and the surrounding area came together to form the Pike County Voters League.²

Veterans became the driving force behind the early civil rights movement in large part due to the incongruity between American ideals and the unequal treatment of black soldiers during and after military service. In American society, military service is often depicted as the pinnacle of citizenship, the greatest duty an individual could perform in order to protect their country. Parades celebrate the sacrifices of veterans, monuments are erected in their honor, and pictures of Uncle Sam encourage individuals to sign up to fight to protect the country. In fighting a war against an explicitly racist and anti-democratic power, blacks could not help but be exposed to an ideology that equated citizenship and military duty.³ However, soldiers quickly found themselves subject to unequal treatment during their time in the segregated military. Commanders regularly relegated blacks to support roles and manual labor rather than let them take over the more prestigious front line duties, a humiliating exercise for black soldiers. These jobs often held many of the same risks as combat duty, but they provided little opportunity for soldiers to prove their worth and gain promotion. Without

¹ Nathaniel Lewis, interview by Tom Healy, *Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage*, University of Southern Mississippi, October 24, 1978, 9; 18.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ Jennifer Brooks, *Defining the Peace: World War II Veterans, Race, and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 16.

combat experience, few blacks could advance to any position of responsibility or command.⁴ Black soldiers, already fully aware of their second class status at home, grew increasingly frustrated with their mistreatment while fighting to protect American democracy.

Veterans also had a heightened expectation of benefiting from post-war economic expansion. Blacks within the military received significant job training for semi-skilled careers like carpentry, construction, and fumigation, which should have led to careers with higher pay and greater chance for advancement than being a sharecropper or other unskilled labor commonly available to blacks at the time. In interviews conducted by Research branch of the Army, 61% of black soldiers believed that military training would help them find a better job at home. When further asked about the kinds of policies they would like to see supported by the President of the United States after the war, a majority listed a desire for anti-discrimination laws or other solutions for racial advancement.⁵ In the military, blacks faced a microcosm of the racial oppression from back home that limited their economic and political opportunities, yet their military experiences still gave the black community hope in their struggle to rise out of poverty and win the rights associated with full citizenship. Brooks, a historian of the social dynamics of black participation in World War II, noted, “The war tended to create highly motivated black men cognizant of their own rights, conscious of the barriers that impeded their full citizenship, and determined to establish for themselves freedom, opportunity, and political participation they felt they had earned.”⁶

While racial inequities and a new economic optimism after World War II energized blacks to push for greater political rights, the passage of a law in Mississippi to temporarily eliminate the poll tax for veterans provided an immediate trigger for an increase in black

⁴ Brooks, *Defining the Peace*, 17-18.

⁵ *Ibid*, 16

⁶ *Ibid*.

voting. The 1946 Mississippi law exempted all veterans in the state from the poll tax for one year, a decisive aid for black veterans at a time when most held low paying jobs and struggled financially.⁷ Whites debated the effect of this law, conscious that the thousands of Mississippi blacks who fought in World War II could gain the right to vote, but most dismissed the idea that black veterans would become a legitimate political threat.⁸ In practice, when small groups of blacks attempted to register, registrars still had many tools at their disposal to reject them. Officials in the Pike County Clerk's office denied the poll tax exemption to Napoleon Lewis, a politically engaged veteran from McComb, by claiming he needed his original discharge papers and not just a copy, despite those papers being admissible by law. Since he could not afford the tax, he did not vote in that election.⁹ This dampened the legislation's ability to increase the numbers of blacks on the Mississippi voting rolls, but it still inspired thousands of veterans around the state to attempt to register for the first time in their lives. When it became clear to blacks that these attempts would remain unsuccessful without a change to the system, many veterans decided to organize.

It was in this atmosphere that the Pike County Voters League held its first meeting on June 21st, 1946 with 50-60 veterans from the area in attendance. Members met as often as two or three times a month for "cramming and guessing," where they discussed possible questions that the registrar would ask of them and devise strategies for successfully registering, and then League members who felt they were ready would go together to the county clerk's office to apply. At that point, blacks could be required to read sections from a given book – often the constitution of Mississippi -- to prove they were literate and then

⁷ Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944-1972* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 113.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ United States Senate, "Record of the Hearings before the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures," (Public Report, Washington, 1947), 122-124.

interpret the passages they had read. Members of the league also discussed other factors that might improve blacks' chances at registering. Dress, for instance, could mean the difference between registering and being sent home, as several black men who went to the registrar in their work clothes found success the next time by wearing their best suit on the next attempt.¹⁰ By 1953, the state of Mississippi added a formal questionnaire for the registrar to administer as a requirement to register to vote, and the league turned toward studying for this more rigorous set of questions, including the names of cabinet members, the duties and rights of citizenship, and how to interpret specific sections of the constitution of Mississippi.¹¹

From the beginning, the working class drove the voting rights movement in McComb. Veterans made up the majority of the Pike County Voter League, and many were also rail workers for the Illinois Central railroad who belonged to the black run Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union. The union had a great deal of strength in McComb as the representative for a large part of the workforce of the city's key industry, and it could protect a number of its members who were involved in civil rights work from being fired. Whites generally avoided using violence or intimidation against union members for fear of causing a work stoppage, and this protection lowered the perceived cost of organizing for local blacks. Union men provided a backbone for the local voter registration movement, and members regularly went down to the registrar's office without fear of losing their jobs in retaliation for exercising their political rights.

Still, the movement lacked support among broad segments of the black population, and the traditional leading figures of the black community sat on the side lines rather than mobilize support the voter registration efforts. The League attempted to expand its

¹⁰ Lewis Interview, 18-19

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

membership by inviting black professionals, preachers and teachers, to assist in their voter education classes, but these groups were wary of joining the movement. While preachers had a degree of economic independence from whites, as black congregants paid their salaries, they were often subject to extreme pressure by whites to keep their fellow blacks in line. Preachers were often seen as the leaders of the black community, the white elite of the city often enticed or threatened them into discouraging their congregants from participating in civil rights work. On one occasion, a group of powerful whites invited ten black preachers to meeting and demanded that they denounce black voter registration activities, and in return the whites would provide them with a significant handout. The vast majority of the preachers took the money and kept the deal secret, but two reported on the deal to the Voters League.¹² Despite this distrust by the church by some in the movement, a few black preachers did play a role in this early period of voter registration activism. Reverend S.J. Dickey, who reported on the preachers meeting with whites the League, testified that Senator Bilbo told whites in McComb to threaten blacks with violence the night before elections and attempted to assist some black residents to vote.¹³ Teachers, as employees of the government, were subject to being fired by white administrators for their participation in the movement, so they usually refrained from joining the struggle. The near certainty of losing their livelihood put the cost of organizing beyond the reach of economically vulnerable.

Perhaps the most important moment in early voting rights struggle in McComb was the participation of black veterans and others in testifying to a widely publicized United States Senate Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures, where McComb residents helped bring the discrimination black voters faced in Mississippi to the

¹² Lewis Interview, 19

¹³ US Senate, "Hearings before the Special Committee," 169.

nation's attention. The Committee held hearings from December 2 to December 5, 1946 to investigate Senator Theodore G. Bilbo of Mississippi for his support of violence and illegal tactics to deprive blacks of their right to vote during his reelection campaign. The committee was formed at the behest of Republican senators who wanted to drive a wedge between the Northern and Southern factions of the Democratic Party. While few Northern Democrats could be considered racial liberals at this time, they would still be uncomfortable with their Southern counterparts openly inciting illegal activities to disenfranchise blacks. A number of members of the Pike County Voters' League, Meredith Lewis, Nathaniel and Napoleon Lewis, Samuel O'Neal, as well as dozens of other black and white residents of Mississippi, actually managed to testify in front of this panel of US senators in Jackson, Mississippi.¹⁴ While their testimony was intended to focus on instances where Senator Bilbo broke the law, these men and others talked at length about the regular abuse of election laws by local government officials and systemic patterns of violence and intimidation that forced black Mississippians to stay away from the polls.

The Bilbo hearings gave blacks an opportunity to speak in relative safety, and they took advantage of this to expose the link between government officials and intimidation perpetrated against blacks while attempting to exercise their political rights. For instance, Joseph Parham of McComb testified about his experience attempting to vote in the July primary in 1946, the *de facto* election in Democratic Party-dominated Mississippi. Unlike many in McComb, Parham was already a registered voter, having passed the test while still living in Fernwood, Mississippi. When Mr. Parham made it to the polling place on Election Day, he was confronted by a Mr. Sauls, a white man, who after warning Parham not to

¹⁴ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 8-9

attempt to vote began, shoved him off the sidewalk. A nearby officer saw the incident, and rather than charge Sauls with assault, decided instead to arrest Parham on the false charge of public intoxication. Once Parham was released, he returned home rather than again face arrest. In his testimony, Parham drew a connection to his treatment and Senator Bilbo's speeches, quoting a section where the Senator said, "If you can't [stop a black from voting] otherwise, visit him the night before the election and if you are arrested or anything... you will be tried before a white judge and white lawyers... anybody will clear you."¹⁵ Another McComb man, Reverend S.J. Dickey found himself threatened by whites after offering to drive a few members of the Voters League to the court house to register. Fearing for his safety, Dickey decided to delay this trip, but after hearing Senator Bilbo's speech, he decided himself or his parishioners to register to vote without repercussions.¹⁶ These two represented only a tiny fraction of the case built against Senator Bilbo, and together McComb residents detailed numerous moments of intimidation, illegal discrimination, and violence that made in nearly impossible for blacks to register to vote in Pike County.

This hearing was broadcast across the United States, getting coverage in *Life* magazine among other publications. Not only did this publicize the plight of black voters in Mississippi, but it frightened local officials in Pike County into temporarily allowing blacks to register to vote. The Senate committee made it clear to in Pike County that they were not to use tools to prevent blacks from registering to vote, and made clear that no violence was to occur against the local blacks who testified before the committee.¹⁷ Nathaniel Lewis and others went back to the registrar's office, and after some discussion, the registrar let everyone present read from the literacy test books. For roughly a week in early 1947, the county

¹⁵ US Senate, "Hearings before the Special Committee," 132-133.

¹⁶ Ibid, 169-170.

¹⁷ Lewis interview, 13.

allowed blacks to register, although officials continued to reject those who they felt did not meet registration requirements. After the nation's attention left the area, the registrar returned to routinely denying registration to black applicants.¹⁸ Public pressure proved to be an effective constraint to local officials' discriminatory policies, but without outside intervention to maintain this pressure, McComb activists could only watch on as the *status quo* quickly returned.

The actual results of the early voter registration movement were mixed. The Pike County Voters League never registered massive numbers of voters, but it did consistently manage to get several individuals registered at the time. They limited their program almost entirely to voter registration, and for fear of facing greater resistance activists never openly campaigned for school desegregation or other attempts to build a more equal society.¹⁹ However, the Bilbo hearings and their immediate aftermath provided a narrow window for McComb blacks to register, proving that national public opinion could be useful in influencing local officials' behavior when Southern whites remained intransigent to equal social and political rights for blacks. This was a major breakthrough, as even though the federal government seemed uninterested in defending black voting rights, a sudden crisis could embarrass municipalizes into temporarily registering aspiring black voters. To do this, however, local civil rights activists needed someone or something that could capture the national attention. C.C. Bryant would later invite SNCC to McComb in 1961 at least in part because the organization's activities were widely covered by the national press at that time.

During the 1950s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also started becoming a player in the Southwestern Mississippi civil rights

¹⁸ Ibid, 18.

movement. Founded in 1944, earlier than many chapters in Mississippi, the Pike County branch played virtually no role in the voting rights organizing of the Pike County Voters League. However, in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 that ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, NAACP activists C. C. Bryant and Webb Owens put together a large membership to support the enforcement of *Brown* in McComb and the surrounding area. The membership of this organization was constructed along similar lines to the Pike County Voters league, as the two men both belonged to the rail workers' union, and they still aggressively recruited from the ranks of veterans such as Ernest Nobles, and small business owners in the black community. The organization boasted more than 100 dues paying members, and they seemed poised to continue the work of the Pike County Voters League, only this time with wider participation and more resources.²⁰ However, by the end of 1955, conservative elements of Mississippi society launched a wave of attacks that in effect forced the NAACP to operate in secret. The state legislature passed a new "breach of the peace" statute that was frequently used by officers to jail activists who advocated for "disobedience to any law of the State of Mississippi" for six months or fine them \$1000, and the newly formed State Sovereignty Commission spied on black civil rights organizations and leaders and passed that information along to the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilantes.²¹

This period also marked the expansion of civil rights organizing in areas of Southwestern Mississippi outside of McComb. In neighboring Amite County, considered local activists one of the most reactionary and hostile towards black rights in the state, the development of the local NAACP chapter followed a slightly different path. E.W. Steptoe

²⁰ John Dittmer, *Local People*, 101.

²¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 59-60.

founded the Amite Branch of the NAACP in 1953 after learning about the organization on a trip to New Orleans.²² While activists from McComb's Pike County faced arrest and intimidation by the police for civil rights organizing, their counterparts in Amite County could easily be lynched or shot for similar efforts. The local government cooperated brazenly with vigilantes to suppress the civil rights movement. Shortly after the founding of the Amite NAACP, the local whites took near immediate action to shut down the chapter and prevent the voter registration movement from gaining a toehold in the county. One night in 1954, the county sheriff entered an NAACP meeting and confiscated the membership lists, in order to distribute that information to white vigilantes, only returning them after the FBI threatened to intervene.²³ With the sheriff's department seemingly happy to work with violent groups to identify NAACP members in town, few in the county could risk participating in the movement. Further, since blacks in Amite County grew crops and raised livestock, they were particularly vulnerable to boycotts by the white community. A boycott of Steptoe's milk brought his family to the edge of financial ruin, and not a single bank in Mississippi would provide him a loan to withstand these pressures. These actions deterred many other members of the country from joining the struggle for voting rights.²⁴ Amite County experienced far less civil rights organizing than Pike County, and after 1954 only E.W. Steptoe continued to work as a member of the NAACP as the rest of the group disbanded. Unlike in Pike County, the conditions in Amite could offer little protection. Without a significant union movement and cut off from an urban center with an active press, Amite activists could do little to fight

²² Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 112.

²³ Payne, *Light of Freedom*, 112.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

pressure from the Klan challenging their political subjugation. Because of this, civil rights organizing could only continue in the county if some outside force joined in the efforts.

On the eve of 1961, the civil rights appeared to be in a deep slumber. Many local law enforcement officers were unaware of the continued existence of the NAACP after the late 1950s, and no visible voter registration drives or civil rights campaigns occurred in Southwestern Mississippi. After a tumultuous decade in racial relations, the white community began to relax their extralegal methods of oppression as they believed blacks had given up trying to push for political equality. However, this provided some room for underground NAACP members to once again organize the community, and talk began about testing the waters for a new registration drive. At their disposal activists possessed battle tested voter registration tactics and a developed cadre of local leaders committed to voting rights, the necessary elements for a large scale, broadly based voting rights movement in Southwestern Mississippi. McComb activists waited for that spark that could reignited the battle for voting rights in the city.

Highlander Folk School Citizenship Schools

In many areas across the South, local voter registration movements followed a similar pattern: veterans, union members, and their families organized bold drives to get blacks out to vote, but after small successes a violent backlash from white vigilante groups or law enforcement ended hopes that blacks could register in meaningful numbers by working within the contemporary political system. Activists from across the country looked on at these movements and saw both the flashes of promise that small scale success inspired, as

well as their failure to bring massive numbers of blacks to openly resist the Jim Crow system. By the mid-1950s, two major drives began to focus on voter registration as a method for the national civil rights movement, the Highlander Folk Schools' Sea Island Citizenship School and the Southern Christian Leadership Council's (SCLC) Crusade for Citizenship

Founded by Miles Horton, the Highlander Folk School opened its doors on November 1st, 1932, to train activists to effectively organize communities in protest around the South, initially focusing on unionization but eventually shifting to civil rights by the 1950s. Local leader Esau Jenkins, after attending the Highlander Folk School in 1954, pushed for the organization to start an adult education program in his community, the Sea Islands, outside of Charleston, South Carolina, for the express purpose of registering blacks to vote. A longtime member of the NAACP, president of the Johns Island PTA, and a former candidate for local political office, Jenkins wielded a special status in the community that could bring in many residents who were hesitant in trusting outsiders from the Highlander Folk School.²⁵ Eager to work with this new approach, Highlander secured funding for a wide ranging voter education project rooting in improving literacy among the impoverished black community.²⁶

From the start, the local blacks dictated the direction of the Sea Islands voter registration program. While the founder of Highlander Myles Horton was white, he recognized the need to develop local leadership and the tendency for whites to take control of protest movements, so he began the drive by supporting the preexisting voter registration movement in the Sea Islands, which had called for outside help in expanding the program. The Citizen's Club, whose president was Esau Jenkins, registered roughly 100 blacks in the

²⁵ John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School 1932-1962* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Pres, 1988), 158-159.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

area to vote in 1955 to support his bid as a candidate for the local school board.²⁷ Before Highlander activists entered the community, there was already strong support in the Sea Islands for voter registration, but literacy tests proved an insurmountable barrier for many who wanted to vote. However, the very existence of an established network of activists in the Sea Islands meant the Citizenship Schools had a base to work with to increase participation and coordinate with the goals of the community.

The registration movement began in the summer of 1955 when Highlander brought three carloads of Sea Islanders to Tennessee to attend workshops on how to register to vote and to create self-sufficient communities, which included the creation of credit unions and lessons on the importance of low cost housing.²⁸ With the new tools gained through Highlander training, the Sea Islanders had an infrastructure to begin testing new ways to improve voter registration numbers in the region.

While local leaders decided voter registration was the most advantageous method to advance their political and economic condition, it still remained for them to convince the rest of the population to buy in to this tactic. Jenkins and his associates held public meetings on Johns Island as a way to communicate directly with the public and get feedback on how such a project could address citizens' concerns about their lives. However, these meetings were often sparsely attended. Few blacks were willing to risk the violence their involvement in the movement might provoke, especially when voter registration did not seem attainable or able to meaningfully improve black lives. Further, it was suggested that few of the 90 percent of blacks unregistered to vote in the Sea Islands could read sufficiently well to pass the required

²⁷ David P. Levine, "The Birth of Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom," *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004): 388-414, 394.

²⁸ Glen, *Highlander*, 160.

literacy test.²⁹ Unless a program could improve literacy in the area, there was a limit to what grassroots organizing by Highlander trained activists could accomplish.

