

CHARLES M. PAYNE



I'VE GOT THE LIGHT OF

THE ORGANIZING TRADITION AND THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM STRUGGLE

FREEDOM

"A REMARKABLE AND
GROUNDBREAKING WORK."

San Francisco Chronicle

WITH A NEW PREFACE

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Eight

SLOW AND RESPECTFUL WORK

Organizers and Organizing

Bob and a band of ten or so organizers, all under 20, could go into a community in the morning . . . find their contacts, establish sleeping quarters and some means to eat, get a church and turn out the community for a mass meeting that same night.

JEAN WHEELER SMITH

Anytime a man come in my community and took the hardships that he took, if he was wrong, I better join with him anyway. He's ready to take a beating, [get] jailed, being bombed and get back on two feet. . . . I'm ready to join that fellow, wherever he is, right or wrong.

PERCY LARRY
McComb

I hope this [newsletter] will give you some idea of one phase of the activity in Amite County. It is less spectacular than marches and such, but, I feel, much more meaningful. Marches help to remove some of the external barriers to the Negro people's freedom. They do little to emancipate people from within. . . . It is by talking and acting together—on their own initiative and their own decision—that some of these bonds begin to be loosed.

MARSHALL GANZ
SNCC

What we did in essence was to try to do for the community people that we were working with what Ella had already done for us.

BOB MOSES¹

MORE HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the role of oratory in the movement than about the role of organizing. Historian David Garrow contends that the real emergence of a sustained, widespread movement in the South can be traced in many respects to SNCC's decision in the summer of 1961 to create a cadre of locally based, full-time, grass-roots organizers, marking the first time that indigenous activists had such day-to-day assistance available to them. "It was the firsthand experience of working with people, day in, day out, that educated both local activists and field secretaries to the item-by-item, conversation-by-conversation reality of what 'leadership' really amounted to in the civil rights movement."² We have overlooked the crucial level of leadership provided by the Sam Blocks, the Willie Peacocks, and the Hollis Watkins's of the South.

Howard Zinn has given us a portrait of the Mississippi field staff as it existed near the end of 1963.³ The forty-one workers comprised about one-third of the total SNCC staff in the Deep South. Thirty-five of them were Black. Two of the six whites and twenty-five of the Blacks came from the Deep South. The white youngsters and most of the northern Blacks came from middle-class homes; their fathers were ministers or teachers or civil-service workers. All of the southern workers came from homes where the mothers had been maids or domestic workers, and most of the fathers had been farmers, factory workers, truck drivers, and construction workers. The ages ran from fifteen to over fifty, but most were in their late teens or early twenties. The staff, then, was mostly Black, mostly southern, mostly from working-class backgrounds. The common image of SNCC as being an organization of middle-class college kids is misleading as applied to the Mississippi staff. It is true that many of them either were in college or were planning to go until the movement got in the way, but most of those represented the first generation in their families to attend college. They were an upwardly mobile group, but few were products of the traditional southern Black middle class. None of the early Greenwood organizers came from the most oppressed strata of Mississippi Blacks, but none of them came from backgrounds that could reasonably be called middle-class. Indeed, they came from backgrounds very much like those of the people they were trying to organize.

In Florida during the 1940s there was a school principal and NAACP officer named Harry T. Moore, who helped lead the fight to get equal pay for Black teachers in his area. He was fired and then, on Christmas Eve 1951, his home was bombed and he and his wife killed. Black people in the area did not soon forget the work he had done. According to Ella Baker:

You could go into that area of Florida, and you could talk about the virtue of the NAACP, because they knew Harry T. Moore. They hadn't discussed a whole lot of theory. But there was a *man* who served *their* interests and who *identified* with them.⁴

In the same way, for many people in Mississippi, attachment to the movement meant attachment to the particular individuals who represented it rather than to particular organizations or political strategies. Percy Larry, a McComb resident who supported SNCC's early initiatives in that town, said "I don't understand the position of some of the people that came here. I've never understood their position. But I would go along with them."⁵ You don't, he explained, have to understand everything about a man's politics to appreciate the "fullness" of a man. Waite Johnson and George Greene made the same comment about people in Greenwood; not everyone understood all the political ramifications of what they were being asked to do—although they understood perfectly well what it would cost them—but they came to appreciate the people doing the asking. CORE's Matt Suarez, who worked in and around Canton, Mississippi, commented that country folk

deal more with the character of an individual rather than what he's saying. . . . When you met him, whatever way he was when you met, when you saw him ten years later . . . he would still be that same way, ten years down the road. And they had much more of a perception about the real character of a man. They didn't get caught up in images. . . . A lot of people who came into Canton, [the local people] didn't respond to and it was simply because they

could see a lot of stuff that we couldn't see about an individual. They knew who was strong and who was for real and who wasn't. . . . We would get caught up in words and logic. That didn't mean nothing to them. They were dealing with motives and intent. Skip all the words and everything else. They brushed that aside and got right to what the individual was about.⁶