The Citizenship School concept began when Highlander-trained local activists tried to set up adult literacy classes so prospective voters could pass literacy tests in South Carolina required to register to vote. The Sea Islands had a population of roughly 4,000 people divided between a number of small towns, and no island was less than two-thirds black. Most blacks were impoverished and worked as farmers on small plots or as laborers in Charleston factories and shipyards.³⁰ While the Charleston County school system already provided literacy classes to promote black literacy as a boon for South Carolina employers, teachers could not attract or retain students in classes.³¹ These schools borrowed materials and lesson plans meant for children's elementary education, which humiliated their pupils, called Daddy Long-Legs by children in the Sea Islands for the way their legs stuck out around the miniature desks they were forced to use. Miles Horton noted that lessons in these schools focused on "...a-b-c-d; 'the ball is red'; 'New York is a Big City'. [Black adults] were being asked to delay reading sentences useful to them until they could read sentences of dubious value to children."³² Many blacks wanted to learn to read, but the public school system's misguided adult education program humiliated participants with its childish lesson, and students began dropping out quickly. The vast majority of the black residents of the Sea Islands remained illiterate, and therefore unable to vote.

Jenkins and Clark were very conscious of the failings of traditional literacy programs, and they set out to construct the new Citizenship School along radically different lines.

²⁹ Ibid, 161.

³⁰ Ibid, 158.

³¹ Ibid, 161.

³² Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 151.

Classes began on January 1, 1957, taught by Bernice Robinson, a local resident of the islands and cousin of Highlander official Septima Clark. Robinson had no background in education, but was rather a beautician and dressmaker.³³ This was a deliberate choice, as the school believed that “non-teachers,” would be less likely to establish a hierarchal teacher-student dynamic with new pupils.³⁴ The local activists in charge of the program wanted to erase all vestiges of domination, feeling that students would be more likely to be invested in the program if they were treated as equals. The directors of the program also decided that they would only let black teachers work at these schools.³⁵ The presence of a white teacher would prevent blacks from stepping up to fulfil that role and could prevent students from challenging the direction of the schools to better fit their needs and wants.

The actual facility was set up to be a shared space between the Citizenship School and the black community, allowing the adult literacy program to become a major part of Johns Island beyond adult education. Highlander loaned local activists \$1500 to buy an old school building on Johns Island to house the Citizenship School and remodeled the space to include a cooperative grocery store and meeting areas for community events, along with classroom space for the adult literacy classes.³⁶ Instead of the school setting up in an isolated part of town to avoid trouble, it became an active center of education and business in the town. Individuals who did not know much about the program would likely visit the facility on their daily errands and would get a chance to talk to teachers, other students, or activists about literacy classes. Further, communal financial and business ventures like credit unions or grocery cooperatives helped fulfil the Highlander vision of democratically run

³³ Glen, *Highlander*, 162.

³⁴ Morris, *Origins*, 153.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Glen, *Highlander*, 162.

communities. Such institutions would render the black community self-sufficient and resistant from economic pressures from white opponents of civil rights, as well as facilitating the development of local leaders to run these ventures.³⁷

Highlander and its local allies structured the Citizenship School literacy program to have practical applications for gaining the political and economic knowledge needed for individuals to become full citizens. In keeping with the spirit of Highlander, Robinson began her class by asking students what they wanted to learn, and formulated a curriculum that would address problems her students faced in their everyday lives. Students began by learning to sign their names, tracing the shapes of the letters over and over before they even learned how to spell. Many of these individuals had spent their lives signing their names with an X, and an immediate application for their knowledge drove students to continue at the school.³⁸ At the onset of the class, students acquired critical skills that enabled them to write contracts and fill out government forms. As soon as students began building up their vocabulary, Robinson had students read from local newspapers, the South Carolina Constitution and the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Robinson also gave students governmental and business paperwork to fill out, including voter registration forms and money orders.³⁹ From these lessons, students could easily contrast the high-minded rights and ideal espoused by such documents and the denial of equal rights they faced on a daily basis. Importantly, this ideological education was paired with a practical exercises on business. With these new skills, blacks could theoretically gain credit, contract to create their own businesses, and further decrease their reliance on whites. A self-sufficient

³⁷ Ibid, 156.

³⁸ Ibid, 163.

³⁹ Ibid.

community in the long term would be more resistant from white pressure in pushing for civil rights.

The Citizenship School on John Island became a significant success. Over the three month initial term first of the Citizenship school, class size more than doubled from 14 to 37, and plans were put into place to begin a second session starting in December of 1957.⁴⁰ As Highlander activists formalized the curriculum and trainings for prospective teachers at citizenship school, communities around the area began requesting their inclusion in to the program. With a well-functioning literacy program working in conjunction with a continuing voter registration drive, the Sea Islands saw their black voter registration numbers begin to rise.

The Highlander Folk School was not involved in the later McComb voter registration drive directly, but information on the structure of the Citizenship Schools was readily available to the SNCC activists who would later work in McComb in 1961. Many of SNCC's early staff attended the Highlander Folk School, and several SNCC conferences would go on to be hosted by Highlander.⁴¹ SNCC would go on to borrow heavily from the curriculum of these schools in their voter registration classes, and would work to involve local leadership heavily in determining the direction of the movement.

It was in the wake of this string of success that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), one of the largest civil rights organizations in the country, decided to make voter registration the centerpiece of a new nationwide program, the Crusade for Citizenship. The goal of this movement was to "enfranchise blacks by organizing a mass-based political movement for the explicit purpose of acquiring the vote," under the

⁴⁰ Ibid, 163.

⁴¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 41.

belief that only black voters could persuade politicians to advance equal rights for blacks.⁴²

The SCLC was well aware of the voter registration drives that had taken place around the country in the 1940s and 1950s, and they took that as a sign that the South had sufficient public support and experienced activists to conduct such a large scale drive. Future SCLC Executive Director Ella Baker continually pushed for her organization to focus on voter registration, and she met with Highlander activist Septima Clark to learn about teaching methods and organizational tactics used in the Sea Island Citizenship School and other subsequent schools.⁴³

The SCLC and its partner organizations launched the Crusade for Citizenship on February 12, 1958 in 22 cities across the South. The SCLC claimed that over 13,000 people attended these events, a massive show of support at a time when such demonstrations were often crushed violently. The SCLC had few direct operatives on the ground, so they partnered with local civic leagues, many of whom had previously sponsored voter registration drives, as well as black churches to use their manpower to register black voters and coordinate their efforts under larger umbrella organizations.⁴⁴ Churches in particular played a major role in these drives, as they instructed their parishioners on how and when to register after services, held regular voting clinics, and distributed instructional materials on voting.⁴⁵ Just as Highlander prioritized local leadership during the Citizenship Schools, the SCLC believed that the most effective way to engage people in the movement was for it to be led and seen as a local movement. Still, the SCLC certainly played a role in providing direction for the Crusade by sending passionate ministers to pulpits around the South to build

⁴² Morris, *Origins*, 106.

⁴³ Ibid, 156.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 109-110.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 110.

public support for voter registration, shipping partner organizations educational material on registration drives, and leading direct action protest workshops.⁴⁶ The success of the drive would be determined by how much these partner organizations bought into the voter registration strategy.

Despite the initial promise of the movement, the Crusade for Citizenship failed to register large number of blacks to vote. Governmental officials in Southern states used every tool at their disposal to reject or delay aspiring black voters, significantly hampering registration rates. Would-be voters would often find their names taken off the welfare rolls in reprisal for attempting to register, and registrars refused large groups from registering at once. If these tactics failed, cities would also change their borders to exclude black neighborhoods, so they could not influence the outcome of city elections.⁴⁷ These tactics were in addition to the legal barriers that already existed to reduce black voting rates, as many Southern states still used literacy tests and poll taxes to reduce the black vote.

While the role of white pressure in suppressing registration numbers cannot be overstated, the SCLC did little to build a lasting organizational infrastructure to effectively disseminate information, foster local leadership, or communicate with partner organizations around the South. The organization relied on a cadre of charismatic black preachers, and they saw little need to throw their resources in funding staff to try and organize local movements. Dr. King wrote, “There was never any genuine cooperation and coordination between national and local organizations working to increase the vote.”⁴⁸ For a brief moment, the energy and enthusiasm provided by preachers like Dr. King allowed for thousands of blacks to join up with a growing civil rights movement. However, without an organization in place

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 111.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 115.

to push these drives forward, participants could not overcome the obstacles put in place by whites.

Further, the SCLC did not embark on a program of education or development of local leadership in conjunction with the movement. Ella Baker insisted that the Crusade hold voter education classes in the mold of Highlander's Citizenship Schools, but few of the upper level staff of the SCLC gave this idea much consideration.⁴⁹ As long as the SCLC led the development of a South-wide voting rights movement, there was unlikely to be a sophisticated effort to train activists and interested blacks to improve black registration rates. In part, these deficiencies convinced Baker that a new organization was needed manpower and knowledge required to build a long lasting local movement in communities across the South. As the student movement began taking shape in 1960, an opportunity presented itself to create just such an organization.

SNCC and the Turn to Voter Registration

By 1960, the voter registration movement was at a crossroads. Attempts to expand voter registration projects across the South had failed, the federal government was uninterested in ending segregation or aiding civil rights advocates, and local chapters of the NAACP had been effectively muzzled by white violence. Without significant changes, Jim Crow would remain the law of the land in the South for the foreseeable future. The rise of a militant, independent student movement within the wider civil rights movement and the foundation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) provided a new blueprint with the potential to radically change the Southern voting rights movement.

When four black students, Joseph McNeil, Izell Blair, Franklin McCain and David Richmond refused to leave the segregated lunch counter of a Woolworth store in downtown

⁴⁹ Ibid, 114.

Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1st, 1960, they helped spark the formation of a student-run civil rights movement. Staff refused to serve the young black men at the whites-only counter, but the student activists decided to stay seated until the store closed despite being demanded to leave. That night the students reached out to their classmates on campus, and consecutive sit-ins over the next two days saw scores of protestors occupy the restaurant, including several white students who joined the protest in solidarity. These students were certainly not the first people to vocally protest segregation in the South, but an excitement began to build at the nearby colleges to join in protests. Conservative white students organized counter protests outside the Woolworth store, but this only led to greater media attention for the demonstration. The city government brokered a temporary end to the sit-in while they worked to come to a solution to deescalate the situation.⁵⁰

This protest struck a chord with many students who were frustrated with the slow pace of desegregation and civil rights activism, but it took the work of many different organizations to grow this nascent movement. Almost immediately, established figures in black community sought to capitalize on student's anger towards Jim Crow laws to train activists who could fight for change far beyond Greensboro. Field organizers from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the national office of the NAACP, two well established civil rights organizations, worked to spread awareness of the sit-in campaign around the South and forge links between students and pre-existing activist networks. They convinced black churches affiliated with the SCLC to open their doors to students who wanted to join the sit-in movement, training them in nonviolent sit-in techniques and mobilizing large numbers of students who had never before taken place in such

⁵⁰ Carson, *In Struggle*, 9-10.

demonstrations.⁵¹ Because strong connections between churches and activists already existed, the information around the sit-ins could be disseminated quickly over a wide range of cities.

In a matter of weeks, sit-in protests spread to dozens of cities in North Carolina, usually in college towns with a large black student population in the midst of largely white communities, and a number of lunch counters began to desegregate. By mid-April, 1960, the sit-in movement had spread to every state in the South, with an estimated 50,000 protestors.⁵² This represented a massive challenge to the Jim Crow South, and protestors showed no signs of slowing down. Increased national media coverage of the civil right movement and the activation of previously existing activist networks brought in large numbers of students new to organizing into a true mass movement.

Ella Baker, the executive director of the SCLC, realized that this moment presented a unique opportunity for the movement to develop new leadership and an organizational framework with ability to sustain long-lasting programs to advance black rights. Already, Ella Baker played a role in expanding the sit-ins by calling her contacts at civil rights organizations on or near college campuses in the South and asking “What are you all going to do? It is time to move.”⁵³

As a longtime leader for the NAACP and the SCLC, Ella Baker saw in the sit-in movement a chance to move away from tactics that relied too heavily on charismatic figureheads. Baker perceived a regular pattern among her own organizations, where experienced leaders would dominate meetings with local civil rights groups, who had trouble voicing their concerns or communicating what kinds of programs they wanted to see

⁵¹ Morris, *Origins*, 199-200.

⁵² Carson, *In Struggle*, 11.

⁵³ Morris, *Origins*, 201.

implemented in their community.⁵⁴ This model allowed for bursts of action, because well-known leaders would attract intense attention from the press that would attract large numbers of supporters in a short period of time. In the long run, however, protests often lacked enough broad support in the community to sustain themselves, as when locals did not buy into SCLC programs they would offer only minimal support and lose interest as soon as activists left the community. Baker hoped a decentralized, student run organization would directly confront the worst of the Jim Crow system, without being inhibited by jobs, children, and concerns about their own reputations.⁵⁵ While students were not the only young or militant activist in the civil rights movement, their increasing power furthered a strong hope in ensuring the movement retained a mass, democratic character.

Ella Baker called for a conference of student protestors to be held April 16-18, 1960 at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. This South-wide “Student Leadership Conference on Nonviolent Resistance” brought in 200 students to decide on “a more unified sense of direction for *training and action in Nonviolent Resistance*.”⁵⁶ Somewhat unexpectedly, and due in no small part to the influence of Ella Baker, the attending students formed a temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to independently organize a militant student movement in support of the civil rights movement.⁵⁷ Participants charged the incipient group with proving information and services to local branches, meeting periodically to monitor the progress of the movement, and to plan future trainings for student activists.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 242.

⁵⁵ Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 244.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 240; Carson, *In Struggle*, 20.

⁵⁷ Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 247.

⁵⁸ SNCC, “Draft Fundraising Letter for October 1960 Conference,” 1960, reel 11 *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*.

By the fall of 1960, SNCC saw real success in becoming a formalized training center for the student movement. The October 1960 SNCC conference became one of the most impressive series of training sessions attempted by a civil rights organization to this point, again drawing in more than 200 hundred student SNCC members and observers. With this success, SNCC held more than a half-dozen conferences between the fall of 1960 and the summer of 1961, roughly one per month.⁵⁹ Students, allies, and advisors would attend seminars on topics such as black political rights and their influence in national elections, the institutions and laws that perpetuated housing segregation, and the persistence of racial discrimination in public and private employment.⁶⁰ SNCC workshops gave experienced and new participants alike the chance to debate policy for the organization and submitted proposals to be voted on by the committee at large, an opportunity few had ever had in a major civil rights movement. Any member of SNCC or observers could participate in these discussions regardless of rank, leading to a remarkably flat leadership structure. In one “Jail v. Bail” workshop, students voted to encourage SNCC activists if they are arrested to refuse bail and remain in jail as a tactic to publicize the movement, which became official SNCC policy.⁶¹ Students at all levels found themselves able to affect the course of debates that would determine the group’s structure and policy goals, and large numbers began to find themselves taking on leadership roles.

Such conferences also brought students in contact with major figures within the civil rights movement. For some of the students involved, this was the first time they came into contact with famous, respected black political figures. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Ella

⁵⁹ Finding aid, *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*.

⁶⁰ SNCC, “Program for the Fall Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Conference,” 1960, reel 11 *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*, 1-2.

⁶¹ SNCC, “Policy Recommendations, April 1960 Conference,” reel 11, *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*, 1

Baker were regular features at these conferences, and they were joined by leaders such as Wyatt T. Walker, Executive Director of the SCLC, and Lewis Jones, Professor of Sociology at the Tuskegee Institute.⁶² Students learned directly from some of the brightest minds on activism, allowing them to challenge basic assumptions they held on the meaning of discrimination, or provide advice on how to best use church networks during a protest. Moreover, when skilled and accomplished black leaders participated directly in educating young activists, it emboldened students to see themselves as influential political actors, powerful in their own rights with little ceiling on what they could become. SNCC wanted to combat even unconscious biases, where whites would push to win leadership positions or blacks would defer to white colleagues in debate. While white students and activists held important roles on SNCC's staff, SNCC was a primarily black led organization, and their choice of speakers ensured that elements of racial hierarchy would not creep their way into the committee.

As the organization developed, SNCC focused its energies primarily on visible, direct action protests. On January 31, 1961, SNCC students traveled to Rock Hill, Arkansas, where SNCC activists sought to flood the jails after police arrested and held 10 local youth for sitting-in at a white lunch counter. The protest did not manage to desegregate that particular counter, but they did raise the credibility of SNCC by coming to the aid of a small local movement that requested help.⁶³ On May 4th, 1961, CORE and student activists launched a freedom ride protest, where an interracial group of passengers traveled through the South by bus to test whether Southern bus stations followed orders to desegregate. SNCC members participated in the original bus ride and welcomed the freedom riders at several stops, but

⁶² Ibid, 2.

⁶³ Carson, *In Struggle*, 31.

violence against the freedom riders in Birmingham, Alabama on May 17, 1961 forced CORE to end the bus trip prematurely.⁶⁴ By provoking harsh response from racist officials and citizens, SNCC brought nationwide attention to Southern officials' resistance to desegregating public accommodations and a new wave of non-violent activism that formed as a response.

SNCC also expanded their program from its focus on desegregation to include voting. At the SNCC Conference in 1960, delegates unanimously voted to support a series of demonstrations revolving around Election Day on November 8th, 1960. SNCC called on chapters to organize simultaneous marches on the local seat of government or polling locations, demanding that the federal government take action on enfranchising blacks in the South and pass a new civil rights bill. These student activists saw the struggle for political rights as another manifestation of the sit-ins, using the slogan, "Don't let the Student Sit-ins down—Vote Today."⁶⁵ SNCC found that non-violent direct action tactics, where activists would openly challenge amoral laws or practices by demonstration or civil disobedience, suited voting rights equally as well as desegregation. To the students, these goals represented two methods to combat one root problem, the subordination of blacks in a white dominated society, and it was natural for them to be tackled together.

The intense backlash by white southerners against direct action campaigns frightened liberal white politicians, who were concerned that trajectory of the civil rights movement threatened the chances of the Democratic Party in the South for the upcoming 1962 and 1964 elections. Civil rights demonstrations such as the 1960 sit-in movement and the Freedom Rides attracted crowds of whites who attacked or beat protestors, causing upheaval in

⁶⁴ Carson, *In Struggle*, 33-34.

⁶⁵ SNCC, "Election Day Action Flyer" November 8, 1960, reel 1, *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*, 2.

Southern society and exposing divisions in between Southern and Northern Democrats. While the Southern governments were dominated by the Democratic Party, opposition to civil rights threatened to turn the South away from Democratic, racially liberal candidates in national elections. On June 19th, 1961, Attorney General Robert Kennedy met with representatives from SNCC and other civil rights organizations to convince them to abandon disruptive protests and instead embark on a program of registering blacks to vote in the South. Kennedy argued that little headway could be made in Washington on stronger civil rights bill until white politicians needed to cater to black voters, and that funding would be made readily available for such a program by liberal donors.⁶⁶ Students scoffed at the idea of increasing their voting rights work just to suit the goals of the Democratic Party, but the promise of gaining enough resources to put together a South-wide voter registration project was difficult to turn down. SNCC and preceding activists brought thousands of students into the civil rights movement for the first time primarily through word of mouth. However, it remained to be seen if SNCC's model was sustainable in the long term, or if it was necessary to use funding from liberals to ensure that the organization continued to grow.

After the meeting with Kennedy, a growing faction in SNCC began to advocate for voter registration. At the June 1961 SNCC conference, the committee began serious discussions on whether or not to launch a major voter registration effort in Mississippi, which had the lowest black voter registration rate in the South. After a lengthy debate, the committee decided that it lacked sufficient personnel and funding to embark on such a program in Mississippi, and it voted to table the discussion until its next meeting in July.⁶⁷

While this should have signaled a temporary end to a voter registration project in Mississippi,

⁶⁶ Carson, *In Struggle*, 39.

⁶⁷ SNCC, "Louisville Conference Meeting Minutes," June 9-11, 1961, reel 11, *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*, 4.

however, SNCC's decentralized structure allowed one activist to begin laying the groundwork for such a project on his own. SNCC volunteer Robert "Bob" Moses brought on an internal crisis within SNCC he traveled to Cleveland, Mississippi, to talk with local protest leader Amzie Moore about launching a voter registration drive in the Mississippi Delta.

Moses sought to coordinate with local activists in Mississippi, to gauge interest for such a project and gain advice on how to approach these communities. A close ally of Ella Baker, Moses agreed with her that it was necessary for blacks to win the right to vote to combat their oppression. To facilitate the launch of a massive project to increase black registration, Moses was put in touch with Amzie Moore, a longtime friend of Ella Baker and an active figure in the state and local NAACP. Moore pushed Moses to bring SNCC field staff to the Mississippi Delta to begin a registration drive, and promised to use his connections to find local groups who were willing to support the effort. With blacks in the Delta hesitant to commit resources to such a project, Moore and Moses decided to look elsewhere, eventually settling on Southwest Mississippi as the location for the drive.⁶⁸ The support of Amzie Moore for the project complicated things for the pro-direct action crowd. An enduring but suppressed organizing tradition already existed in Mississippi to support voter registration movements, but the strength of white vigilante groups suppressed any of these programs from finding real success after the mid-1950s. Moore presented SNCC with the opportunity to work with local activists to establish a broad based coalition in support for voter registration, a template that could be used for future organizing across the South. To reject this program outright would be to violate SNCC's principled support of local autonomy.

⁶⁸ Dittmer, *Local Peoples*, 102-103.

Moses' involvement in Mississippi brought internal conflicts within SNCC to light. Moses regularly reported his activities in Mississippi to the rest of SNCC, The committee responded by saying, "Mr. Moses wants SNCC to get volunteers for the project. The office has communications with people who have volunteered... It was decided that until SNCC votes on a decision to participate in the project, no steps should be taken."⁶⁹ The committee could not agree on whether to support Moses' efforts, and so they attempted to halt the project. This is one of the first instances where the organization voted to halt a member directed project. While at least in part SNCC's objection to Moses' work stemmed from his involvement with the SCLC, from which students desired to remain independent, many in SNCC feared that the organization was distancing itself from the direct action tactics that made it a major force in civil rights organizing.⁷⁰ Diane Nash and John Lewis believed that running a voter registration movement would take resources away from protests and sit-ins, which had already proved successful in desegregating lunch counters and generating publicity on the human rights abuses occurring the in the South. Further, non-violent direct action gave activists a sense of moral superiority over both reactionaries and reformers because they refused to work within an inherently unequal political system. If SNCC collaborated with Democrats and liberals for political gain, they feared militant students would become disenchanted with the movement.⁷¹ Without much middle ground, the two groups seemed destined to split.

SNCC managed to hold itself together by reorganizing to allow both factions to meaningfully direct the group's strategy. At the August 11, 1961 Conference of SNCC, the

⁶⁹ SNCC, "Baltimore Conference Meeting Minutes," July 14-16, reel 11, *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers*, 2.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 269.

two factions debated splitting into separate organizations, one in favor of voter registration and the other in favor of direct action. Ella Baker, desperate to avoid a schism in the movement that would slow their progress, brokered a compromise where each faction could conduct their own operations separately but still under the auspices of SNCC's executive committee. She also noted how a voter registration movement would inevitably spur forms of direct action protest when white registrars in the South would arrest or intimidate blacks to prevent them from voting. Even if they were not breaking the law, the registration drive would violate the *de facto* laws of racial subordination in the South, and the end result would look similar to earlier sit-ins performed by SNCC.⁷² Under this compromise, SNCC launched two separate programs, one for voter registration and the other for direct action, which were free to institute their own projects in the upcoming voter registration drive in Mississippi. Large numbers of staffers began to volunteer to work on such a project with the hopes of developing their strategies through real world experience.

Conclusion

By the summer of 1961, the conditions in the local and national civil rights movement moved toward the commencement of a regional voter registration drive in Southwestern Mississippi. In McComb and the surrounding towns, blacks harbored hopes of relaunching a voter registration drive after years of underground activism, and despite the fragility of the movement the community retained a pool of well-respected local organizers who could work with SNCC. Only a town with the experience The innovations, successes, and failures of the NAACP and Highlander registration and literacy programs instructed a new wave of activists in how to expand and sustain such a drive.

⁷² Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 271.

Finally, the rise of a student movement and the foundation of SNCC brought together activists with new ideas on how to work with local communities and a philosophical and tactical knowledge of civil rights work. It was in this context that C.C. Bryant, president of the Pike County NAACP, contacted Bob Moses of SNCC about conducting a voter registration drive in McComb, Mississippi.

CHAPTER TWO: SNCC and the 1961 McComb Voter Registration Drive

By the summer of 1961, SNCC had built up an organization ready and willing to launch a voter registration drive in the Deep South, but without a local partner it was unlikely that such a drive would gain much traction. It was when Ella Baker connected SNCC's Robert "Bob" Moses with well-respected Mississippi activist Amzie Moore that the door finally opened for SNCC to get involved in rural Mississippi. After finding that few towns in Moore's Mississippi Delta were willing to play host to such a drive, Moore brought SNCC to McComb's C.C. Bryant, President of the Pike County NAACP. Bryant had long pushed to develop a strong voter registration program in town, and he invited SNCC to use its manpower and expertise to help McComb to put together its first major voter registration drive in years.

SNCC and local activists set up a sophisticated voter registration program in Pike, Amite, and Walthall Counties starting in July of 1961. The involvement of longtime local leaders like Webb Owens and C.C. Bryant brought credibility to the project, and they mobilized large segments of the black community to fund and participate in the registration drive. This was critical to provide SNCC with both the financial and community support needed to sustain a voter registration drive over a number of months and beyond. Many local blacks had never before been involved in politics, in part because voting was viewed as "white folks business," that would bring harsh repercussions on black participants, and viewed SNCC staffers as ignorant of voting's cost to the people in the city.¹ SNCC would have no hope of recruiting participants if their efforts were seen as foolish and not suited to McComb. In order to bring in new participants, the SNCC needed to function with local

¹ Robert Moses, *Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 46

blacks playing a leading role in directing the course of the project. This would free SNCC to use an innovative series of tactics, including voter education, canvassing efforts, and mass meetings, to draw in more volunteers for the voter registration drive.

Further, The presence of a direct action program facilitated by SNCC's Marion Barry both brought in local students to the civil rights movement and caused tensions between segments of the McComb community. Barry held workshops on nonviolent organizing techniques for students, many of whom readily embraced the possibility for change that nonviolence promised. Those students formed the Pike County Nonviolent Action Committee, which became a forum for students to plan visible demonstrations against segregated public accommodations. Yet, as high school students soon found themselves in jail for conducting a sit-in on the bus terminal, many adults in the black community began to feel uncomfortable with SNCC's involvement.

Finally, activism in the community took a drastic turn with the murder of local activist Herbert Lee. Such an action mobilized the community like nothing before, but SNCC soon realized that protests no longer had the undivided support of the community. More than one hundred students walked out of their high school in protest of the school's treatment of classmate Brenda Travis and for the murder of Lee, leading to many of their expulsion. Parents turned strongly against SNCC for putting their children in danger, and C.C. Bryant would ask SNCC to leave McComb, ending the 1961 voter registration drive.

Invitation to McComb

After Bob Moses returned to Mississippi to meet with Amzie Moore in the summer of 1961, it was clear that locals in Cleveland and elsewhere in the Mississippi Delta were not ready to begin a voter registration project. Moore could not find a church or black fraternal

organization willing to offer use of their facilities to SNCC, and few locals felt they could mobilize their community effectively in the face of white vigilantes.² Still, Amzie Moore sought to use his network of black activists to find an area with greater support for registration, and SNCC's growing commitment to this project led them to look elsewhere in Mississippi for an initial staging ground. Ed King, SNCC's first executive secretary, decided to place an advertisement in the black magazine *Jet* announcing SNCC's intention to launch a voter registration project in the Mississippi Delta region of the state.³ C.C. Bryant, the president of the Pike County NAACP, took notice of this advertisement, and quickly wrote to his friend Amzie Moore to learn more about the program. Moore heavily encouraged Moses to go to McComb and test the area's suitability for a voter registration drive.⁴ Bryant's support for a voter registration movement provided legitimate local support, a factor not present in the Delta region. If Bryant and his colleagues in the NAACP could work with SNCC, the ensuing mix of local know-how and organizational expertise could lay the foundation for a broadly supported voting rights movement in Mississippi.

Bringing out-of-state activists to McComb carried inherently risks for SNCC and the NAACP alike, but SNCC field staffers also brought with them certain advantages that local activists could never match. Bryant made a straightforward case for why he asked Moses to work in Pike County: their NAACP branch lacked the manpower to run a large scale drive on their own, but they had the facilities and funding available to support one.⁵ However, in the context of McComb's history of voter registration, it made sense for the local NAACP to reach out to an outside organization for help. The Pike County Voter's League won an

² Robert Moses, Interview with Clayborne Carson, March 29, 1982, Transcript, 13.

³ Moses interview with Carson, 14.

⁴ C.C. Bryant, Interview with Joe Sinsheimer, February 12, 1999, Transcript, 2.

⁵ Robert Moses and C.C. Bryant, Mississippi Voices of the Civil Rights Movement Conference in McComb, Mississippi, July 9, 1983, Transcript, 1.

unprecedented victory for voting rights after the Bilbo hearings in 1946, when Republican senators exposed the illegal treatment of prospective black voters by Democratic politicians in Mississippi. For a short time, federal politicians signaled a willingness to prosecute violations of blacks' political rights, and local registrars decided to register aspiring black voters rather than provoke the national government's ire.⁶

Even though news of SNCC did not always penetrate the national consciousness as well as the Bilbo hearing had, their organization was media savvy and had proven they could turn a local conflict into a national news story. Not only did SNCC have its own publication to communicate with activists around the country, the *Student Voice*, but their recent campaigns in the 1960 Sit-in movement and the 1961 Freedom Rides regularly made national headlines.⁷ No force solely within McComb's black community could successfully in shame the county registrar into accepting black applicants to vote. The press attention brought by a group like SNCC could provide blacks some protection from reprisals for voting activism. Any act of violence by municipal officials or vigilantes would be broadcast to the entire county, and if it got bad enough, the federal government could conceivably step in and prosecute the perpetrators.

Moses came to McComb in mid-July to work with local leaders to lay the groundwork for a voter registration drive. For Moses' first two weeks in the city, he stayed at C.C. Bryant's house, where he was introduced to the local activist circles that had quietly continued the organizing tradition of McComb. As head of an NAACP chapter that had been forced essentially underground, meaning they could no longer continue public activism,

⁶ Nathaniel Lewis, interview by Tom Healy, *Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage*, University of Southern Mississippi, October 24, 1978, 8. (double check page number)

⁷ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 25.

Bryant still managed to organize and inform the community through his barbershop. Whites would virtually never visit a black-owned barbershop, which allowed Bryant the freedom to stock large amounts of civil rights literature and up to date information about projects which he could then give to customers.⁸ Bryant used the connections made through his shop and his contacts in the rail workers' union to build up a large network of locals who were well versed in the politics of civil rights.

Still, the crucial work remained to convince the residents of McComb to open their community to outside activists. Originally, SNCC agreed to send Moses two volunteers, Reginald Robinson and John Hardy, and the three of them would stay during the month of August as a trial run for the project.⁹ Moses and SNCC understood that the registration drive could only be successful if the community was firmly behind the project, and they predicated their involvement on McComb blacks raising enough money to support the three men.¹⁰ This would be no easy feat for a community where even its more prosperous members could only be considered working class.

One local black leader, Webb Owens, became the driving force in connecting Moses to the citizens of McComb. Owens was alternately described as the membership chairman and treasurer of the Pike County NAACP.¹¹ An older man, Owens had been an active member of the NAACP since the mid-1950s, and his work was instrumental in doubling the number of dues paying members to organization in Pike County. He cut a unique figure in the community, as corrective glasses for a droopy eyelid gave him a fish-eyed appearance,

⁸ Joe Martin, Interview by Jimmy Dykes, *Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage*, University of Southern Mississippi, November 1, 1995, 1.

⁹ Moses and Bryant interview, 2.

¹⁰ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 103-104.

¹¹ Moses and Bryant interview, 2; Dittmer, *Local People*, 101.

and his easygoing manner earned the nickname “Super Cool Daddy.”¹² In some respects, Owens resembled the prototypical McComb activist. He was a retired railroad worker and union member from the Illinois Central, same as C.C. Bryant, which allowed him to cultivate a network of activists to support civil rights work in the city.¹³ Yet, Owens also owned a small business in Illinois, where he had spent much of his adult life, which for a former railworker provided him relatively high income and completely protected him from economic pressures from the white community in McComb.¹⁴ Owens had unrivaled activist credentials, and he was held in high esteem by the black community for his economic status.

Webb Owens took Moses around McComb to introduce him the black leaders of the city. For two weeks, Owens would arrive in a taxi each morning to pick up Moses, and the two of them went door to door to “every black person of substance” who lived in the community. Moses would explain the aims of the project, how it would be conducted, and introduced the background and philosophy of SNCC. Owens would then convince the person to pledge a small donation to the effort, usually no more than five or ten dollars.¹⁵ It is impossible to overstate how critical Owens’ involvement was to the creation of the project. When Moses received a pledge, “Who did they give [the money] to, they didn’t give it to me because they didn’t know me from Adam. They gave it to Webb Owens... [N]obody had any question in their mind about one penny of that money as long as Webb Owens was handling that money. They knew that if he said the money was going for this, the money was going for

¹² Dittmer, *Local People*, 101.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Moses Interview with Carson, 21.

¹⁵ Ibid.

this. It wasn't going someplace else."¹⁶ Without someone as trusted as Owens, it was highly unlikely that Moses could have secured enough money for the program to function.

As it stood, the two men made enormous progress. Local leaders such as Nathaniel Lewis, who led the Pike County Voter's League registration drives starting in the 1940s, along with respected small business owners like Aylene Quin, who owned a local bar, Ernest Nobles, who owned a laundry, donated money for the project, and several of them would become actively involved in the registration drive. While none of these individuals were particularly prosperous by white standards, they earned enough that by pooling their donations they provided the necessary funds to sustain the three SNCC staffers. Through their two weeks of work, Owens and Moses heard near unanimous support from residents for holding a voter registration drive with SNCC's help.¹⁷ With money now available, local leadership beginning to offer support, and a wide community interest in voter registration, SNCC finally felt confident enough to officially launch their project. By the first week of August, SNCC field staffers Reginald Robinson and John Hardy joined Moses to begin setting up a voter registration drive.¹⁸

Voter Registration Project

While Webb Owens and Moses did all they could in those initial weeks to drum up support for a voter registration project, it did not take much for the community to rally behind the idea. John Dittmer attributes the two men's early success in building support for a voter registration to McComb's long but intermittent history with voting rights activism. The movement had already produced some tangible, if short-lived, successes, and many in the

¹⁶ Moses and Bryant Interview, 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Carson, *In Struggle*, 47.

community saw it as the only viable avenue in McComb for civil rights work.¹⁹ Still, work had to be done to bring the entire community to support this new registration drive. Earlier efforts were usually concentrated among certain groups, such as railworkers and veterans. In order to create a mass movement in the city, where nearly all blacks in McComb would participate in some form in the program, they needed to reach out to those ignored by earlier activism. While a large portion of McComb's black population worked on the railroad, sharecroppers and domestic laborers in town often found themselves excluded from civil rights work. These individuals were extremely sensitive to economic pressure from whites, due to their low incomes and lack of institutional protections, and had never before felt they had the ability to participate in the movement.

Moses, with the help of Robinson and Hardy, began a canvassing effort to get residents of McComb to buy into the movement. While Moses and Webb had previously contacted respected leaders of McComb for donations, this wave focused primarily on potential voters. Robinson and Hardy were hardly inexperienced students; Hardy worked in the Nashville protest movement and had served jail time, while Robinson had previous experience with voter registration in Baltimore.²⁰ The men knocked on door after door, paying special attention to poorer areas where little civil rights work had been done before, explained the registration project, and ask residents to try filling out a voter registration form.²¹ They would also occasionally give them a section of the Mississippi constitution to interpret, a requirement to register.²²

¹⁹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 103.

²⁰ James Forman, *Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, DC: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 225.

²¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 105.

²² Hollis Watkins, Interview with John Rachal, *Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage*, University of Southern Mississippi, October 23-30, 1996, 8.

SNCC workers and their allies worked to build perception that they were a part of the local community and not merely professional activists with their own agendas. Moses would introduce himself by saying, “C.C. Bryant brought me here. I’m C.C. Bryant’s registration man,” when knocking on peoples doors.²³ SNCC staff made it clear that they were here at the behest of a leader of black McComb, and they viewed their job was to facilitate the goals of local activists. Nor were SNCC activists the only ones knocking doors. Webb Owens encouraged a group of honors students from Burglund High School, McComb’s segregated black high school, to meet with Moses and help SNCC canvass neighborhoods. Five or six took part in this early effort.²⁴ These young adults would likely have already been known to the community, and a potential voter who would be a stranger to Moses could be a family friend or acquaintance. As the students took on greater responsibilities for community activism, they gained a greater say in how the registration drive was conducted. This allowed SNCC to start building local leadership among the youth. This students would gradually be given more and more work, rising from local volunteers to controlling the course of the movement.

Even though canvassing as a tactic was not always effective in getting individuals to register, it often served a higher purpose. Speaking about this effort, Moses wrote, “I liked to think I got anyone I spoke with imagining himself or herself at the registrar’s office. Getting someone to make this kind of mental leap, even for a moment, had to be considered an achievement in the Black Mississippi of those days...”²⁵ To SNCC, just as important in registering individuals to vote was fostering an active political consciousness in the town.