Organizers were in a situation in which their character was being continually assessed. Once they were judged to be worthwhile people, they and local people often entered into relationships in which each side called forth and reinforced the best in the other. Amzie Moore spoke with evident sincerity about how much he admired the courage of the youngsters:

But when an individual stood at a courthouse like the courthouse in Greenwood and in Greenville and watch tiny figures [of the SNCC workers] standing against a huge column . . . [against white] triggermen and drivers and lookout men riding in automobiles with automatic guns . . . *how they stood* . . . how gladly they got in the front of that line, those leaders, and went to jail. It didn't seem to bother 'em. It was an awakening for me.⁷

In turn, virtually every early COFO worker in the Delta has commented on how inspiring Amzie Moore's courage was. It was hardly possible for idealistic young people to spend time with a Mrs. Hamer or a Mrs. McGhee and not feel some stiffening of their own spines. Bob Zellner, commenting on the courage of Moore and the McGhees, added "We breathed people like that. . . . There was nothing I could refuse them." It wasn't just courage. Martha Prescod Norman has pointed out that people referring to SNCC as non-elitist often forget that SNCC had no choice in the matter. If you wanted to be around people like Amzie Moore or Mrs. Hamer, you had to be non-elitist, and you had to listen. Mrs. Annie Devine played a crucial role in the movement in Canton, Mississippi. CORE's Rudy Lombard speaks of a meeting where "She looked me in the eye and said 'Rudy, I *know* you won't deny us your talents in Canton this summer. I'm

depending on you.' I knew I was trapped. No way I could turn that woman down."⁸ The organizers and the local people who took to them were in a positive feedback loop, in which the courage and humanistic values of one side encouraged a like response from the other. "They were gentlemen," said Mr. Larry of the McComb organizers, "and around them we were gentle." That would be even more true in reverse.

In Greenwood, the praise of local people for the organizers is effusive and is only partly about their courage. Dewey Greene thought the world of the SNCC kids. He couldn't say enough about them. Silas McGhee was especially impressed by Stokely Carmichael and his strong beliefs. "He was highly educated. He was very intelligent, and he knew how to communicate with a person." Waite Johnson thought even the worst Tom in Greenwood couldn't find anything negative to say about Block and Peacock. Bob Moses, he thought, seemed to have what Waite called a special charisma with the old folks. They just seemed to trust him. Alberta Barnet admired Block and Peacock for their nerve but also for their intelligence. Indeed, people refer to the intelligence of SNCC workers, to their ability to make other people understand, just about as often as they refer to their courage. Mary Lane remembers Bob Moses as

someone you could sit down and talk with. And really, after talking to him, you would really understand. . . . You'll be a little broader than you were at first. And he was a person that could come to you, ask you to do a thing and you were willing to do it. Whatever it might have been. He had this thing about him like if it was Bob who said it, you know it had to be done.

Mary Boothe remembers Bob as a "straight cat," the person who showed her how to be Black without being ashamed, as a person who didn't care for publicity. "I doubt if ten local people would know him." Will Henry Rogers remembers Guyot as being respected in Greenwood because people could see he "was about something and he wasn't about no bullshit." Similarly, he attributes Willie Peacock's influence to the way he "carried himself" around people; people knew

he was serious.⁹ Phrases attesting to the character of organizers are recurrent—he was straight, he was about something, he carried himself well, he had this thing about him. Local people were duly impressed with the courage of the organizers, but it seems to have been important to them that it was courage embedded in character.

Guyot has commented that "the SNCC workers were no saints," and local people knew that, and it is not true that all the criticisms came from Toms. Those who kept themselves outside the movement, of course, had an investment in believing that the organizers were only in it for the glory, but those in the movement had some misgivings as well. The skirt-chasing of some of the organizers offended some of the older people, and they knew more about some of what was going on than some SNCC workers wanted them to. The SNCC workers and the local young people partied hard when the opportunity arose, and that was offensive to the moral codes of some local people. A number of people didn't like the way they dressed; anybody wearing old work clothes all the time couldn't be about very much. It was disrespectful. Some of the SNCC workers had reputations for being a little pushy, not giving other people time to make up their own minds. If they impressed some people as smart, they impressed others as smart-assed. The very idea of young people coming into a town and trying to tell grownups how to run their business struck some as presumptuous. Keeping one's word didn't always mean as much to the SNCC folk as to some of the local people. Some of the SNCC volunteers who came from the North after the first year struck some local people as truly snobbish. They acted as if Mississippi people were still in slavery, too backwards to do anything for themselves. According to Waite Johnson, his grandmother, Mrs. Holt, had to straighten one or two of them out. As staunch a movement person as Canton's Annie Devine commented on the missionary attitudes. The SNCC workers were seen as having the usual human failings, but the bottom line for many of the local people was that they also had virtues of courage, character, and commitment that more than compensated.

In 1967, Robert Jackall, then a young professor at Georgetown University, spent part of the spring and summer working in Sunflower County. In an essay written years later, he commented on the modern

trivialization of the concept of charisma, adding that he had seen real charisma just once, and it was in Mississippi. It was at a mass meeting that was going poorly, speakers droning on in the heat without reaching the audience. Then Mrs. Hamer stood to speak.