²³ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 46.

²⁴ Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 115

²⁵ Moses, *Racial Equations*, 47.

The full rights of citizenship had never been meaningfully granted to McComb blacks, and it took a real effort in order to combat the perception that blacks' position was inevitably at the bottom of the society. Even if many in the city were still too frightened to walk into city hall and attempt to register, this change in perception among was revolutionary. Further, SNCC attempted to contact those who had been left behind by previous civil rights activity in the area. Before 1961, most civil rights work in McComb occurred in certain networks, usually through unions or veteran organizations. To build a larger movement, activists had to reach out to the sharecropper, the janitor, and the student. Certainly, many of these kinds of people had already participated to an extent in the civil rights movement, but Moses and his allies worked to immediately incorporate them into this budding project.

Black churches in McComb played a key role in building popular support for the voter registration campaign. The church was the traditional center of many black communities around the country, and McComb was no exception.²⁶ Black ministers from many Pike County churches preached about the importance of voter registration to their congregants on Sunday mornings, and many black churches would eventually host meetings and workshops for the registration drive.²⁷ Blacks from every segment of McComb society would have attended these churches together, and ministers could help draw in individuals who were not involved with existing civil rights networks. Further, the church provided some cover for individuals afraid of reprisals for taking part in the voter registration movement. Whites could not directly monitor activities at black churches, and volunteers could use the space to help SNCC without exposing themselves as activists. Churches also donated funds

²⁶ Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 4.

²⁷ Moses and Bryant Interview, 3.

and basic supplies like paper and printing equipment to SNCC volunteers.²⁸ Few in the blacks had much disposable income, but by combining small donations from the community, the church could fundraise like few others. C.C. Bryant lists at least a half dozen ministers who took part in the registration drive, and both Methodist and Baptist churches worked.²⁹

This was a major departure from earlier voter registration drives in McComb, where activists like Nathaniel Lewis saw the church as indifferent or even hostile to the voting rights movement. This likely changed during the mid-1950s, as the NAACP found itself at the forefront of local civil rights movements across the South. Bryant mentions that the McComb NAACP sent a Rev. Hubble to take part of 50th Anniversary activities for the NAACP in 1959, and Rev. Taylor did some work in the 1950s as well.³⁰ Black churches often worked in close alliance with the NAACP, in that it was one of the few places for civil rights organizers to meet without interference from whites. In turn, the NAACP had gave ministers prestige within the community, by meeting with well-respected figures in the movement.³¹ The NAACP could also provide black preachers with tools to advance black rights without risking reprisals by fundraising for national NAACP legal efforts. In part, this change can also be explained by Bryant's strong connection with church officials. Bryant was an active churchgoing man, and his importance in the community likely persuaded churches to become more heavily involved. While this relationship predated the arrival of SNCC, for the first time local activists effectively leveraged the power of black religious institutions across the community into building a broadly based civil rights drive.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Moses and Bryant Interview, 3. Both of these actions took place outside of McComb, but it is unclear whether these were activities organized by the state branch of the NAACP or elsewhere.

³¹ Morris, *Origins*, 15.

The town's black Masonic temple donated space in their meeting hall for seat for the voter registration project. While SNCC may not have had many options for a base of operations, the building allowed the activists to work right in the heart of the community. The building occupied a space in the primarily black Burglundtown district of the city, and the first floor of the building was a grocery store.³² Most black residents of McComb would likely pass by the building or even enter it on their daily errands. Those who were afraid of facing attacks or intimidation for entering a building used only for civil rights activism could drop in and learn how to register to vote under the pretense of a shopping trip. Just as the Sea Island Citizenship Schools found that meeting attendance increased when the event occurred in a resident's house or at the church, SNCC positioned their school to seem as familiar and safe as possible. Further, on a given day the center would be open from 9am to 9pm.³³ Sharecroppers, railroad workers, and shopkeepers, common professions in Pike County, often had inflexible hours that did not line up with a usual 9-5 business day, and keeping the center open as long as possible helped SNCC to reach out to diverse segments of the community.

To popularize the project, SNCC held regular "mass" public meetings to bring apolitical members of the McComb into the project. SNCC called these mass meeting in reference to purpose as an introductory meeting for the public at large and not necessarily the attendance. These were usually held either at the St. Paul Methodist Church, the Society Hill Baptist Church, or the SNCC office in the Masonic hall. Meetings would begin with the group singing together, either old spirituals or more modern blues songs, to get participants "warmed-up." Occasionally, a featured speaker would come before the crowd and try to get

³² James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, D.C.: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 225.

³³ Ibid.

them motivated to attempt to register to vote.³⁴ This largely stuck to the format of a typical day at church, a place that much of the black community considered a home away from home. SNCC workers did their best to make their meetings seem familiar and normal and so dispel the idea that voter registration was a tactic from outside the community. Students from McComb and volunteers would be on hand to answer any questions, and they would offer to walk through how to fill out registration forms to anyone interested.³⁵

At the Masonic hall on August 7th, SNCC and local activists held the first meeting of the voter registration school. The instructors tested students as they would be by the county registrar when they presented their registration form, giving students a questionnaire with 21 questions and going over the meanings of sections in the Mississippi constitution. They avoided setting up a formalized classroom environment, and instead held classes through discussion, where individuals would work together to interpret sections of the constitution. In the beginning, 25 people regularly attended these classes, with many more dropping by the office to learn about the program and how to vote.³⁶ SNCC staffers were familiar with instances educational successes in Highlander's Citizenship Schools and the NAACP's Crusade for Citizenship, which occurred when teachers protected student's dignity and treated them as equals.

At the onset of the program, activists saw small but concrete gains in voter registration numbers. Starting on August 7th, individuals contacted by SNCC canvassers went together in small groups to the Pike County Registrar in nearby Magnolia, Mississippi to attempt to register to vote. Quickly, sixteen blacks from the area took the voter registration

³⁴ Watkins Interview, 9.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 105.

exam, and six managed to pass.³⁷ Even considering the high failure rate, this still represented a significant success for the movement. Back in the 1940s and 1950s, it was common that blacks could be rejected to vote for something as simple as not wearing proper clothing.³⁸ Even those who failed to register after going through SNCC's registration school gained a new consciousness about their political rights. Blacks who had never before engaging in political or civil rights work began taking notice, and it looked as though the movement would continue to grow. As larger and larger numbers of McComb blacks learned about and began participating in the voter registration program, Moses began organizing group trips to the registrar's offices as an additional tactic to embolden individuals who were still afraid of retribution for participating in this drive.³⁹

The advances made by SNCC and McComb leaders did not escape the notice of neighboring communities. E.W. Steptoe, the President of the Amite County NAACP, urged Moses to set up a voter registration school in Amite, while C.C. Bryant's nephew Robert Bryant asked for the same in Walthall County. Moses himself went down to Amite to replicate the success SNCC had found in McComb, while John Hardy and three newly arrived SNCC volunteers, MacArthur Cotton, Jimmie Travis, and George Lowe, set up a voter registration school in Walthall.⁴⁰ The social structure of these areas were fundamentally different from areas of McComb and the rest of Pike County. Economically, most individuals were farmers, either sharecroppers or the owners of small family farms, a group that had rarely been brought in to earlier activism in Southwest Mississippi. While Pike County's black registration numbers were low, Amite (a black majority county) had only one

³⁷ Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 115.

³⁸ Nathaniel Lewis interview, 18-19.

³⁹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 105.

⁴⁰ Dittmer, *Local People*, 105-106.

registered black voter, and no one could identify his or her identity.⁴¹ Nor did these areas benefit from an active press. While the *McComb Enterprise-Journal* was still a white run newspaper, it would often report on violence surrounding voting rights activism in the city, meaning a story out of McComb could become state or even national news.⁴² This regional newspaper did not keep pay equal attention to the outlying areas of Amite and Waltham Counties, meaning a violent response by white had less of a chance of making the news.

To Moses, SNCC needed to be active in hostile areas, even if the danger threatened the future of the project. Moses feared that if they refused to work in an area that ac, they would lose the confidence of the rest of the black community.⁴³ SNCC considered itself part of a democratic movement, and SNCC's staff attributed their presence in McComb to the desire by the people in the area for a voter registration project in their town. If their neighbors began begging for this same treatment, to use the energy and experience of trained young activists to win them political rights, how could SNCC deny them?

In Amite, Moses again relied on an already well developed network of activists to help register voters in an area even more hostile to civil rights activism than Pike County. E.W. Steptoe took in Moses and allowed him to use his dairy farm and resources to support the project. Even after the Amite County NAACP chapter was forced underground by the county sheriff's raid, Steptoe continued to pass information along, going door-to-door to let his neighbors and others know about his plans and any work by the state or national NAACP.⁴⁴ Steptoe activated these connections to help on the registration project. Herbert

⁴¹ Ibid, 105.

⁴² Tom Hayden, "Report on McComb, Mississippi," 1961, box 7, *Tom Hayden Papers*, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Libraries, 16.

⁴³ Dittmer, *Local People*, 105.

⁴⁴ Eldridge Steptoe Jr., interview by Jimmy Dykes, *Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage*, University of Southern Mississippi, November 14, 1995, 2-3.

Lee, a member of the NAACP and Steptoe's neighbor, drove Moses around the county so he could directly reach out to farmers about registering. Another friend of Steptoe's was a janitor at the county courthouse, and he risked his safety to monitor meetings where white citizens planned their response to SNCC coming to register people to vote.⁴⁵ SNCC took advantage of these relationships to, which they received only because local leaders believed SNCC had already proved its authenticity as an ally to their interests who took their direction from the black community in town.

SNCC did their best to replicate in Amite the organizational structure that had some success in McComb. Just as in McComb, SNCC worked through a church already well known to local blacks, where individuals could meet without fear of harassment or exposing themselves as civil rights activists to hostile whites. Still, the Amite movement registration school was never as well-attended as its counterpart in McComb. Usually, two or three people showed up each night for meetings, which they held at a small church on E.W. Steptoe's property.⁴⁶ Considering that Amite was a small county by population and significantly less densely populated than Pike County, it is likely that geographical factors contributed to low attendance. Large meetings had always proven dangerous in Amite, as it gave local law enforcement and vigilantes the opportunity to identify and threaten participants. In an area so hostile to civil rights work, residents preferred to remain at home and find other ways to communicate with the network of activists in the community. Neighbors talked to one another, SNCC workers and volunteers knocked on their doors, and steadily farmers from Amite began attempting to register to vote as SNCC adapted to find the most effective tactics to bring in more local people to the movement.

⁴⁵ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 49.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

In Amite County, municipal officials began to crack down on voting right activism, launching the white response to this budding movement. On August 15, Moses began his involvement in the county when he took an older man and two middle-aged women to register to vote at Liberty, the county seat, who approached Moses because they afraid to attempt such an action on their own. Despite being made to wait six hours, the registrar permitted the three of them to fill out the registration forms. However, once the four of them left the town, they were followed by a local police officer who eventually pulled the car over and arrested Moses for “interfering with an officer in the discharge of his duties.”⁴⁷ Local officials wanted Moses arrested for challenging the racial order, and they hoped this would set an example for any other activists who sought to stir up trouble. The police’s involvement made a statement that local officials would not just turn a blind eye to Ku Klux Klan violence against activists, but they would play an active role in stamping out the nascent voting rights movement. Official reports blamed Moses for the incident, claiming he intimidated the officer during a routine driver’s license check.⁴⁸ The white response to civil rights work often involved discrediting activists. If they could portray SNCC as a violent and unruly influence from the outside world, they would justify to more moderate whites the violence of vigilantes and police officers in suppressing activism. They also hoped to damage SNCC’s image in the eyes of ordinary blacks, who would fear to get involved with men with such a reputation.

Violence against voter registration was not restricted to Amite County. In Walthall County, John Hardy also found some early in organizing an extremely rural area. Eighty percent of the black population in Walthall were independent farmers who owned small plots of land. Hardy secured space for a voter registration school at the Mt. Meriah Baptist Church,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ A.L. Hopkins, “Report on Robert Moses,” April 15, 1963, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online Archives, 2.

and found volunteers to open their homes to classes as well. On August 18th, they held their first class with roughly 30 students in attendance.⁴⁹ Again, farmers had almost never been involved within the Mississippi voting rights movement, and there was a fear that the rural residents of Walthall would not respond to this type of activism. And yet, their voting school's attendance rivaled that of its counterpart in McComb's Pike County, and local activists proved that the black community, long thought of by whites as submissive and passive, would no longer suffer the indignities of Jim Crow life. In Walthall County, John Hardy had already made many trips escorting black residents to the registrar's office Tylertown. On one such trip on September 7th, John Q. Wood, the registrar, denied the farmers he brought the opportunity to even fill out the registration forms. When Hardy confronted him, Wood drew a pistol and smashed the weapon against the side of Hardy's head. When the injured SNCC staffer fled the office and sought help, he was arrested by the sheriff for disturbing the peace.⁵⁰

SNCC's participation guaranteed further protection to locals wanting to register to vote. Moses noted, "I think they felt some sense of security, and clearly we were acting as a kind of buffer, because the initial physical violence was always directed at the voter registration workers." Historian Charles Payne argues that SNCC staffers drew violence away from those seeking to register to vote, creating a much safer environment for locals.⁵¹ When Moses or another staffer brought a group of farmers to the registrar's office to register, their presence often discouraged local whites from engaging in violence, but even when violence occurred SNCC workers served as a lightning rod for the anger of racist whites and suffered in place of local blacks. This lowered the perceived cost of activism for black

⁴⁹ Hayden, "Report on McComb, Mississippi," 6.

⁵⁰ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 47-48

⁵¹ Payne, *Light of Freedom*, 121.

residents of Southwest Mississippi, allowing greater participation in the voting rights movement.

While violence committed by white politicians scared off some from participating in the voter registration drive, it brought SNCC the opportunity to invite intervention from the federal government to enforce black voting rights. The Justice Department, under Robert Kennedy, had made it clear that they preferred voting rights activism to sit-ins and protests, and they pledged that resources would be made available to any future voter registration project. John Doar, a civil rights attorney in the Justice Department, gave his personal phone number to SNCC, and Bob Moses publicized this openly when arrested.⁵² This provided protection for SNCC activists, as whites risked going to jail if their case went to the federal courts, instead of remaining in the state courts where it was nearly impossible to prosecute white-on-black violence. Further, by mid-September Doar himself visited several in the black community to listen to residents' concerns when they believed their civil rights had been violated. He even came to Amite County to meet with Moses at E.W. Steptoe's farm on September 24th, where he examined Moses' wounds after being beaten in Liberty.⁵³ Doar became a visible symbol of federal intervention for the community, and even his limited role gave locals hope that the federal government would step in if the violence got out of hand.

Direct Action

SNCC's involvement in McComb began explicitly to create a voter registration program in the city that could be exported elsewhere in the organizations crusade for advancements in civil rights. However, a large faction of SNCC felt that only direct action

⁵² Moses, *Radical Equations*, 48.

⁵³ Robert Moses, "Reflections from Bob Moses on the Mississippi Theater of the Civil Rights Movement: on the occasion of the passing of John Doar," *The Algebra Project*, http://www.crmvet.org/comm/1411_doar-moses.pdf, 2.

protest could challenge a morally bankrupt social system. Under Ella Baker's compromise at the August SNCC conference in 1961, direct action supporters were given the freedom to run their own projects under the SNCC brand. After, Marion Barry and Charles Sherrod made their way to Mississippi to lay the ground work for their preferred style of protest, eager to prove the effectiveness of their tactics. Moses himself disagreed that direct action should be the focus of SNCC's work, as he felt building blacks political power through voter registration was the most effective long term strategy to repeal Jim Crow laws, but nevertheless he did not feel it was his place to reject the help being offered.⁵⁴ It would be up to the community itself to accept or reject direct action, and if they felt it more important to desegregate public spaces than to attempt to register to vote.

Marion Barry saw the potential to seriously disrupt segregated Southern society by involving high school students and other youth in a direct action campaign. The youth in McComb played an active role in the voter registration movement, handing out fliers and canvassing neighborhoods with Moses.⁵⁵ Still, they often felt that voter registration did not address the primary concerns in their daily lives, such as the substandard equipment and facilities at the segregated black high school. Marion Barry went after these students, promising them an active role in shaping the course of the movement.

Barry helped the students create a Direct Action Committee to organize the youth movement in McComb as a complement to voting rights activism. The Pike County Nonviolent Action Committee was founded in mid-August by a group of fifteen to twenty young adults, with the purpose of investigating what establishments in McComb remained segregated and determining how to desegregate them. Barry held workshops for the students

⁵⁴ Dittmer, *Local People*, 107.

⁵⁵ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 51-52.

to teach them the basics behind nonviolent activism, variations on sit-ins (stand-ins, wait-ins, walk-ins), and how to protect yourself from a violent white response.⁵⁶ Hollis Watkins was elected president of the new organization, with Curtis Hayes becoming vice-president.⁵⁷ For many of the students, this was the first time they had been asked to run anything. Each individual was given the opportunity to debate and decide the new organizations' tactics, allowing youth to take ownership over the development of a direct action movement in McComb.

The Pike County Nonviolent Direct Action Committee began its first sit-in on August 29. After lengthy discussion, the group determined the first site of their desegregation program would be the town library. Even though only two members of the committee, Watkins and Hayes, felt prepared to begin on the appointed day, the two young men decided they needed to follow even if they risked beating or worse on their own. However, none of the students checked to see if the library was open that day, and as a result they could not complete their sit-in. Instead, the students walked down to the nearby Woolworths, another potential target that the committee had earlier discussed.⁵⁸ After being denied a cup of coffee at the white-reserved lunch counter, police (already on hand and likely tipped off about the library sit-in) asked the students repeatedly to leave. When Watkins and Hayes refused, police arrested the two men for breaching the peace, and the two were sentenced to six months in jail, though they only served thirty-four days.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Watkins Interview, 11-12.

⁵⁷ "Hollis Watkins Profile," *One Person One Vote*, accessed March 28, 2016, <http://onevotesncc.org/profile/hollis-watkins/>

⁵⁸ Watkins Interview, 12; James Forman (*Black Revolutionaries*, 227) alleges that White citizens anticipated the sit-in and closed down the library for the day, but neither Watkins himself nor any other source I found mentioned that.

⁵⁹ Watkins Interview, 13.