Immediately, an electric atmosphere suffused the entire church. Men and women alike began to stand up, to call out her name, and to urge her on. . . . She went on to speak about the moral evil of racism itself and the grievous harm it was doing to the souls of white people in Mississippi. . . . She did not do so in accusation, but with a kind of redemptive reconciliation, articulating a vision of justice that embraced everyone. She ended by leading the assembly in chorus after chorus of a rousing old Negro spiritual called, appropriately, "This Little Light of Mine." When she finished, the entire assembly was deeply shaken emotionally. People crowded around her to promise they would join the struggle.

Jackall goes on to analyze the specific elements of her charisma:

her unvarnished, earthy forcefulness, devoid of all pretence; her unshakeable conviction in the justness of her cause, proved by her personal physical sufferings and the risks she continued to take; her ennobling vision of racial harmony and of personal redemption for those who seek it; and her ability to articulate her ideas with a powerful religious rhetoric that had deep resonance for her audience but that had no trace of practiced cant.¹⁰

In a less concentrated way, similar characteristics among other local people had a similar effect on SNCC workers. The mere fact that joining the movement entailed so many risks meant that early joiners were likely in disproportionate numbers to be men and women with distinctive strengths of character. Moreover, organizers were self-consciously seeking such people. As local people were drawn to much that they saw in the character of SNCC workers, the workers were in turn drawn by, strengthened by, the force of character of some of the

local people and by their lavish affection. "If I needed a couple of bucks," one organizer said, "or even a ride for a hundred miles or so, there would be people waiting in line. Their feelings would have been hurt if I didn't let them help me. When there's that kind of push behind you, you can keep going."¹¹

The good opinion of others is a form of social control. Having attained it, we tend to conduct ourselves so as to maintain it. Local people set constraints on what organizers could or could not do, in effect operating as a source of moral regulation for the movement. Block, Watkins, Peacock, and the others self-consciously strove to be on their best behavior around local people, best behavior as defined by local people. Organizers tried to present an image of themselves as God-fearing, as respectful to women and the elderly, as men and women of their word, as principled. By demonstrating that they could live up to values that the community respected, organizers legitimated themselves and their program.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Bob Moses was once asked how you organize a town:

"By bouncing a ball," he answered quietly.

"What?"

"You stand on a street and bounce a ball. Soon all the children come around. You keep on bouncing the ball. Before long, it runs under someone's porch and then you meet the adults."

Charles Sherrod, who directed SNCC's work in southwest Georgia, commented that the whole key to organizing is finding one person other than yourself. One of his coworkers described organizing as slow work, respectful work. Most of us would expect more "political" answers, but SNCC's early organizers often portray much of their work as simply building relationships. Thus, SNCC's MacArthur Cotton thought his morning coffee break was significant enough to deserve mention in a report:

8:00 am—I went to get my coffee as every morning. I talk with many people as possible in an informal way—trying to get to know the people that I work with. . . . After working this area for 6 days the same people have [accepted] me as a friend. They have become willing to discuss some of their more personal problems.¹²

A staff newsletter from mid-February 1963 suggests something of what the daily work of an organizer was like at that point, less than a year after COFO entered the Delta in force.¹³ The newsletter's tone is that of an in-house document. Many people are referred to only by nickname, and there are jokes that only insiders can fully appreciate. ("Dorie 'Elephant' Ladner had 'tea' with Tom Gaither [of CORE]. So now we know why Dorie went to Atlanta.") Overall, the document reflects a sense of people being dug into their communities, experimenting with tactics and strategies.

In Indianola in the Delta, the mayor told workers they could canvass door-to-door, but if they tried to pass out literature on the street or tried to get into churches, they were going to find themselves in jail. In Greenville, Curtis Hayes was trying to arrange a meeting with the mayor to see how far he was going to let them go before arresting them. In Coahoma County, the clerk told one group that they had had the last forty or fifty years to register, so why are they bothering him now? At the very end of January, Hayes tried to get something established in Hollandale. Amzie Moore had advised him that the Black professionals there were pretty backward and he would be better off trying to work with small businessmen like cafe owners. Hayes was staying in a house of prostitution owned by a man who had two such houses. The man—a bisexual, a registered voter, and a bigwig in the Masons—had started carrying people to pay poll taxes as soon as Hayes got there. One never knows where help is to be found. Someone on the Greenville staff noted that Greenville is not the kind of place where canvassing is likely to be productive; more direct action would be needed there.

In Jackson, attorney Bill Higgs filed suit to force the University of Mississippi to admit Dewey Greene, Jr. The next day he was arrested

on a morals charge. In Greenville, three COFO staffers were picked up for investigation of a burglary charge. On the social side, Charlie Cobb and Curtis Hayes had just found out they were both being led on romantically by the same girl. (Her version is not reported.) CORE's Dave Dennis had picked up clothing in Jackson, delivered it to Amzie, and gone over to Ruleville, looking for people who needed commodities, then back to Jackson for more clothing. Work in Washington County was being hampered by the lack of a car.

An organizer had just moved into Leland, forewarned by Amzie Moore that the police were especially bad there and that he should expect trouble soon. One of the prominent Black residents had promised to organize a meeting of other leading citizens. The organizer really did not expect his contact to follow through, "but I have to start somewhere. He may surprise me." The organizer was planning a car pool and a citizenship school.

In Holly Springs, in the northern part of the state, Frank Smith had a lot of things going. He had a system with a contact person in every section of the county, and he had organized a speakers' bureau and a welfare relief committee chaired by a professional social worker. The registrar had recently allowed twenty-five people to register, most of them, interestingly enough, schoolteachers. It seemed that someone had let the air out of the tires of a visiting Justice Department official, and Justice had suddenly gotten around to acting on several affidavits that had been filed earlier. Smith was again hearing rumors, from both Black people and white people, that he was to be killed. The county clerk was jerking people around when they tried to pay poll tax—putting dates on the receipts that invalidated them, charging whites less than Blacks. One of Smith's contacts thought he had located at least one white person who might be willing to testify about the latter.

By the end of the month, the weather had turned so cold that it was hard to get anybody to do anything. Smith continued to have problems with people failing to follow through. One night after visiting the home of one of his contacts, a man who lived "seventeen miles from nowhere," Smith stopped by a cafe, met some people, bought them a beer, and got them interested in what he had to say about registration. They promised to meet him at the registrar's at ten the

next morning. Next morning, not a soul turned up, so Smith went back to the cafe to wait for them to show up.

The last item in the newsletter reported happily that Mrs. Hamer had finally gotten registered, making a total of six in Ruleville since August. The Ruleville Christian Citizenship Movement had raised \$3.85 for transportation. They were expecting some evictions soon on the plantations and planning to set up a tent city if need be. Workshops were well attended, and they were thinking about spreading out into some nearby towns.

Bob Zellner once compared organizing to a juggling act—how many plates can you keep spinning at once? Organizers had to be morale boosters, teachers, welfare agents, transportation coordinators, canvassers, public speakers, negotiators, lawyers, all while communicating with people ranging from illiterate sharecroppers to well-off professionals and while enduring harassment from the agents of the law and listening with one ear for the threats of violence. Exciting days and major victories are rare. Progress is a few dollars raised, a few more people coming to pay poll tax.

The newsletter reflects the specificity of the organizing experience. Local situations could vary greatly from one another. There were general patterns, but organizers worked with individuals, not generalities. Maybe this was a police chief with whom you could reason, maybe here you could get help from schoolteachers. In general, you knew ministers were unreliable, but not all of them and not everywhere. In Hattiesburg, ministers responded to the movement very early on, which Hollis Watkins attributes to spadework done by Vernon Dahmer and others. People will sometimes surprise you, as the one organizer said, but mostly only if you are open to it. A 1964 handbook for volunteers tells them “No one can give you specific instructions on what to do in your area this summer. . . . There is no set one way. Fake it.” At this stage in its history, SNCC, in the tradition of Septima Clark and Ella Baker, was still taking a let’s-try-it-and-see stance. That stance was institutionalized. According to Willie Peacock, over the winter of 1962–1963, “different projects were taking different approaches to organizing, sort of an experiment and we’d have workshops on a regular basis on the weekends,” allowing experiences to be

sifted and analyzed.¹⁴ Their openness to learning from experience meant they could more fully exploit whatever sources of strength a particular locality offered, whether found in a pulpit or a whorehouse. It was a climate that militated against writing off this or that group in advance on the basis of what “people like that” were *likely* to do.

Their ability to exploit the human resources they found in these various towns was contingent on how well organizers came to know the individuals in them. If you knew your town well enough, even Uncle Toms had their uses. When Frank Smith was called from Holly Springs to Greenwood in response to the Jimmy Travis shooting, he first carefully explained why he was leaving to local movement supporters. Then: “You have got to let the white folks know why you are leaving, so you find a local ‘Tom’ and explain the plan in detail.” As soon as your back was turned, Tom could be counted on to run and tell the white folks everything he knew.¹⁵

By this time, some organizers had been dug into their towns for six months or more, and they had an enormous store of information about who was likely to do what, but their knowledge could hardly compare with that of local people like Amzie Moore or Cleve Jordan. Across the South, VEP’s experience time and again was that registration drives were more successful to the degree they could be locally organized and staffed, which they attributed in part to the importance of “intimate knowledge of [the] conditions, psychology and people” involved.¹⁶