Jail time did not dissuade the young men from participating in civil rights work, but instead strengthened their commitment to nonviolent activism. During Watkins' and Hayes' month in jail, police regularly questioned and threatened the young men for information. On one such occasion, Watkins wrote that an officer grabbed a length of rope, "[H]e looked at me as I was looking at him, and he said to me, 'O.K., nigger, get up, let's go, we're going to have a hanging here tonight and you're going to be first.' I became very frightened at that moment... but instead of showing my [sic] frightenedness, I crossed my legs and reared back in my chair and smiled at him."⁶⁰ Such treatment by the jailers attempted to dehumanize the young men, constantly threatening them with violence or death and refusing to recognize their rights, but the two men persevered and only strengthened their commitment to the civil rights movement. Watkins' and Hayes' thirty-four days in jail brought exposed them to an extreme microcosm of Southern society; white officers showed no regard for the well-being of their black prisoners, who they openly considered less than human. In a society with such deeply ingrained discrimination, blacks had little chance to advance their position without a major change to the *status quo*. This renewed their commitment to direct action, which sought to cause an immediate disruption to the functioning of an unequal society. They fought back through nonviolence, assuring themselves of a moral superiority even if they had to endure. Even inside the jail, they still managed to carve out a sense of agency and power. This improvement in self-worth became critical as these young men, as let them view themselves as capable leaders who could take a role at the forefront of the civil rights movement.

Predictably, the arrest of two young men outraged the black community in McComb, who had previously escaped the violence and arrest that plagued the neighboring counties

⁶⁰ Forman, *Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 228.

through their civil rights work. Black leaders hastily called for a town meeting that night to organize a response, and over 200 attended. James Bevel, an influential civil rights activist and SNCC ally, gave an address to the town where he advocated the continued use of nonviolent resistance to bring justice for the black community.⁶¹ Through Marion Barry's actions, SNCC used students' involvement as a way to draw the entire community further into civil rights activism. Many parents who had remained hesitant to join SNCC sponsored activities suddenly saw young men their children's age being thrown into jail for ordering food at a lunch counter. The public outrage at such a disproportionate white response to student's direct action led at least temporarily to higher participation in the movement by the community.

The August 29th mass meeting also served as a bridge between the voting rights and direct action campaigns in McComb. On the same day that Watkins and Hayes were arrested in McComb, Bob Moses was beaten in Liberty while escorting two men to the courthouse to register to vote. Group trips were meant to embolden blacks afraid of registering on their own, but it also served as a visible demonstration against the racial order of Southwestern Mississippi, just as sit-ins had done previously. As Moses and his group walked down the street towards the courthouse, Billy Jack Caston, the cousin of Amite County's sheriff, jumped out at the group and used the handle of his knife to repeatedly bludgeon Moses until he was bloody and bruised.⁶² Moses refused to fight back against Caston, and instead he endured the blows until he could escape. After being bandaged up at the Steptoe Farm, Moses rushed back to McComb to take part in the mass meeting. As Moses spoke, it became clear to everyone in the room that the period of relative calm in McComb during the

⁶¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 107-108.

⁶² Dittmer, *Local People*, 106.

registration drive was over. Moses' bandaged face brought to life the reality that voter registration would face as heavy resistance as direct action protests. Whites signaled that saw even minor gains in black political power or consciousness as threatening to the social fabric of McComb as protests against segregation where students trespassed on white property. One girl in particular was affected by Moses' condition, as he wrote, "At the mass meeting, a young girl kept staring at me... I think the sight of my battered and bandaged head registered some great outrage in Brenda [Travis]." ⁶³ The next day, August 30th, high school student Brenda Travis, along with recent graduates Bobbie Talbert and Ike Lewis, organized a sit-in at the white section of the Greyhound bus terminal in McComb. Just as in the sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter, police quickly arrested the young activists and sent them to jail for roughly one month. ⁶⁴

The arrest of Brenda Travis divided the opinions of McComb blacks. While the earlier arrests of Watkins and Hayes shocked and outraged black leaders in McComb, they did not blame SNCC because the two men were technically legal adults when they chose to sit-in and so were responsible enough to understand the danger that they put themselves in. However, direct action supporters had now brought a minor into the sights of local law enforcement, which incensed established leaders of the McComb civil rights groups. C.C. Bryant had already voiced his disagreement with the theory behind a direct action program, and claimed that Barry ignored the black community of McComb by enabling high school students to protest and get thrown in jail. ⁶⁵ Bryant did not go so far as to condemn the direct action oriented SNCC staffers, but the established leaders of the civil rights movement in McComb began to grow wary of their SNCC allies. However, with the arrests of the five key

⁶³ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 52-53.

⁶⁴ Hayden, *Report on Mississippi*, 7.

⁶⁵ C.C. Bryant, interviewed by Joe Sinsheimer, February 12, 1999, 11.

participants of the Pike County Nonviolent Action Committee, the direct action movement in McComb came to a temporarily halt and delayed the impending break between local leaders and direct action supporters.

McComb Boils Over

By mid-September, SNCC and local activists were making some progress in their crusade for black voting rights. While several individuals had been jailed or beaten, large segments of Mississippi society began to mobilize to support it. Farmers, students, and the poor joined the traditional ranks of the civil rights movement that included union men, business owners, and veterans to create a broad based social movement. There was a hope, even despite the violence, that eventually whites would give in and begin to register qualified black voters. This changed, however, with the murder of Herbert Lee.

Herbert Lee had played a key role in supporting the Amite County voter registration movement. He helped found the Amite branch of the NAACP along with E.W. Steptoe in 1953, and he was an active member even after law enforcement began cracking down on the organization in 1954. As a prosperous independent dairy farmer, Lee could sell his goods across state lines where he would get a better price and protect himself from the economic pressures from local whites for his civil rights work. When SNCC came to Amite to help Steptoe register blacks to vote, Lee offered to ferry activists around the county as they canvassed the area to recruit registration applicants.⁶⁶ Because of his economic independence, Lee had the freedom to openly fight the area's oppressive racial policies, but this would draw the ire of his white neighbors. State representative E.H. Hurst, Lee's white neighbor, objected strongly to Lee's civil rights activities, and threatened him repeatedly

⁶⁶ Payne, *I've got the Light of Freedom*, 121.

without success.⁶⁷ On the morning of September 25th, Hurst followed Lee to the town cotton gin and pulled out a handgun on his neighbor. Lee appeared to talk Hurst into lowering his weapon, but after Lee attempted to leave Hurst again pulled out his gun and this time he shot Lee in cold blood. The sheriff intimidated witnesses to place the blame of the incident on Lee, and a coroner's jury accepted Hurst's claim that he had shot Lee in self-defense after the small black man raised a tire iron against him.⁶⁸

The killing of Herbert Lee signaled a new phase in the McComb civil rights movement, where every protestor could face death for their work, even without direct provocation. The white community had been caught off guard by the sudden and well organized rise of voting rights and direct action activism, and never before had they faced such a serious challenge to Jim Crow laws. SNCC's involvement in McComb emboldened blacks past the point where local politicians and law enforcement could merely threaten these groups into silence, but open violence still proved effective. Strategies previously employed by SNCC, such as going to register in groups and using volunteers to canvass neighborhoods for potential registrants, would no longer work if SNCC could no longer provide participants a measure of protection. Lee's murder also exposed cracks in the alliance between SNCC and the black community of McComb. Herbert Lee's wife accused Moses and the rest of SNCC of killing her husband, and others in the black community began to attribute this new wave of violence to SNCC's entrance into McComb. SNCC's visible and confrontational techniques had provoke violence from whites, and so to them the organization shared the blame for the fallout from the registration drive.⁶⁹ In the immediate aftermath of Lee's death, there was

⁶⁷ Ibid, 123.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 122.

⁶⁹ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 50.

little chance that the voter registration program could continue, as few were willing to put their lives on the line to register to vote.

More than that, Lee's death signaled the weakening of federal support for the Southwestern Mississippi voter registration movement. FBI agents refused to offer their protection to Allen, the only witness to Lee's killing that was willing to testify in court against Hurst.⁷⁰ It seemed as though the protection that SNCC brought Southwestern Mississippi activists was crumbling before local peoples' very eyes.

This was the situation in MCom when the jail terms of the five central figures in the Pike County Nonviolent Action Committee ended, and they returned to McComb. On October 2, the NAACP and the SCLC paid for the bond of the five young activists, including the high school students Brenda Travis and Isaac Lewis.⁷¹ While Watkins, Hayes, and the others could risk their safety by continuing their civil rights work, Travis and Lewis wanted to further organize their classmates to build a larger nonviolent student movement. This presented a difficult problem for the black Burglund High School, where school administrators had little appetite for the chaos that would be brought on by open civil rights work. The murder of Herbert Lee made the issue especially sensitive, as students would no doubt use him as a symbol to continue rebelling. Commodore Dewey Higgins, principal of the high school, expelled the two students in hopes that the rest of the student body would be too afraid to continue organizing with SNCC.⁷² It is unclear how much of this came from Higgins' genuine concerns about the safety of students, and how much was the result of pressure. As a school administrator, he would have served at the pleasure of an all-white school board, and at the smallest sign of support for students who "disturbed the peace"

⁷⁰ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 123.

⁷¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 110.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Higgins would likely lose his job. Some alleged, however, that the school board allowed Higgins to skim revenue from tickets to athletic events in return for his cooperation in suppressing the involvement of students in the civil rights movement.⁷³

The expulsion of Brenda Travis was the last straw for many youth at Burglund High School. Students in McComb were angry: angry at their school for expelling their friend, angry at the older civil rights leaders for telling them to slow down with direct action, and angry at whites for killing blacks who spoke out. On October 4th, well over 100 students walked out of a school assembly Burglund High School when the principal refused to readmit Brenda Travis.⁷⁴ This action caught SNCC staffers off guard, and staffers only found out about the walk-out when they heard students chanting as they went to the Masonic hall to make signs for a march.⁷⁵ This protest was a spontaneous manifestation of the students' anger, and students appropriated tactics taught to them by SNCC for their own ends. Just because it was sudden, however, does not mean this protest was disorganized or lacked an endgame. Students demanded that the school reinstate Brenda Travis, that the town bring State Representative Hurst to justice for murdering Herbert Lee, and that their parents to support the civil rights movement.⁷⁶

SNCC staffers strongly counseled the students to return to school, but after it became clear that students would not settle for anything else, Moses and others joined them to facilitate their goals. Bob Moses suggested that students refrain from marching to the county seat at Magnolia, where rural whites would be free to attack the students, and instead recommended the McComb city hall as their target. Charles McDew, the newly arrived

⁷³ David Ray, "Brave Times at Burglund High," Jackson Free Press, February 19, 2014.

⁷⁴ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 124.

⁷⁵ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 53.

⁷⁶ Joe Martin and McComb Conference Interview, 14.

SNCC chair, cautioned students to be on their best behavior, and to avoid breaking any city ordinances so any arrest that took place would clearly hinge on student's civil rights work.⁷⁷ SNCC often stressed their position as an ally to local peoples, not an outside force that dictated the direction of the movement within communities. SNCC joined with the McComb students knowing this jeopardized their relationship with local civil rights leaders clarified what it meant to be a facilitator for a local democratic movement. For SNCC, democracy was not the will of the majority, but rather the ability for a passionate person or group to determine their own actions and impact their community. In that way, SNCC preferred to become a tool to be used by local people and not the controlling force. This strategy had its flaws, as it became difficult to unite the community around a single set of tactics or goals, but it created an organizational framework that encouraged the development of a diverse array of new leaders who took ownership of the movement. Some local people, however, viewed SNCC as having control and influence over the students, and they were shocked that they did not stop children from endangering their lives and futures. In that way, SNCC was not working for the desires of the community at large, but rather let students fulfil some SNCC agenda.

As parents watched their young children get arrested and suspended from school, large segments of the black community put pressure on C.C. Bryant to throw SNCC out of town. Principal Higgins issued an ultimatum, where he would only allow expelled students to return to school only if by October 16 they signed an affidavit pledging to end any involvement with civil rights activism. On behalf of the NAACP, Bryant approached the students and asked them to end their protest and go back to school. 103 students handed in

⁷⁷ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 53.

their textbooks that day and left the school permanently.⁷⁸ The NAACP officially supported students who refused to sign an affidavit that they would not continue working in the civil rights movement, but they preferred that the students work to integrate the schools instead through a campaign to enforce the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.⁷⁹ Bryant recognized that the voter registration program had failed to effectively engage youth in civil rights activism, and that students turned to direct action for a sense of agency. Bryant hoped he could channel their energy in a way acceptable to the majority of the black community. However, this attempt at compromise prove too little, too late. Students could not see themselves continuing to attend a school that taught them and their classmates to submit to white authorities, and they decided to forge ahead with their direct action campaign.

For several weeks after the October 16 walk-out, SNCC offered support to the expelled students. Moses, a teacher by trade, founded the “Nonviolent High,” a school staffed by SNCC workers to continue the education of the walk-out participants, with a curriculum designed by the SNCC activists in McComb and Ella Baker, who had previously set up a voter education program during the SCLC’s Crusade for Citizenship registration drive in 1958.⁸⁰ Fifty to Seventy-Five students joined the school, which took place in both the Mason hall and St. Paul Methodist Church.⁸¹ The creation of a parallel educational institution, outside of the normal legal framework for schools and run directly by the community, marked an important milestone in the movement. Most publically funded black high schools and colleges in the South had their funding decisions controlled by white government officials, and the threat of closure or firing pushed these institutions to become a

⁷⁸ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 125.

⁷⁹ Bryant interview with Sinsheimer, 4.

⁸⁰ Dittmer, *Local People*, 12; Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 326.

⁸¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 112

barrier to students participating in civil rights work.⁸² Instead, Nonviolent High gave students the freedom to express themselves, learn black history, and engage in thoughtful discussions. Charles McDew taught students history lessons about black history, focusing on courageous black figures like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and exposing students for the first time to the briefly successful struggle for black rights during Reconstruction. The school also provided more conventional instruction, as Moses taught mathematics and Dion Diamond (a newly arrived SNCC staffer) taught chemistry and physics to the young men and women.⁸³ Students were asked to challenge what they learned at Burglund High School, and to allow every student a chance to talk regardless of social status.⁸⁴ This school became another means to liberate black students from a hierarchal society. The school ended when Campbell College in Jackson, a religiously affiliated black school, took in all of Nonviolent High's students.⁸⁵

By early November, SNCC lost virtually all its momentum in McComb. When the students left for Jackson to continue their schooling, SNCC lost its largest remaining base of support in the city. Several influential members of the community, such as Webb Owens and Aylene Quinn, continued to trust SNCC and their campaign but no longer would scores of people join SNCC-sponsored meetings or demonstrations. As SNCC no longer held the support of black McComb, Bryant had little choice but to call for SNCC to leave the city.⁸⁶ After SNCC staffers, including Moses, Zellner, Watkins, and Hayes, made bail on December 10, they complied with Bryant's wishes and left town to continue the struggle elsewhere.⁸⁷

⁸² Leslie Etienne, "A Historical Narrative of SNCC's Freedom Schools," (PhD dissertation, Antioch University, March 2012), 78-79

⁸³ David Ray, "Brave Times at Burglund High."

⁸⁴ Dittmer, *Local People*, 113.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 111-112.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 114-115.

Conclusion

If one judges the McComb voter registration drive by the number of newly registered black voters in Southwestern Mississippi, it was an abject failure. While a few dozen managed to put their name on the voter rolls, they did not constitute a meaningful political constituency that could influence the outcome of elections. Such little progress seemed to have been made, at such a high cost to the community. Yet, the McComb registration drive was successful in that it broadened the civil rights struggle beyond a small niche of dedicated activists and provided lessons about organizing that would shape the movement for years to come.

SNCC did not enter a McComb devoid of leadership or direction. The region has a long and complex history of civil rights activism, and it is wrong to believe that this voter registration drive occurred in McComb only because SNCC decided to launch their first project in the city. Still, a real revolution occurred when SNCC partnered with local civil rights workers to reach out to segments of black society that historically found themselves marginalized from leadership in the civil rights movement: sharecroppers, poor city workers, and students. For a brief moment, the black community of the entire region rose up together, and whites resorted to violence-- including the murder of Herbert Lee-- to restore the “proper” racial order of McComb. Yet, when SNCC left, they left behind a community with a new and wider experience in civil rights work, and that activism would continue in other forms even without outside support.

SNCC was just as influenced by McComb as McComb was influenced by SNCC. In the fall of 1961, McComb became a proving ground for tactics that would become central to further civil rights activism. Neither voter registration nor direct action could appeal to the

entire community, and the combination of both allowed SNCC to draw in nearly every segment of black McComb. While the established figures in the Southwestern Mississippi movement preferred voter registration, students and youth felt only sit-ins and walk-outs gave them the ability to fight back against the Jim Crow South. These two tactics could not be considered mutually exclusive, and the work done in McComb helped heal the split that occurred in SNCC. Did the name of the tactic matter, if either way the activist ended up arrested, beaten, or killed? SNCC found that a combination of those tactics was necessary engaging the whole of a community in civil rights work, and they were ready to use the lessons learned from successes and failures there as they went on to work elsewhere in the South. McComb was not a decisive turning point American civil rights movement, but it provided a template for voting rights activism that would be replicated in many areas across Mississippi.

CHAPTER THREE: The Aftermath of the McComb Voter Registration Drive

The McComb voter registration drive ended when SNCC staffers left the city on December 10th, 1961, after they were released from the local jail for aiding the delinquency of minors. When McComb parents took their expelled children to Campbell College in Jackson to continue their education, SNCC lost its base support in the community, and the NAACP and others demanded that SNCC end their project in McComb. It became clear that Moses or other SNCC staffers would not be welcome to return to register black voters in Pike County or the surrounding area.

While this ended a chapter of the civil rights struggle of Southwestern Mississippi, it would be incorrect to imply a strict separation between SNCC and McComb. In reality, SNCC and Southwestern Mississippi residents maintained a complex relationship where each managed to shape the actions and behaviors of the other. SNCC continued to run regional projects where they would coordinate with McComb and the surrounding community, while McComb activists continued civil rights work on their own. Several McComb youth joined SNCC or other civil rights organizations, and their experiences from 1961 led to similar programs being instituted around the state. Finally, SNCC veterans of McComb influenced future SNCC policy, where the chaos from the registration drive pushed SNCC into further centralizing their organization. In the short term, voting rights activism continued to take up most of the attention of SNCC field organizers, with McComb serving as ground zero for the movement. In the long term, SNCC needed to rethink their strategy in how to convince the federal government to protect SNCC's projects and force Southern registrars to accept large numbers of black applicants to vote.

Still, McComb was not the profound turning point in the early 1960s civil rights movement. Rather, the McComb voter registration drive revealed many of the structural and tactical failings of SNCC, along with tactical innovations that were used and improved in the organization's other programs.

The Continuing Movement in McComb

Support for SNCC did not totally vanish when the organization left Pike County, and in fact some individuals continued to coordinate with SNCC through a number of different campaigns. However, those demonstrations were on a much smaller scale than the 1961 voter registration drive, and it lacked coordination with any sort of program or seriously planned effort. Yet, even factions in the community that would no longer work with SNCC found their work influenced somewhat by the registration drive, adapting SNCC ideology to improve already common tactics to the region.