Organizers were particularly exposed when trying to open up some of the smaller Delta towns, especially if they were without local contacts. COFO’s manpower was always stretched thin, so going into a new town often fell on just one or two persons. In the fall of 1963, for example, Ivanhoe Donaldson (he who had organized food caravans into Leflore) and Charlie Cobb (he who had found himself in the midst of a shooting a few days after coming into the state) paid their first visit to a town called Rolling Fork, intending to start by going door to door. A police car watched them for a while and then disappeared. Donaldson was standing on the steps of some man’s house, trying to get him to talk about registering. A pickup with two white men inside pulled up and began taking down the tag number of the rented car Donaldson and Cobb were driving. The driver, a man who

had been sitting in the police car a few minutes earlier, then drove the pickup right over the man's lawn, nearly running Donaldson down. He threw a shotgun into Donaldson's face. "Nigger, we aren't going to have any more of this agitation 'round here. Niggers 'round here don't need to vote, so you and your damned buddy get out of here. Goddamn it, Nigger! I'll give you one minute to get out of town or I'll kill you!!" Then he drove off. The old man they had been talking to disappeared into his home as soon as he saw the shotgun, and no one else would so much as speak to them after the incident with the pickup. They left town and returned that evening after dark.¹⁷

In small towns it was frequently impossible even to place a phone call for help. Local operators might refuse to take the calls, or they might tell the local police where the organizers were calling from. Operators across the state recognized "movement" phone numbers—the COFO or NAACP offices, Amzie Moore's home or Aaron Henry's—and anyone placing a call to one of those numbers from a small town endangered the people whose phone had been used.

Organizers coming into a new town had to confront immediately the complexities of the local stratification system. One SNCC training document makes it clear that SNCC put a great deal of thought into dealing with the problem. It suggests that prospective organizers engage in a role-playing exercise. Assuming that they have just come into a new town, they are instructed to act out how they would solicit the help of a local businessman. Trainees are first instructed to assume that the businessman is a Tom but is pretending to be friendly, then they are to assume that the businessman is unwilling to share power with young upstarts, and finally they are to assume that the businessman is sincerely committed to the movement but thinks SNCC people are working for personal glory.¹⁸ Trainees are encouraged to think about not only overcoming fear but also neutralizing deception, distrust, and arrogance while avoiding pigeonholing people stereotypically.

Identifying informal leaders was often the most efficient way to open up a town. Registration workers

frequently found that the real leaders were not the people in places of position. An elderly woman of no title and with no organiza-

tional support might be highly influential simply because she was noted as a kind of personal problem-solver. Sometimes, such a person, because of her effectiveness in small matters and the trust consequently built, could be a key figure in efforts to persuade people to register to vote in a difficult area.¹⁹

When such people were identified they were often sent to Septima Clark's citizenship training center in Dorchester, Georgia. The trip helped people develop a sense of the larger movement and of themselves as movement people.

It was seldom advisable, though, just to ignore the traditional leadership class. Organizers were encouraged to respect traditional leadership without depending on it. One VEP field worker, described as very experienced, describes how he would go about organizing a new town:

He would go first to the "independents," the undertaker, the grocers, the preachers. Then he would go to the school principal. ("In some cases you can go to the principal, ask who his enemies are, and you have the leaders.") Having made contact with these, he would assume that he had discovered the principal community leaders. He would assume, too, that the Negro church was at the center of the community because "the church belongs to the folks." He would regard the deacons of the churches ("because they're the preachers' men") as very important to anything he undertook. Finally, he would assume that for action, a strong outside stimulus probably would be necessary to break what frequently was a local paralysis.

Another worker, probably also thinking about the problem of paralysis, puts the issue of contacting middle-class traditional leaders in a different light.

I would do this to neutralize them. They do not usually oppose having the job done—they want it done, but they don't want to be embarrassed if someone else does it and they are left out. After seeing

them, I would find people prepared to work hard for recognition. Then I'd try to wed the two together and monitor the group.²⁰

No matter what the response from the established leadership, mobilizing a town ordinarily involved a great deal of canvassing, going door-to-door, trying to draw people in. "There is nothing dramatic about the work. There are no emotional releases. The tension is constant. Every passing car is a threat, every white face a mask for violence, every back road a potential trap."²¹ Many Blacks were less than welcoming. Will Henry Rogers recalls that he and the other canvassers "got thrown out of people's homes, got knocked in the head with skilletts, got knives and guns thrown in our faces."²²

In Greenwood as in most places, the volunteer canvassers initially tended to be young people like Rogers. Bob Moses wrote:

We can't count on adults. Very few who "have the time" and are economically independent of the white man are willing to join the struggle, and are not afraid of the tremendous pressure they will face. This leaves the young people to be the organizers, the agents of social and political change. . . . They operate at extreme disadvantage; they suffer from the most backward educational system in the United States; they very seldom are free to work in their own home towns because of the pressures brought to bear on their parents and their relatives. . . . They have little knowledge of procedures and skills involved in writing newsletters, press releases, reports, etc., so their ability to analyze and report on their activities is limited; they do not have a functioning adult structure to provide a framework for their operations. Such structures as exist are usually paper organizations with no active program. . . . It is a sign of hope that we have been able to find young people to shoulder the responsibility for carrying out the voting drive. They are the seeds of change.²³

Among the initial group of youthful canvassers in Greenwood were some, like George, Dewey, and Freddie Greene, who came from families with a history of political activism, and others, like Al Garner, who had been involved in founding the NAACP Youth Council. Others

were drawn in gradually by the SNCC workers. SNCC workers simply hung out wherever young people did. In the fall of 1962 Waite Johnson, Lula Belle's son, was a high school sophomore. His first contact with the movement was in the person of Sam Block, who made it a practice in the afternoons to hang out in the poolroom frequented by Waite and some of his friends. Waite found Sam interesting, captivating; he talked about things that Waite had not heard of before, and he told Sam and the other boys that they were going to be a part of the movement whether they wanted to be or not. The boys laughed at that, but they kept listening, and a number of them did eventually begin canvassing, which did not mean that they had bought the whole message that Block, Peacock, and the others were preaching. When Waite first started canvassing, he still believed that even if blacks were allowed to vote, their votes wouldn't be counted. Again, SNCC workers knew that participation could precede ideological commitment as well as follow it.

When Waite Johnson describes his initial reaction to Block and Peacock, he uses the word "skeptical" a lot, but the word he uses most is "curious." They were just interesting to listen to. They were equally interesting to some young women. The SNCC workers, in their late teens or early twenties, were marketable items romantically. They were from out of town, they were courageous, they were intelligent, everybody in town was talking about them, and some of them were "soft talkers."

At least some young women, then, began hanging out at the SNCC office for reasons that were not entirely political, and young men followed them. Indeed, there were at least a few arguments among SNCC staff over whether some of them were keeping the right balance between the social and the political. In any case, some young people initially drawn to the movement partly for social reasons became a part of the initial cadre of canvassers. The movement also offered opportunities for travel that were unusual for Black youth growing up in small Delta towns. Alberta Barnett, who was in her early twenties when SNCC came to Greenwood, remembers traveling to other parts of Mississippi, to Georgia, Ohio, Indiana, New York, and to the 1964 National Democratic Convention in Atlantic City.

Field reports are filled with stories of spending day after day drag-

ging from house to house without a single positive response to show for it. Most people were simply afraid and confused but reluctant to admit it. Some of the excuses people gave were repeated so often that some workers simply developed a checklist:

Feel votes of Negroes not counted.
Thinks politics are un-Christian.
Just not interested.
Don't have the time to discuss voting.
Feel the politicians are going to do whatever they want, regardless of votes cast.
Too busy, engaged in personal affairs.
Feels Negroes should not become involved.
Must consult with someone else.
Fear of being embarrassed at the registrar's office.
Wants time to think it over.
Feel poll tax should be abolished.
Don't like the way things are carried out.
Been advised not to register.
Satisfied with things as they are.²⁴

One young worker commented on the same problem with inventive syntax and unintentional irony:

I canvassed, while I was canvassing we discussed that the problems of some of the Negro race are afraid and do not understand their rights as citizens simply because all their lives they have been taught that the Negro race isn't as good as any other race in the South which in most cases that's true.²⁵

Producing one warm body at the courthouse took a great deal of knocking on doors. Luvaughn Brown reported that on one day in August of 1962, a hundred people were contacted, ten agreed to go register, three actually showed up, and those three were frightened away from the courthouse by the sheriff.²⁶ The yield probably varied a great deal from community to community. At about the same time

Block went to Greenwood, Frank Smith went to Holly Springs in the northern part of the state, an area where economic reprisals were quite severe but reputedly somewhat less violent than Leflore and other counties near the heart of the Delta. After his first meeting, he was able to get adult volunteer workers, unlike the experience in Greenwood. After contacting over one thousand people, they got about one hundred fifty actually to take the test.²⁷

Some COFO workers in Greenwood developed reputations as being especially successful canvassers, and no one style of work characterizes them. When I interviewed George Greene, he impressed me as a man who genuinely enjoyed talking with people and particularly enjoyed a friendly argument. According to Waite Johnson, Greene was a remarkably patient and persistent organizer, with a response for every excuse:

I have seen people slam doors in his face, but he said I'm going to be back. . . . he'd go every day, every hour, every week. Like he would knock on that person's door, they would see him at least 3 or 4 times a week. He'd say, "This is something you should do. It's free and won't cost you nothing. I got the gas, I got a ride—you ain't got to walk. I've got the paper here. . . . I'll hold your hand." He took time with them.

Canvassers had to be patient. Silas McGhee remarked that people, especially on the plantations, had only known one way of life, and you couldn't expect them to change overnight. Guyot, talking about how one might approach a potential local leader, said, "Don't speed him up too much, dialogue with him, find out what his tempo is, what his objectives are. Then you might alter them a little bit, but . . . be careful."²⁸ Willie Peacock recalled that canvassers were instructed not to worry about numbers; the idea was to reach individuals, and you did that by returning over and over to the same people. Eventually, he said, people would start telling you some of the negative things they heard about you. As that suggests, returning repeatedly to people who had rejected you was partly a matter of developing trust. Repeated visits also meant that canvassers could gradually get a feel for

what line of argument might best move a particular individual. Alberta Barnet recalled that among older residents who had little or no conception of electoral politics, you could sometimes get their attention by talking about Franklin Roosevelt and explaining that if they wanted to see programs like those Roosevelt started, they would have to vote. Older canvassers who were residents of Greenwood had the advantage, of course, of frequently talking to people they had known all their lives. In such cases, Alberta Barnet said, you would pretty much know in advance what kind of argument the person might listen to and you had the important advantage that “he already has a little trust and confidence in you—just from the way that you live.” Guyot noted that when you got a door slammed in your face, “It just takes a day or two of talking to people to find out whose face the door won’t be slammed in.”²⁹ Thus, getting even a few reliable adult volunteers was a significant turning point in the development of each local movement.