Most SNCC-related activism that continued in the town dealt with education. SNCC advisor Ella Baker contacted Webb Owens, the Pike County NAACP treasurer and SNCC collaborator in McComb, to request that he distribute SNCC produced pamphlets on the "Revolt in Mississippi" to members of the community. Baker further sought Owens's advice on how best to oppose attempts by whites to gain control of Campbell College in Jackson, where expelled McComb students were continuing their education. McComb students taught their classmates nonviolent tactics and began a series of demonstrations in Jackson against the conditions of black students, and racial conservatives fought to take over the school and shut it down in response.¹ Webb Owens had been a strong SNCC supporter even after the organization left town, so it is unsurprising that he continued to keep in touch with Ella Baker and contribute to the movement's success. There is no evidence that Owens had

¹ Ella Baker, Letter to Webb Owens, *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement Online Collection*, May 24, 1962.

significant help in these efforts, and his role shifted from a volunteer on the front line in the voter registration effort to spreading information in town on other civil rights projects in the state. Handing out pamphlets pales in comparison to the earlier registration drive, where meaningful numbers of people directly confronted the white power structure, but it continued to spread awareness of the bravery of rebelling blacks in the South.

Regional SNCC programs continued to play a role in McComb, but only through the help of local activists. Immediately after SNCC left McComb, Bob Moses agreed to work for Rev. Robert L. T. Smith's campaign for congress, the first black man to run for office since Reconstruction, in a district that covered the city of McComb. Moses returned to McComb with Smith to canvass the area and speak at meetings about Smith's candidacy. Smith drew deep resentment from whites, but Moses himself was usually the subject of attacks as an outside agitator. Ernest Nobles, a small businessman and early supporter of SNCC's work in Mississippi, hid Moses in his dry cleaning shop from whites after an attempt to attack him during a visit to the city.² Even after the 1961 voter registration drive, only a small percentage of blacks in Southwestern Mississippi could vote, so the odds of McComb playing a significant role in deciding the Democratic nominee for congress was near zero. The goal, rather, was to inspire blacks in the community to continue their civil rights work through political engagement. Nobles and others recognized the importance of such a demonstration, and Noble's protection and support made it possible for Smith and Moses to organize these meetings and continue political programs for blacks in the city.

While only a minimal relationship remained between local activists and SNCC in the wake of the 1961 registration drive, the McComb civil rights movement barrowed and

² Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 107.

adapted tactics that resembled those used by SNCC. Information is sparse during this period from 1962-1963, as most major newspapers ceased their coverage of McComb after SNCC left the area, but in what is available there is no mention of a continued, visible voter registration drive in the city. Instead, the Pike County NAACP held control over the direction of the movement in McComb. As a strategy, the NAACP preferred to focus on school desegregation and fundraising for the national NAACP to continue their legal campaigns against Jim Crow laws in the South. C.C. Bryant in particular, President of the local NAACP, continued to prod the federal government into enforcing the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision on the local school system in Pike County, believing that school desegregation was the best avenue to advance black rights in the long run. Such an effort would not be successful until 1970.³ With most activist students gone from the community while continuing their studies in Jackson, SNCC lost its natural base, and local leaders like Aylene Quin and Webb Owens could only continue low level support for the movement.

The threat of renewed violence also contributed to McComb activists' preference for more quiet desegregation work over SNCC styled voter registration drives and direct action protests, as there was little hope that the federal government would intervene against anti-civil rights forces. McComb lacked the size and often relevance to warrant coverage by the national media, and without press-savvy allies in the city, it would be practically impossible for McComb residents to build enough public pressure to spur the federal government's enforcement of voting rights. Even though the Justice Department rarely intervened in a meaningful way to convict McComb officials of civil rights abuses, at least the specter of federal involvement provoked by SNCC's presence in the area could moderate the actions of whites. McComb blacks could no longer afford to openly register voters, which would bring

³ C.C. Bryant, Interview with Joe Sinsheimer, February 12, 1999, Transcript, 11.

them into direct confrontation with white supremacists law enforcement and registrars, and instead they preferred to work within their community to educate and work to support more promising efforts elsewhere.

Still, this is not to say that the local movement remained static in the wake of SNCC's departure. The Pike County NAACP organized public meetings for the black community, advertising informational and historical events to educate the community on cultural and political issues, such as a speaker series around the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1963.⁴ The local NAACP was virtually silent in the few years leading up to 1961, keeping many of its programs secret in fear of spurring reprisals from the white community for their activism. Instead of returning to that pattern after SNCC departed, however, local civil rights proponents felt that they could more openly challenge their economic and political condition, through open discussions that connected residents of the community concerned with black rights. Just as important is the subject material covered by these speeches. SNCC emphasized lessons in black history during their voter registration school and in their high school curriculum for "Nonviolent High," in an effort to build a pride in ones' blackness and an understanding of the course of black rights in American history. The NAACP decided to use this to their own benefit, evidently believing they could draw in larger numbers of people to become involved in the movement if they could link past successful struggles for the blacks to the contemporary fight for black voting rights and desegregation.

SNCC failed to develop a network that could provide a more radical alternative to the NAACP after they left the area. Many former participants of the 1961 registration drive still

⁴ Pike County NAACP, "Emancipation Proclamation Centennial Program," January 20, 1963, *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement Online Collection*, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/630120_naACP_mccomb_flyer.pdf

supported the idea voter registration; however, without an outside force aiding the effort, it would be difficult at get the community to rally behind such a drive. Activism continued in McComb, but the actual role of SNCC was quite muted. Without a base of students ready to engage in visible protest, and with many others scared off by murder of Herbert Lee, SNCC supporters lacked the numbers or the manpower to continue organizing. The goal was no longer to stage blatant acts of resistance against discrimination in voter registration, and instead locals fought for legal changes by funding NAACP legal efforts and holding meetings on black history. Still, the fact that mass meetings could still be popularly attended attests to the increased political consciousness of black McComb since the 1961 registration drive.

McComb Students Join the Movement

To Bob Moses and many other SNCC workers during the 1961 McComb voter registration drive, the success of the movement depended on the development of local leadership. While a number of civil rights organizations like the NAACP or the Pike County Voters' league achieved some small successes, many high school students became first time activists when exposed to SNCC during the 1961 registration drive. These youth were not bit players or "grunt workers" for SNCC, but instead they played an active role in controlling the policy and direction of the movement. This youth involvement in civil rights work carried over past the end of the drive. In particular, Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, and Brenda Travis, among others, went on to participate in the SNCC and continued to use their knowledge and experiences to shape the civil rights movement.

It is unsurprising that two of the leading activists among the youth in McComb, Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes, followed SNCC's staff out of McComb to become full-

fledged organizers with SNCC. Watkins and Hayes went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, at the invitation of Vernon Dahmer, a farmer and President of the Forrest County NAACP who was frustrated with the slow pace of progress and lack of militancy in the local movement.⁵ Despite early resistance by members of the Hattiesburg NAACP, Watkins and Hayes managed to run a program very similar to that of SNCC in McComb. The two SNCC staffers set up a voter registration school that taught literacy and political rights to prospective black voters, using documents ranging from the Bible to the Mississippi and US constitutions to prepare students for the voter registration tests and teach them about their constitutional political rights. They also canvassed all areas of the community in search of finding black residents who would be willing to brave the registrar and attempt to register to vote.⁶

In attempting to create a broad-based coalition, as had been attempted in McComb, Watkins and Hayes reached out to students, business people, and women who had been traditionally alienated by influential black figures in Hattiesburg. Much of the black elite of the city had actively worked to suppress the civil rights movement, and individuals had few places they could turn to express their frustration with the lack of progress in voting rights. Reverend R.W. Woullard, a black preacher in town, had heavily discouraged fellow blacks from registering to vote and informed the Sovereignty Commission, a *de facto* anti-civil rights police force of the state, of civil rights activists' activities.⁷ As an informant, Woullard managed to prevent the development of a leadership base in Hattiesburg that had any credibility on civil rights issues, intimidating the local NAACP into near inaction, which SNCC leveraged when they entered the community. In McComb, the NAACP presented

⁵ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 180.

⁶ Hollis Watkins, Interview with John Rachal, *Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage, University of Southern Mississippi*, October 23-30, 1996, 21-22

⁷ Dittmer, *Local People*, 182.

school desegregation as an alternative to SNCC-supported student protests when the group was expelled from the city; in Hattiesburg, SNCC positioned their voter registration work as the only avenue for individuals interested in advancing black rights. Many of the business persons, black professionals, and youth in the area were extremely disenchanted with Rev. Woullard and the local NAACP, and SNCC offered to give them a way to fight back against the white establishment.⁸ These groups often had fundamentally different views on the best way engage in civil rights protest, as was the case in McComb, but SNCC readably included these disparate groups in their decision making process and at least in the short term these groups cooperated fully. Watkins and Hayes also made a concerted effort to bring in women to their organizational work. The Hattiesburg Branch of the NAACP, not affiliated with Dahmer and basically inactive in the community, was male dominated and refused to take on female members. Victoria Gray, the local PTA leader and a church official, became a central leader in SNCC's new effort after being denied membership in the Hattiesburg NAACP, and she assisted SNCC in reaching out to other women.⁹ When SNCC brought in local leaders from different sections of Hattiesburg society, they gained allies who could recruit new volunteers from their respective parts of the community, building a broadly based movement. Watkins and Hayes were later in 1962 recruited to work in Greenwood, Mississippi and Holmes County, Mississippi, where they used similar tactics to further build a voter registration movement.¹⁰ These two former McComb students became well trained activists who worked around the state trying to spread the voter registration movement to areas devoid of much activism, and in their programing they attempted to prevent SNCC from making the same mistakes they made in McComb.

⁸ Ibid, 182.

⁹ Ibid, 182.

¹⁰ Watkins interview, 25.

Hollis Watkins in particular became an influential member of SNCC, and his voice helped shape debates over the organization's future. Like Moses, Watkins retained a strong commitment to the development of local leadership as a central part of SNCC's programs. In order to better understand how to serve local communities, Watkins attended the Highlander Folk School as a student in 1962, where he learned about the latest tactics for civil rights groups to coordinate with local communities, while also educating his fellow classmates of the realities on the ground in Mississippi.¹¹ This impulse carried over to internal debates in SNCC on the role of Northern students in the. Moses and SNCC began to advocate for the use of white college students as volunteers in a mass voter registration movement that would later be called the Freedom Summer, but Watkins vehemently opposed that plan.¹² Watkins believed that "people from the North, be they black or white, felt that they were better than us from the South. And with that attitude existing then we knew that the minute they came they would automatically attempt to take over and run things."¹³ As a resident in McComb, it must have been evident to Watkins that outside activists often cause friction within the communities they work, either through ignorance or entitlement. While in McComb, SNCC imagined themselves as facilitators who worked for the aims of the city's black residents, but even so the organization had a set idea of strategies and principles around which to organize. To Watkins, it made sense that by prioritizing hiring staff from the South, SNCC could create an organization more aware of the problems facing blacks in rural Mississippi and less likely to control the direction of the movement at the expense of local leaders. Despite these reservations, he agreed to work with SNCC on the 1964 Freedom Summer project, which would be SNCC's largest undertaking to date.

¹¹ Ibid, 30.

¹² Dittmer, *Local People*, 209.

¹³ Watkins Interview, 32.

Brenda Travis, the student whose expulsion led in part to McComb's student-led walk out of Burglund High in October of 1961, suffered significantly for her activism but eventually rejoined the civil rights movement. After Travis was arrested for taking part in a sit-in of McComb's segregated bus terminal, a Pike County court sentenced her to attend reform school at the Oakly Training School, several counties over in Hinds County, Mississippi. Administrators would not let Travis have any contact with her family or other students from McComb, and they took great care that she would no longer continue agitating for black rights.¹⁴ This time of isolation was particularly hard on Travis, and she grew indifferent to her cause and towards life. On her time at Oakly, Travis said, "[T]hat was the one time that I felt that I didn't care if I lived or died, because I didn't feel as though I was going to see my family again.... Shoot me, do whatever you have to do to me, because right now, you've stripped me of everything."¹⁵ Yet, her case got significant attention in the press, and six months after Travis arrived, a professor from Alabama's Talladega College convinced the governor of Mississippi to release Travis into his custody, on the condition that the two of them left the state and did not return. This arraignment lasted only a short while, however, as the professor began making unwanted sexual advances towards Travis, and the young woman fled from Alabama to the only group she knew in the South that might show her some kindness, SNCC. She travelled by bus to the Atlanta home of SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman, and he quickly put Travis under the custody of Ella Baker.¹⁶

¹⁴ Brenda Travis, Interview with Wazir Peacock, Jean Wiley, and Bruch Hartford, *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*, February 2007.

¹⁵ Travis Interview.

¹⁶ Ibid.

In this confused, angry, and isolated young girl, SNCC provided training that could give Travis direction and allow her to continue in the fight for civil rights. Ella Baker, the SNCC advisor and longtime civil rights activist, became a surrogate mother for Travis. She arraigned for Travis to attend school, raised money from SNCC staffers to send her to summer camp, and took her shopping to feel like a human being again.¹⁷ Baker pushed Travis into accepting greater responsibilities during her time in Atlanta, giving her clerical work at the SNCC offices and exposing her to some of the leading figures in the organization.¹⁸ Still, this did not mean that this was a happy period for Travis. Brenda spent a year at the Palmer academy, a women's dormitory school that she found authoritarian and domineering. Travis did not respond well to this new authority figure and resented being put in another situation where she was under someone else's control. Further, it was also impossible for her to see her family, as her mother had been fired for Travis' activism and could not afford to travel, and Travis still could not legally enter Mississippi.¹⁹ Dissatisfied and lacking direction, Travis began to bounce around from place to place, staying with a network of activists, eventually graduating from high school in North Haven, Connecticut. Still, Travis left Atlanta with a greater understanding of how civil rights organizations functioned and a series of contacts that would keep her informed and involved with SNCC's activities.

Even though Travis was many years removed from her time in McComb, she still retained a determination to rejoin the movement. As SNCC began organizing in Mississippi in advance for the Freedom Summer, a massive voter registration drive in 1964, Travis was

¹⁷ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 292.

¹⁸ Travis Interview.

¹⁹ Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 293.

presented with an opportunity to return home and continue the work she started in 1961. Even though she risked arrest for returning to the state, she felt compelled to take part. When asked why she would agree to return to Mississippi, she answered in one word: “Defiance.” She returned to her hometown to speak on behalf of SNCC organizers and encourage her own friends and family to rejoin the voter registration movement. However, as violence escalated quickly in McComb and she realized she was a potential target, Travis decided she would be more useful elsewhere and continued her work in Jackson, Mississippi.²⁰

While these three McComb youth, Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, and Brenda Travis, became vocal and visible leaders of the civil rights movement, many of the McComb students expelled in 1961 also played a role in continuing civil rights work. After the administration at Burglund High School refused to readmit students who did not sign a pledge to abandon their activism, President Robert Stevens of Campbell College in Jackson, Mississippi, invited the young students to continue their studies at his institution. Campbell College was an AME affiliated black college and had already allowed the state NAACP to use its facilities for trainings and press conferences.²¹ However, once the McComb students arrived on campus, they encouraged their new classmates to become directly involved in the movement, beyond supporting campus’ general support for NAACP activism. McComb students helped educate their peers at Campbell College about direct action tactics such as boycotts and sit-ins, and suddenly students on campus began to use these tools to attract local and press attention to the condition of blacks in Mississippi. The campus Chaplain even launched a sit-in on his own of the campus.²²

²⁰ Travis interview.

²¹ Joy Ann Williamson, “Quacks, Quirks, Agitators, and Communists,” *History of Higher Education Annual* 23 (2003-2004): 59.

²² Ibid.

This wave of activism launched a massive fight between the college and conservatives in Mississippi. After receiving threats from Mississippi's State Sovereignty Commission for students' agitation, conservative members of the board of trustees and the AME church filed an injunction against President Stevens and Dean Jones, alleging that college was teaching a radical, pro-integration ideology instead of the teachings of the church, that the McComb students had no right to gain admission to the school, and that the stances of administration put the school at risk of closure by the state.²³ The court ordered new elections by the church to fill the board of trustees and the demotion of the pro-civil rights bishop who supported student's actions, but members of the church reelected half of the previous Trustees, and the new board decided to retain President Stevens and Dean Jones.²⁴ While this move intended to end civil rights activism at the school, it in effect purged the conservative elements of the AME from their influence over the college, and got church membership to participate to some degree in civil rights movement by voting to support the activist students.

One cannot attribute the rising activism at Campbell College solely to McComb students. The AME church played a visible role in black protest movements, and for years before Campbell College acted as an important center for NAACP activism. However, McComb students sparked a new enthusiasm for direct action tactics, and provided manpower for demonstrations on campus. At the same time, this new activism had its casualties, as many movement centers faced repercussions from white elites. While the pro-civil rights administration of Campbell College remained intact, the costs of the legal fight

²³ Ibid, 60-61.

²⁴ Ibid, 61-62.

took an enormous financial toll on the school. After a failed attempt to move the college to a cheaper property, the state took over the land under eminent domain and closed the school.

SNCC Turns to Electoral Politics

While SNCC would no longer set up McComb-based programs until the Freedom Summer of 1964, the organization continued to push for black involvement in electoral politics in Southwest Mississippi. Bob Moses, still a SNCC field staffer, joined the congressional campaign of Reverend Robert L. T. Smith in December 1961. Reverend Smith petitioned to be in the Democratic primary as the first black man to run for Congress since Reconstruction, running in Mississippi's 3rd congressional district which covered Jackson, the city of McComb, and much of Southwestern Mississippi. Smith had little hope of winning as long as white racial conservatives controlled the state party apparatus, but instead this campaign allowed organizers to bring larger numbers of blacks to the civil rights movement through political organizing.²⁵ Moses acted as his campaign manager, and together they traveled to different communities around the district, canvassing neighborhoods and working with local groups to organize increasing voter registration efforts. As part of the campaign, Smith held meetings in McComb and engaged directly with black McComb voters, just as SNCC had done in 1961.²⁶ Moses believed the most important aspect of the registration drive in McComb was getting a black man or woman to imagine themselves in the voting booth and wielding the power to affect political decision making.²⁷ This strategy was used to combat a sense of submission in the black community to whites, and in that way this congressional campaign was an extension of McComb's voter registration work.

²⁵ Wesley Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 77.

²⁶ Robert Moses, Interview with Clayborne Carson, March 29, 1982, Transcript, 23.

²⁷ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 46.