Sam Block’s effectiveness as a canvasser seemed to be related to his “preacher’s air,” according to Waite Johnson. He was especially good with older people. “He was always saying my grandfather told me this, my grandmother told me this and the Bible says so and so. . . . Once people got to know him naturally they thought he was Jesus. They would sit down and I heard them say ‘I’ll go down with you, Block. Go ahead, my boy!’”

The handbook that COFO prepared for the volunteers for the 1964 summer program summarizes what the organization had learned about canvassing from nearly three years in the field. It starts by warning volunteers to be careful how they present themselves; you have to make people want to talk to you. Everybody can be approached, but some people will require a lot of time. If a person seems reluctant, come back later, try to soften them up through repeated exposure. Try to build a relationship. If a person asks you in but doesn’t really seem to be listening, try asking questions to focus their attention. If a person shows any interest, try to give them something to do right away, perhaps helping you contact others. If a person already knows what you are telling them, try to find out how they learned. Do not over-

whelm people. Give them a single idea—attending a mass meeting or helping with a workshop.³⁰

In the city of Greenwood itself, canvassing might only be a matter of taking a group to a section of town and assigning a different street to each person, or it might be a matter of going to the basketball court to see who was willing to canvass that day. “Out in the rural” was a different matter. The plantations were white-owned, and civil rights workers were trespassing. They had to either sneak past the landlord or lie their way past (“I’m just going to visit my cousin.”) There was always the possibility that someone would tell the owner what was really going on, and if plantation workers were even suspected of talking to civil rights workers, they would be fired and evicted. When people did decide to register, civil rights workers might slip onto the plantations at night and help them move before the landlords got wind of what was happening. Sometimes it was better to wait until people came to town on the weekend. Even then, there remained the problem of what civil rights workers called the “plantation mentality,” an ingrained sense of helplessness and dependence on whites.

George Greene, who for all of his long career in the movement seemed to wind up in the hardest and most dangerous places to work, was among those who spent the most time canvassing on the plantations. So did Silas McGhee. Silas, who lived on a farm himself, knew a great many of the people on the plantations and was able to build on that, translating their personal regard for him and his family into political capital.

Some people left no doubt that they didn’t want to be bothered. Arance Morgan and Dot Johnson were canvassing together once, when a lady pulled a gun on them. The girls got out of there quick. The first time Jake and Silas McGhee visited the Willard home, Mr. Willard pulled a gun on them. They went back anyway, though, eventually convincing him to register. It was a pyrrhic victory. Mr. Willard was thrown off the plantation he lived on and eventually left the area.

Maybe canvassing is the prototypical organizing act. It is the initial reaching out to the community, the first step toward building relationships outside the circle of those favorably predisposed to the

movement. Mass meetings were another step in that process. If canvassers could awaken an initial curiosity in people, mass meetings could weld curiosity into commitment.

MASS MEETINGS: LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS

*"It is said that these people accumulate into crowds and then by
their speeches are exhorted into frenzy and then
seek to march in a body to register."*

GREENWOOD COMMONWEALTH

April 1, 1963

I once heard a journalist who had covered the movement remark that two decades after its height the civil rights movement had inspired no great works of art—no great novels or films, no great plays. He rather missed the point. The movement was its own work of art, and mass meetings were among the places where that might most easily be seen. Mass meetings, which had the overall tone and structure of a church service, were grounded in the religious traditions and the esthetic sensibilities of the Black South. If the drudgery of canvassing accounted for much of an organizer's time on a day-to-day basis, mass meetings, when they were good, were a part of the pay-off, emotionally and politically.

The Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955 is one of the turning points of the modern movement. According to Ralph Abernathy, the first song at the first mass meeting there was "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms": What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms. What have I to fear, what have I to dread, leaning on the everlasting arms? It was an appropriate choice. Emile Durkheim wrote:

The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence or to conquer them.³¹

The religious traditions of the Black South were an important part of what empowered members of the movement, especially the older members, allowing them to endure and conquer. In bending Afro-American Christianity toward emancipatory ends the movement took it back to its origins. For much of the twentieth century, the Black church, especially in rural areas, turned people away from this-worldly concerns.³² The preacherocracy, as one critic termed it, urged patience in the face of suffering. "They saw the church as a way to escape the pains of the world, not as a moral force that could help heal them."³³ This view was a far cry from the Christianity of the slaves. As described by Lawrence Levine among others, slave Christianity was a liberation theology. It is true that those slavemasters who pushed Christianity generally hoped it would make slaves more manageable, but as Herbert Gutman points out, the important question is not just what masters did to slaves but what slaves did with what was done to them. In this case, they were to take what was intended to be a theology of accommodation and fashion from it a theology of liberation.