A major facet of this campaign was the ability to train and develop a cadre of black activists who would in turn run for political office. In a letter Bob Moses wrote to a supporter of Rev. Smith during the campaign on June 2, 1962, he proposed the creation of a summer adult training program, writing, “The impetus for such a center grew out of discussion between Bill Higgs, Rev. R.L.T. Smith and myself about the need for a training period in political education for prospective candidates for office in the local government, state government, and national government.”²⁸ Electoral politics offered aspiring black leaders a platform to voice their opinions to the whole of Mississippi society, and built a hope in the population that blacks would one day hold influence in local, state, and national government. This dream still faced long odds, but Moses hoped that Smith would serve as an inspiration to other black leaders to launch their own campaigns. Such political action would provide another avenue for local peoples to begin taking part in the civil rights movement, and a rapid increase in the number of black candidates would build awareness nationally for the continuing discrimination and inequality that Mississippi blacks faced on a daily basis.

Moses applied the lessons he learned from the 1961 McComb voter registration drive to Rev. Smith’s campaign. Instead of openly working as campaign manager, Moses became a sort of secret operative, working behind the scenes to advise Smith and build relationships with local leaders. Moses worked unofficially for fear that the involvement of a “New York Negro” would inflame Mississippi whites and begin open violence against the campaign.²⁹ Even in McComb, Moses was sensitive to making the movement a genuinely local movement, but most violence against voter registration projects targeted out-of-state activists

²⁸ Robert Moses, letter to James Dombrowski, , June 5, 1962, *Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Online Archives*, June 5, http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/photo.php?display=large&oid=738

²⁹ James Forman, *Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, DC: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 263.

like Bob Zellner and John Hardy.³⁰ Moses hoped that the less visible he was, the less he would distract from Smith's message and the less resistance the movement would attract for being a tool of outsiders.

SNCC Restructures

After SNCC was disinvited from McComb, the national organization restructured itself to rein in some of the excesses of the group's activism. Harry Belafonte met with SNCC leaders Bob Moses and Charles McDew shortly after the registration project, where he criticized their lack of discipline that led to the fracturing of SNCC's support in the community, refusal to work closely with other civil rights organizations, and inability to effectively capitalize on the events in McComb to build a nationwide campaign.³¹ Harry Belafonte had close ties to Martin Luther King and the mainstream elements of the national civil rights movement, which meant he had access to a nationwide network of donors that could sustain a serious south-wide registration movement if SNCC proved serious enough. In the wake of this meeting, SNCC responded by making Bob Moses the official head of SNCC's voter registration program.³² In that capacity, Moses could moderate SNCC's direct action programs occurring in local areas, and instead use those kinds of tactics in conjunction with and for the benefit of voter registration drives. Belafonte and others believed that the tensions between the voter registration and direct action wings of the group distracted SNCC from their true goal, building a transregional mass movement that could bring the nation's attention to Mississippi. Without a cohesive voice they could not win the sort of federal intervention and foundation money needed to effectively register voters. SNCC staffers

³⁰ With the notable exception being the murder of Amite County resident Herbert Lee in 1961.

³¹ Walter (no last name), Report to SNCC on Harry Belafonte meeting, 1962, *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement Online Collection*, http://www.crmvet.org/docs/62_sncc_belafonte.pdf.

³² Ibid.

would still have a significant amount of autonomy in the day to day running of local voter registration programs, certainly when compared to other national civil rights organizations, but a new level of oversight began under the direction of Moses.

The work to revamp SNCC's organization carried into a new constitution, where the organization sought to give increased control over future programs to its leadership. In the revised SNCC constitution passed during their convention in April 1962, the body reemphasized the importance of the Executive Committee on the direction of local affiliate's projects. Students flocked to SNCC because it offered disaffected youth the chance to directly confront the white supremacist state, but in their zeal for change students often put themselves deliberately in harm's way, and getting arrested became a way to prove one's commitment to the movement.³³ Simply put, activists often prioritized direct confrontation with police over tangible success in registering voters, and this in no small part contributed to SNCC's expulsion from McComb. The new constitution states, "SNCC shall serve as a channel of coordination and communication for the student movement. By direction of its Executive Committee through its staff it shall have authority to initiate programs in areas where none presently exist and to work closely with local protest groups in the intensification and extension of the movement."³⁴ McComb proved how quickly a local movement could spiral out of control and cause pain to the residents of the community when a SNCC project progressed in an ad hoc manner without deliberate planning. At that point, it was conventional practice for SNCC field organizers to find and develop their own projects, with very little oversight or coordination from the organization as a whole. The inability for the voter registration and direct action wings from coordinating together essentially hamstrung

³³ Carson, *In Struggle*, 68.

³⁴ SNCC, "Constitution (1962, as revised in Conference)," April 29, 1962, *Labadie Collection*, University of Michigan, 1.

SNCC's position in McComb. The two concurrent programs running in McComb failure to coordinate with one another squandered a chance to build an enduring movement in the city.

SNCC's Continuing Battle in Mississippi

As SNCC concentrated some decision making power in the Voter Registration Director and Executive Committee, the organization continued to take part in voting rights activism with local peoples across Mississippi. By the summer of 1962, at least six SNCC projects popped up in different places around the state, such as that under Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes in Hattiesburg (South Central Mississippi) or Frank Smith's efforts in Marshall County (North Central Mississippi).³⁵ These programs continued along the lines of the McComb voter registration project, where activists would embed themselves in rural communities and work with local leadership to develop a voter education program. As time went on, SNCC began putting more and more energy into the Delta region, arguably the least developed and most heavily black areas in the state. Cleveland, Mississippi in particular became hub for voter registration work for several Delta cities, where Amzie Moore and Bob Moses coordinated several registration programs.³⁶

In the summer and fall of 1962, no project in Mississippi inspired as much energy or passion as the project in Greenwood, Mississippi. Sam Block, a young man from Cleveland, Mississippi who was mentored by Amzie Moore, built up a SNCC program in the nearby rural town of Greenwood, Mississippi. Greenwood's Leflore County had a black population of about 30,000, but only 250 were registered to vote.³⁷ In many ways, this project's early development mirrors that of McComb. Block put together mass meetings at the local black Elks fraternal organization's lodge to hear the community's needs and convince blacks to

³⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 135.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 128-129.

take part in a voter registration drive. Block worked tirelessly on his own to register new voters, and through July and August he gathered small groups of aspiring registrants and escorted them to the court house to take the registration exam.³⁸ Progress was halted, however, by a series of attacks and intimidating acts by whites. Armed vigilantes attacked the registration office in August of 1962, and the three SNCC staffers present barely managed to escape before the white men stormed the building. As SNCC found a new headquarters, they were quickly evicted after their black landlord was pressured by local whites against allowing his property to be used for civil rights work.³⁹ At this point, Greenwood exemplifies the typical SNCC experience, where brief successes would be derailed by violence against participants in activist work. However, SNCC refused to leave the community in an effort to prove their commitment to advancing black rights in the Mississippi Delta.⁴⁰ SNCC staff wanted to communicate to local blacks SNCC would stay and help the community fight regardless of the severity of the white response- the organization would not provoke a crisis through its involvement and then skip town. If this project had shut down, it would have likely set back many other projects in the region by eroding SNCC's goodwill with locals.

SNCC decided to make this project their main focus in Mississippi when Greenwood's Leflore County began cutting off food aid in response for black's voting rights work. In October 1962, the county Board of Supervisors voted to opt out of a federal program that sent surplus food to thousands of poor in the county, mostly blacks. SNCC decided that quickly solving this shortage was the most important need of the community, and it immediately began mobilizing its nationwide network of donors to raise food and money for Greenwood and distributed that aid to local blacks. While SNCC workers handed

³⁸ Ibid, 131.

³⁹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 79.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

out food to hungry black families, they also discussed the importance of voter registration and explained how individuals could take part in the fight for black political rights. This proved extremely effective in getting ordinary residents to attempt to register, but violence only continued as SNCC staffers continued to face arrest and supportive local businesses were burned.⁴¹ By February 1963, Bob Moses called for all SNCC staff in the state to join the Greenwood movement so organizers could continue the program in the face of this outbreak of white resistance, bringing in a dozen or so veteran SNCC staffers including McComb veterans Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes. Civil rights historian Clayborne Carson argues that this represented a shift from SNCC's focus on developing local leadership, as now organizers chose to flood the area with experienced staffers who could bring the country's attention to Greenwood instead of training locals to the same degree.⁴² This compromise is important to understand as SNCC continued to alter its voter registration programs in the wake of McComb. Fundamentally, the organization could not function in rural areas dominated by the Klan or white Citizens' Councils without the federal government at least threatening to intervene on their behalf. Local officials would often restrain vigilantes if they thought the Justice Department would sue the city or, which provided space for SNCC to organize. In McComb and many other early voter registration projects, SNCC relied heavily on local leaders and volunteers to provide staff for community outreach efforts and ensure the project retained support as an authentic local movement, which SNCC hoped would inevitably attract the attention of the local and national media and the federal government. Still, SNCC had little success with that strategy. While many local blacks gained experience in civil rights activism, violence and arrests continued to hamper

⁴¹ Ibid, 77-78.

⁴² Ibid, 81.

the movement's progress without winning meaningful federal support. In Greenwood, SNCC instead used large numbers of outside staff to incite such a confrontation with the white community that federal policy actors would have no choice but to intervene on SNCC's behalf. This impulse would later influence SNCC's decision to launch the Freedom Summer of 1964, which would involve hundreds of white, northern volunteers in a statewide voter registration project.

The strategy to flood the country with SNCC staffers did show some immediate promise. The increasing SNCC presence escalated violence used against them, but it also spurred the federal government to action. On February 28th, Bob Moses and two SNCC staffers were shot at by unknown assailants while driving through Greenwood, wounding staffer James Travis seriously in the process.⁴³ Undeterred, activists began to use large demonstrations to bring increasing numbers of blacks to the local registrar's office. On March 28th, more than 150 blacks descended on the county seat *en mass* to register to vote, yet police quickly dispersed the crowd with dogs and arrested the leadership of the movement, including Bob Moses and SNCC executive secretary James Foreman.⁴⁴ This took a registration project that already had some attention in regional and liberal media and turned it into to a national story. President Kennedy announced that the his administration would end the violence in Greenwood, and the Justice Department under Attorney General Robert Kennedy filed a lawsuit on March 30th, 1963 that called for the release of SNCC staffers and put in place a restraining order on local officials to say away from activists or participants in the voter registration drive.⁴⁵ Still, this victory, which would have allowed civil rights

⁴³ "SNCC Staff Jailed as Greenwood Negroes Register in "First Breakthrough" in Miss", *Student Voice*, April 1963.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 153.

workers free rein in the city and proven a federal commitment to enforcing black voting rights, would be short lived. On April 4th, Local officials cut a deal with the Justice Department that if jailed SNCC members were released and the county allowed for the resumption of the surplus food program (paid fully by the federal government), they would drop their suit for an injunction against local law enforcement.⁴⁶ SNCC mobilized large numbers of its own staff and provoked local white officials and vigilantes into launching a campaign of violence and attempted assassination, yet even then this was not enough to stop the federal government from “selling out” the civil rights movement. It would take a project of unprecedented size and scope, it seemed, to endure long enough and spark enough outrage to win the protection of the federal government for SNCC and their allied local peoples. However, the drive still found some success, as between August 8, 1961 and June 10, 1963, more than 1,000 blacks in Leflore County attempted to register, although only 23 of those did so successfully. Like many SNCC efforts, the Greenwood project brought in large numbers of black to the civil rights movement, but little had been done that could be called a tangible success.

Conclusion

The 1961 McComb voter registration drive did not succeed in registering impressive numbers of new black voters, but to call it an outright failure ignores the continuing influence of the project both within and outside of Southwestern Mississippi. Did SNCC change how civil rights work functioned within McComb itself? While some tactics used by Moses and his fellow staff were adopted by the local movement, the NAACP continued to pursue school desegregation as the most important avenue to advance blacks’ social position in the long run. McComb, as we have previously discussed, had a long history of voting rights activism

⁴⁶ Ibid, 155.

and civil rights work, and it was difficult and perhaps unnecessary to tear down that structure and replace it. In that regard, the SNCC registration drive failed to inspire a new, radical movement that could sustain itself within the city limits of McComb.

However, that is only part of the story. Critical to Moses was the development of local leadership. Three students involved in the movement, Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, and Brenda Travis became key figures in SNCC programs, and their experiences from the SNCC registration drive in McComb during 1961 led them to improve similar programs in other areas and bring other individuals into the civil rights movement. Even if one considers their experiences as atypical, the Burglund High student body continued to agitate for desegregation and other civil rights causes while they continued their schooling at Campbell College. In the face of arrest, imprisonment, and exile, student veterans of the McComb movement remained an integral part of SNCC and civil rights organizing in general. In evaluating the success of the McComb registration drive by the impact of McComb residents as they became leaders in activism, it is a success.

Finally, the failure of SNCC in McComb inspired internal changes that left the organization better able to continue fighting to advance black rights in Mississippi. Bob Moses and Marion Barry, the leaders of the voter registration and direct action factions of SNCC in McComb respectively, did little to work with one another to engage diverse sections of the population towards a cohesive and singular goal. The SNCC executive committee took on greater responsibility to direct the course of future Mississippi registration drives, in ways that allowed SNCC to form coalitions with other civil rights groups, build capacity to conduct to create mass movement, and discipline their staff to foster positive relationships between SNCC and local communities. The McComb registration drive could

take only partial credit for the changes, but it became a “canary in the coal mine” by revealing to SNCC leadership how divided and decentralized projects could cause resistance from local blacks and prevent the expansion of SNCC programs elsewhere in Mississippi.

CONCLUSION

At this point, it was fair to say that the drive had more impact on the wider Mississippi civil rights movement than on the situation in McComb itself. SNCC launched similar voter registration drives that penetrated rural Mississippi communities that previously been unable to support civil rights activism, a vital step in building a widespread “revolution” against Jim Crow South. Seemingly fearless, SNCC volunteers and staffers chose to work in the most hostile, rural areas in the state with the lowest black registration numbers, inviting reprisals that brought the nation’s attention to these small areas. SNCC felt its template for activism could effectively challenge black’s disenfranchisement, but even this was not the unmitigated success that the organization hoped it would be. SNCC made slow progress on its own because the organization lacked the resources to mobilize beyond a handful of towns or sufficiently engage the federal government to enforce black voting rights.

This would change with an effort by SNCC to bring in outside assistance from mainstream civil rights and liberal groups, as well as inviting white, Northern students to volunteer in voter registration work. SNCC required tens of thousands of dollars and hundreds of volunteers to build a mass movement capable of bringing the fight to every corner of Mississippi and provoking federal action on voting rights legislation. SNCC and others created an umbrella group, the Coalition of Federated Organizations (COFO) with the ultimate goal of building an infrastructure to conduct a Mississippi-wide Freedom Summer voter registration effort. The Freedom Summer, launched in the summer of 1964, would lead SNCC to organize voter registration drives in almost every area in Mississippi, including McComb and elsewhere in Southwestern Mississippi. Veteran’s activists from SNCC and McComb itself would return to the town and apply a mix of old and new tactics which would

bring the city to rise again in resistance, this time in larger numbers than before. This drive would correct for some of the major mistakes committed by SNCC in 1961, achieving a greater degree of coordination and cooperation with local activists, but problems around developing local leadership would still remain.

SNCC Reaches Out

While the Freedom Summer of 1964 became a massive campaign between coordinating civil rights organizations, SNCC began as early as 1962 to ally itself with other influential organizations and donors to build up capacity for voter registration work in Mississippi. SNCC's work in McComb and elsewhere in Mississippi prompted the creation of the Voter Education Project (VEP) to support voter registration in the state, and SNCC agreed to accept their money to expand their own programs. The VEP was created as a tax-exempt vehicle for donations from wealthy liberals in the North to civil rights organization doing registration work in the South. The organization raised more than \$500,000, and SNCC received a small portion of that money.¹ Essentially, this was the money promised by figures such as Robert Kennedy and Harry Belafonte from mainstream liberals that would be given to civil rights organizations if they put a greater emphasis on voter registration over direct action. The money provided SNCC with a unique opportunity, as it allowed SNCC to pay increasing numbers of staffers to launch projects in rural towns and cities across the state. The Coalition of Federated Organizations (COFO) was formed in the wake of the VEP to divide funds received from Northerners to the civil rights groups active in Mississippi and to coordinate volunteers on the ground. The NAACP, SCLC, and others joined together to create the COFO coalition, but it was primarily SNCC-affiliated activists who went in to

¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 91.

communities and became the face of the alliance in Mississippi. Still, the importance of this money should not be overstated. SNCC workers made up much of the organization's staff, but SNCC itself was comparatively underfunded, as the tough regions they decided to work in often did not produce large numeric gains attractive to Northern donors. SNCC ended up receiving only \$24,000 from COFO to staff projects in rural Mississippi, though considering most of the group's staffers worked at "subsistence pay" it did play some role in allowing SNCC to expand its efforts.² Still, COFO and the VEP brought SNCC leaders in direct contact with both networks of pro-civil rights northerners and civil rights organizations active in Mississippi, groups that would prove critical to creating a truly mass movement in Mississippi around voting rights.

For a brief time, SNCC and COFO entered into a debate on how to proceed with registration work. Without success in electing black candidates like Rev. Smith or registering significant numbers of blacks to vote, many in SNCC came to the realization that, as the election rules currently stood in Mississippi, it would be impossible to register a significant portion of the population to vote. Instead, SNCC turned towards creating a parallel election system that operated outside of the Mississippi racial state. In the summer of 1963, COFO decided to launch a freedom vote campaign, where pro-civil rights candidates Aaron Henry, chairman of the state NAACP, and Edwin King, a white chaplain from Tugaloo College, ran for governor and lieutenant governor in a mock election. Any individual who met the legal requirements to register was welcome to walk in to the voting booth, and COFO staffers worked in cities around the state manage and drive up turnout for the project.³ While this campaign temporarily abandoned the hope of directly winning blacks a voice in Mississippi

² Carson, *In Struggle*, 70.

³ *Ibid*, 97-98.

politics, it provided COFO with a platform to bring in large numbers of blacks to a demonstration geared towards raising a black political consciousness. Bob Moses believed that having an individual walk into the voting booth, even a mock voting booth, was a step to combat, “a deeply entrenched habit of deference to as well as genuine fear of white power, accumulated over years of living in a society that [denied]... any effort by Blacks to participate in the political process.”⁴ 80,000 voted in this election, a disappointing figure to civil rights activists, but it helped bring together a broad coalition of SNCC activists, local peoples, and out-of-state students who had volunteered for the effort.⁵ While the Freedom Vote campaign was not a success in bringing out hundreds of thousands of disenfranchised blacks, it gave experience to activists in running a state-wide campaign and fostered communication between locals and COFO staff, factors that would improve the prospects of the upcoming Freedom Summer in 1964.

As it stood, SNCC could not register meaningful numbers of people as long as they operated in a state whose electoral system provided myriad tools to prevent black voter registration. Worse, federal politicians in favor of black registration, like Attorney General Kennedy, would not rigorously enforce 15th Amendment rights unless pressured to by the voting public, and the brief challenges around Mississippi in 1962-1963 could not arise such public outrage. One major critique of the McComb movement was their inability to convert the outrage surrounding the McComb registration drive into a national movement or call to action, and in 1963 this failure continued. In order to combat this, SNCC needed to establish a strong funding network of friendly Northerners, and they needed to cooperate with the other constituent organizations of COFO to build the capacity required for such a project.

⁴ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 46.

⁵ Carson, *In Struggle*, 98.

While steps had been taken on both points, as of yet SNCC had not managed to build a state-wide program. This would only get harder as the VEP withdrew its funding from COFO and SNCC two weeks after President Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, as less than 4,000 new black voters made it on the rolls.⁶ However, activists grew determined, and SNCC pushed to build a movement of such massive scale that it could no longer be ignored by federal policy makers or the American public. This period would prove key in that effort, as the newly formed COFO could raise volunteers from national civil rights organizations and funnel them into SNCC-inspired voter registration programs, and northern students and donors who first became aware of the plight of Mississippi blacks in started throwing their support behind the effort. In 1964, these relationships would spur the creation of the Freedom Summer project in Mississippi.

The Freedom Summer was COFO sponsored voter registration drive that spanned several months in the summer of 1964. With the combined resources and fundraising ability of its constituent civil rights organizations, COFO had the ability to send a massive number of volunteers to register black voters in Mississippi. The first of over one thousand northern student volunteers began training with COFO on June 13, 1964, and projects would open in many Mississippi cities as summer went on. The project had two central aims. First, SNCC to conduct voter registration and educational projects similar to the McComb 1961 registration drive, but this time on a much grander scale.⁷ Second, COFO sought to build support for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), an integrated political party that aspired to take the place of the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic

⁶ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 212

⁷ Marshall, *Student Activism*, 83.

Convention.⁸ The large number of “boots on the ground” made it so COFO staffers could reach larger number of blacks than ever before for these projects, but it was still unrealistic to assume that Southern registrars would suddenly start accepting black registration applications. Instead, this scale of activism ensured that COFO’s work in Mississippi would dominate national headlines, and any violence provoked by the presence of white volunteers would be easily seen in newspapers or on television screens. Earlier COFO efforts in Greenwood and elsewhere struggled to get sufficient coverage for national political actors to become seriously involved; now, SNCC hoped public outrage over discrimination and violence in Mississippi would give the federal government no choice but to step in and force registrars to accept black applicants.⁹

Return to McComb

During this time, the McComb movement began to reawaken. Just as the murder of SNCC-supporting local activist Herbert Lee sparked a drastic increase in direct action activism in 1961, another killing of a member of the black community spurred renewed activism by local residents. Louis Allen, a black man who was the only person to see Lee’s murder, originally corroborated State Representative Hurst’s statement that the killing was done in self-defense. However, Allen confessed to SNCC that he had been pressured by local whites into giving false testimony and made it clear he was willing to testify in court that Hurst had actually killed Herbert Lee. After a series of threats, Allen was killed hours before he was scheduled to flee the state on January 31st, 1964.¹⁰ This was the last straw for the black community, which was determined to once again fight back.

⁸ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle*, 122.

⁹ Marshall, *Student Activism*, 87-88.

¹⁰ “Witness Murdered,” *Student Voice*, February 3, 1964.

With the infrastructure and tools in place to launch a massive registration movement, and local people ready to reignite the struggle, SNCC set its sights on returning to the place where voter registration began: McComb, Mississippi. Eight SNCC volunteers set up their first office in McComb on July 5, 1964, mere weeks after the disappearance of three SNCC volunteers in Philadelphia, Mississippi, that caused national outrage.¹¹ SNCC moved deliberately in choosing its volunteers for the project. Curtis Hayes, former vice president of the Pike County Nonviolent Direct Action Committee and SNCC organizer, became a leading figure in the new McComb project, while McComb resident and Burglund High School walk out participant Joe Martin was chosen to accompany him.¹² The initial SNCC staff included six black men and two white men.¹³ SNCC was now conscious of the need to work well with the local movement, since SNCC in 1961 had often been perceived as an outside force that had trouble working effectively with the local NAACP and the more conservative elements of the community. By prioritizing local people as SNCC staffers for the project, SNCC sought correct for earlier tensions in McComb and prove their commitment to developing local leadership.

Youth continued to play a central role in the voter registration movement in McComb, putting pressure on their parents and adults in the city to join the civil rights movement. On July 15, SNCC set up a Freedom School in the city to educate students on the civil rights movement and the importance of being prideful over black history and accomplishments.¹⁴ The Freedom Schools can trace their development from “Nonviolent

¹¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 265.

¹² Dittmer, *Local people*, 265; Joe Martin Interview...; Jesse Harris has also been described as the project leader in McComb. With SNCC’s often shifting leadership structure, it was possibly unclear who lead the movement.

¹³ Dittmer, *Local People*, 270.

¹⁴ James Marshall, *Student Activism and Civil Rights in Mississippi: Protest Politics and the Struggle for Racial Justice, 1960-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 112.

High” in McComb during 1961, but through the course of the Freedom Summer the program became more structured and an official curriculum was adopted. While the school did deal with academics, it also exposed to students to theater, through the Free Summer Theater, and black folk music.¹⁵ This project included teaching students poetry, such as this one written by a Freedom School attendee:

I asked for your churches, and you turned me down,
But I'll do my work if I have to do it on the ground.
You will not speak for fear of being heard
So you crawl in your shell and say, “Do not disturb”¹⁶

Students sent their poetry to the leaders of the town who continued to hesitate supporting SNCC since their return to McComb. The youth would not become as enflamed as they had after the murder of Herbert Lee in 1961, and SNCC staffers encouraged them to apply their outrage in a constructive manner, by using poetry to express themselves and encourage their parents and other adults in McComb to get involved in the local movement.

Unlike previous efforts, disciplined SNCC activist effectively used the horror of the situation to gain major press attention and influence public opinion in favor of the Freedom Summer. Representative Don Edwards of California made an official visit to McComb in July 1964 to observe the situation on the ground. This trip became national news, and Edwards used the opportunity to communicate student’s frustration with the lack of FBI support in cracking down on racist Southerners.¹⁷ In no small part did this come from involving white students in the Freedom Summer. Edwards’ son, a college student at the time, worked as a volunteer for the Freedom Summer, and Representative Edward’s wanted

¹⁵ Marshall, *Student Activism*, 112.

¹⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 268.

¹⁷Newspaper Clipping Fragment, *Associated Press* 1964, from Freedom Summer Collection, University of Wisconsin Libraries,
<http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/14256/show/14109/rec/15>

to lend his support for the organization.¹⁸ Using white volunteers had been widely criticized by some segments of SNCC, including Hollis Watkins of McComb, because it suppressed the development of local leadership. Still, by engaging volunteers with connections to policy makers and people with influence, SNCC could bring the nation's attention to a small city in Mississippi. This connection with national leadership continued to pay dividends, as by the fall of 1964 McComb residents Aylene Quin, Ora Bryant, and Matti Dillon traveled to the White House to inform President Johnson about the situation in Southwestern Mississippi.¹⁹ The federal government could not ignore the crisis in McComb any longer, and FBI attention to the area increased significantly. This constrained the actions of whites, who feared the president declaring martial law in the area to seriously go after the Ku Klux Klan in the region.

SNCC worked further to publicize their work to local audiences as well. SNCC held a Freedom Day event on August 17, with the goal of encouraging members of the community to attempt to register to vote the next day. Folksinger Len Chandler and SNCC freedom singer Cordell Reagon led the hundreds of attendees in song, and residents and staffers made speeches to those gathered about the importance of registration. The next day, a group went to the county seat in Magnolia to register, an event that was covered by the FBI, newspapers, and photographers.²⁰ Most civil rights work was absent from local papers in the period between 1961 and 1964, but these large and visible demonstrations broke through the "conspiracy of silence," allowing information on the expanding civil rights movement to reach local blacks and especially to moderate whites in the area.

¹⁸ Dittmer, *Local People*, 267.

¹⁹ Ibid, 308.

²⁰ Dittmer, *Local People*, 270.

Despite these successes, the local Ku Klux Klan and others began a campaign of violence and intimidation that surpassed what the town had ever seen before. While Robert Zellner had participated in the 1961 registration drive, the Freedom Summer campaign put whites in a much more visible role in supporting the civil rights movement. C.C. Bryant blames this for the extreme violence faced by blacks, saying “You had a law on the books that prevented blacks and whites from socializing, you know, the law. Any many times [Freedom Summer volunteers] come down the street hugged up, black and white... And those kind of things really rouses the [white] community.”²¹ Not only did the presence of an integrated voting rights movement infuriate local whites, but they also now possessed more dangerous weapons to use to suppress civil rights activism. White conservative and businessman J. E. Thornhill, a local oil magnate, bankrolled opposition to the Freedom Summer and provided the Ku Klux Klan and others access to explosives used by his company to target centers of civil rights activism.²² Bombings began in June, before SNCC even arrived in town, but the violence only grew worse as the Freedom Summer went on. Bombs went off at the home of Aylene Quin, injuring several of her children, at the Society Hill Baptist Church, and the home of Ardis Garner, a black policeman who refused to engage in anti-civil rights work.²³ In practice, the bombers focused on any persons or institutions that supported the civil rights movement. This horrified the community, but rather than abandon the movement local blacks only renewed their commitment to the Freedom Summer registration movement. SNCC staffers interviewed the victims and sent the information to be

²¹ Bryant Interview with Sinsheimer, 15.

²² Dittmer, *Local People*, 266-267.

²³ “Bomb Blast Rock McComb,” *The Student Voice*, September 23, 1964.

published in SNCC's paper the *Student Voice*.²⁴ SNCC and local activists used the violence against them to stir outrage across the country, a tactic to move public opinion and provoke intervention by the federal government.

The black residents of the town did not take this lying down, but instead armed themselves to fight against white supremacist terrorism. C. C. Bryant's sister in law Ora Bryant attacked a group of Klansmen who threw an explosive at her house.²⁵ McComb residents took turns standing guard around properties perceived to be vulnerable to Klan attack, heavily armed, in order to deter attacks.²⁶ While SNCC did not abandon nonviolence as a tactic by 1964, local blacks viewed guns as their only way to defend themselves as the federal government dragged its feet in protecting black voting rights. Some local blacks, most notably EW Steptoe of the Amite County NAACP, armed themselves during the 1961 drive, but this was only for personal protection and did not involve the formal organizing. However, never before had the black community faced such a systemic and large scale destruction of property as the bombings that occurred in 1964. It is impossible to know what impact armed resistance had at suppressing violence, but it required stronger coordination between disparate elements of the black community, perhaps spurring better organization in the local movement.

Local black leadership organized themselves to create a support structure for SNCC's new effort. Aylene Quin, a longtime SNCC supporter, hosted a meeting of ten black business owners at her tavern to discuss the needs of the SNCC volunteers in the community. Moved by statements from students, the business owners agreed to set up two committees, a housing

²⁴ Joe Martin, Interview with Jimmy Dykes, *Oral History & Cultural Heritage Project*, University of Southern Mississippi, November 1, 1995, 7.

²⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 268

²⁶ *Ibid.*

committee and a food committee, as well as agreed to fund a community center which was to be the headquarters for the new movement.²⁷ This organization became the Citizen's League, which created an infrastructure to support the new registration drive and get the black business owners and professionals to support SNCC.²⁸ The outcome of the meeting provided critical funding to ensure SNCC volunteers could stay in the community for the long haul and proved local commitment to the registration drive. Moreover, this represents a massive development from the 1961 voter registration drive, where black professionals often remained hesitant. With the creation of the Citizens League, nearly every segment of the black community in McComb became openly involved in the drive. With locals mobilized and SNCC drawing national attention to Southwestern Mississippi, the McComb civil rights movement would be much tougher to suppress than ever before.

Briefly, this movement had success. Twenty three blacks took the registration test on August 18th, after the Freedom Day festivities.²⁹ Due to rumors of an impending federal intervention in McComb, local officers arrested eleven Klan members responsible for the bombings in the city.³⁰ While eventually all their sentences were suspended, the circuit court judge threatened to revoke the suspension if any further violence was perpetrated against the black community.³¹ This was the first time that a local judicial official in McComb legitimately threatened legal repercussions against white perpetrators of racially targeted violence. The possibility of federal involvement caught the white community off guard, and attacks quickly decreased as local officials struggled to retain their authority in the area. Civil rights activists took advantage of this relative calm, and on November 18, the NAACP

²⁷ Dittmer, *Local People*, 269

²⁸ Marshall, *Student Activism*, 161.

²⁹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 270.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 310-311.

³¹ Marshall, *Student Activism*, 165.

launched a test of the enforcement provisions in the civil rights act of 1964, where local police men, the FBI, and others accompanied activists from the state NAACP, and most public accommodations began to allow blacks and whites to use their services. Still, by 1965 all but one hotel in the town had resegregated.³²

In many ways, the Freedom Summer in McComb became as popular as it was in McComb because of the registration drive of 1961. Local civil rights supporters quickly formed organizations to aid SNCC's registration drive, students pressured their parents and others to get involved in voting rights activism in part because this work was so familiar and important to the people of McComb. Figures like Webb Owens, C.C. Bryant, Alyene Quin, and Curtis Hayes, who led the much of the local efforts in 1961 McComb, again found ways to engage diverse segments of the black community. Even if the Justice Department would not vigorously prosecute KKK members who bombed black civilians, the size of the demonstrations in McComb did bring some federal intervention into the area and convinced local white elected officials into turning in vigilantes to the courts.

The Meaning of McComb

As Bob Moses and other SNCC activists sat in a McComb jail cell on a cold day in November 1961, they imagined Mississippi society as an iceberg- harsh, frozen in place, and monolithic. Even while most areas of the South continued to resist progress for black rights, Mississippi proved to be the most violent and difficult area in which to organize. Early attempts in the 1940s and 1950s by local blacks to put together voter registration drives ended in arrest and intimidation, and SNCC's involvement in McComb in proved to be no different. This was a state where a white man like E.H. Hurst could kill a black farmer just for driving around a few SNCC staffers, in broad daylight and without repercussions. Up

³² Dittmer, *Local People*, 311.

against a force like that, many activists took it for granted that it would require nothing short of the federal government's involvement to move black rights forward in the state.

SNCC and the people of McComb joined together in spite of this opposition, and built a movement that relied on professional activists embedding themselves in the city and working with locals to shape the course of the movement according to their wishes. By focusing on training and empowering residents, SNCC contributed to building an infrastructure that continued to advance the cause of black political and social equality. Established local leaders gained tools and SNCC's manpower to conduct voter registration program, while segments of the black community left behind by previous civil rights activism, including the poor, students, and farmers, became actively involved for the first time. In the space of a few months, the voter registration drive in McComb generated a unique blueprint for grassroots civil rights organizing that would be replicated many times over. The tactic did not always prove successful purely by the numbers, and significant tensions developed over miscommunication and ideological disagreements, but it was quickly recognized by SNCC as a program that needed to be expanded elsewhere in the state.

The McComb voter registration drive is often glossed in histories of the civil rights movement, in no small part because of its lack of tangible success. SNCC and their local partners in Southwestern Mississippi could convince townspeople to try to register and get them in the door of the courthouse, but they could do nothing to stop the county registrar from rejecting their applications out of hand. Even in the immediate wake of McComb, when similar projects sprang up in different areas around the state, this represented only a small fraction of black communities. And yet, the McComb was at least partially a success.

While few new voters were added to the rolls, the registration drive helped foster a new political consciousness among the black residents of Southwestern Mississippi. As Bob Moses wrote on his canvassing efforts in McComb, “I liked to think I got anyone I spoke with imagining himself or herself at the registrar’s office. Getting someone to make this kind of mental leap, even for a moment, had to be considered an achievement in the Black Mississippi of those days where even the idea of citizenship barely existed.”³³ For many, the idea of voting, or participating in the political process in a meaningful way, seemed like an impossible dream. Even though few voters actually managed to register, political and social equality became a heartfelt goal and expectation demanded by the black population.

The McComb registration drive of 1961 was not a key turning point in the American civil rights movement. The federal government continued its indifference towards enforcing existing voting rights laws, and the lives of black residents of Southwestern Mississippi continued on much as they had before. But SNCC and the people of McComb did something extraordinary- they proved that it was possible to for activists to challenge racial inequalities anywhere in the South, with McComb as the “middle of the iceberg.” Mississippi was in effect a police state where government officials, law enforcement, and vigilantes cooperated to use violence and intimidation to rigidly enforce the Jim Crow system. Even for Mississippi, McComb had a nasty reputation for aggressively suppressing. However, the McComb registration drive of 1961 revealed that the power of local whites was not absolute, and that a well-coordinated movement could bring an entire city to rise up in open defiance.

The ripple effects of McComb could be felt for years afterwards. The local NAACP integrated some SNCC tactics into their own programs, youth dedicated themselves to the Mississippi civil rights movement, and SNCC brought similar programs to cities across

³³ Moses, *Radical Equations*, 46.

Mississippi. The 1961 registration drive even contributed to the relative success of the 1964 Freedom Summer program in McComb, as many black residents retained their support for voter registration and they rose as soon as conditions allowed. This new political consciousness was real and measurable. When President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which removed many barriers to vote and discriminatory policies, blacks in Mississippi suddenly found themselves almost totally free to register to vote. As of 1967, 75.5% of voting age blacks in Pike County had successfully registered to vote, well above the statewide average of 59.8% and only a single percentage point below white registration rates in the county. Neighboring Amite and Walthall Counties had similarly high voter registration numbers.³⁴ As soon as the laws allowed for it, McComb blacks registered in droves, ready to take political power and use it to begin tearing down the profoundly unequal Mississippi society.

No civil rights group can presume to spend only a few months in a community, and build an enduring movement that could organize successfully against all odds. When SNCC left McComb in the December of 1961, seemingly little enthusiasm was left in the community to continue voter registration work and only small changes were made to the way the local NAACP conducted its future activist work. There was basically no precedence for what SNCC tried to build in McComb, and as figures like Bob Moses improvised tactics and projects it was inevitable the group would make mistakes and lose battles. Yet each “failure,” planted the seeds for future activism, and ensured the next time the local movement would be more experienced, find a more expansive base of support, and be better able to resist whites. The McComb story sheds light on these perceived failures in the greater narrative of the civil rights movement. Each drive laid the groundwork for subsequent civil rights campaigns that

³⁴ Government report...

would only become more difficult to shove aside. This was the legacy of SNCC's voter registration drive. Racist local government officials, the Ku Klux Klan, and other vigilantes could time and again find ways to suppress the voter registration movement, but local blacks would not turn back until they had won meaningful political power in their community.

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