If masters were fond of the Bible verse that urges, "Servants, obey thy masters," slaves tended to be fonder of the verse that held the laborer is worthy of his hire. Levine notes that slaves identified more strongly with the Old Testament than the New, and within the Old Testament they identified themselves with the Hebrew children held in bondage by Egypt. Their sacred music referred more frequently to Moses than to Christ, and their Moses was the Deliverer, more than the Lawgiver. They seem to have preferred slave preachers to white ones, in part because white ones were too likely to present an order-serving interpretation of the Bible. Similarly, Du Bois argues that in the world view of the slaves, emancipation, when it finally came, was seen as fulfillment of prophecy. "My Lord delivered Daniel, Daniel, Daniel. My Lord delivered Daniel, then why not every man?"³⁴

SNCC had deliberately made a policy of recruiting Mississippi field secretaries from within the state, so many of them were steeped in the religious traditions of the South. Sam Block could slip into his "preacher's air" at will. Many people in Greenwood thought Hollis Watkins was the Reverend Hollis Watkins, and he did not try to dis-

courage them from thinking so. Willie Peacock grew up in a family that was very involved in the AME church and was able to use his knowledge of its politics to prod reluctant ministers. All of them took pride in their knowledge of the Bible and their ability to find the verses and the parables that made the points they needed to make.

Meetings in Greenwood were frequently opened with a prayer by Cleve Jordan, who had an enviable reputation as a prayer leader. His prayers were part-chant, part-song, with the audience murmuring assent and agreement at the end of every line.

Oh Father, Oh Lord,
Now, now, now, Lordie, Oh Lord
When we get through drinking tears for water
When we get through eatin' at the unwelcome table
When we get through shakin' unwelcome hands
We've got to meet Death somewhere
Don't let us be afraid to die. . . .
Father, I stretch my hand to thee
No other help I know.³⁵

Fannie Lou Hamer was such a powerful public speaker that Lyndon Johnson once called a news conference solely to stop television coverage of her. One of the most popular speakers at mass meetings in Greenwood, she stressed that God walks with the courageous. A meeting taped at Tougaloo is a good example of her style.³⁶ The meeting began with Hollis Watkins leading a vigorous rendition of "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free." Mrs. Hamer follows the singing, giving a history of her involvement in the movement, including the kinds of harassment she was subjected to. Lately, the cops in her hometown have taken to coming by late at night with their dogs, letting the dogs bark so she will know she's being watched. They have done it so much she has gotten used to it. "Look like now the dogs help me get to sleep." She then pointed out the need for people to be serious about their religion. There are plenty of people, she says, always talking about "Sure, I'm a Christian," but if you're not doing anything about being a

Christian, if you can't stand some kind of test, you need to stop shouting because the 17th chapter of Acts, 26th verse, says that the Lord made of one blood all nations. After giving some examples of how some people in the movement were making their faith concrete, she ends by leading the meeting in a freedom song: "I'm on my way to the freedom land / If you don't go, don't hinder me / I'm on my way, praise God, I'm on my way / If you don't go, let the children go."

The mixture of spirituality and music had a special impact on some of those raised outside the traditions of Afro-Christianity. Jean Wheeler Smith had never so much as heard gospel music before she went to Howard. When she got to Mississippi,

the religious, the spiritual was like an explosion to me, an emotional explosion. I didn't have that available to me [before]. It just lit up my mind. . . . The music and the religion provided a contact between our logic and our feelings . . . and gave the logic of what we were doing emotional and human power to make us go forward.

Mass meetings partook of the mundane as well as of the sacred. New workers in town might be introduced, internal problems ironed out, tactics debated and explained.³⁷ They were also educational. At one meeting in February 1963, James Bevel gave what amounted to a lecture on political economy, talking about the separation of Negroes from the land, outmigration to the North, the implications of automation, Negro self-hatred, and the broader purposes of education. Speakers brought news of what was going on in other places. Medgar Evers, for example, a frequent and popular speaker in Greenwood, might bring word of what was happening in Jackson or at the NAACP national office. Meetings broke down the debilitating sense of isolation by bringing local people out so they could see that growing numbers of their neighbors were with them. At the same time, the news from other places reinforced their sense of being part of something larger and more potent than just what was going on in Greenwood.

In some respects, mass meetings resembled meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers. Groups like these try to change the behavior of their members by offering a supportive social environ-

ment, public recognition for living up to group norms, and public pressure to continue doing so. They create an environment in which you feel that if you stumble, you are letting down not only yourself but all of your friends. One might be afraid to go to a particular demonstration or be tired of demonstrations, period, but not going would mean disappointing those people who were counting on you.

From its inception, SNCC was sensitive to the need to motivate people by giving them public recognition. Ella Baker often stressed the point. At mass meetings in Greenwood, local activists might find themselves sharing a platform with heroes like Medgar Evers or Dick Gregory, or later with Harry Belafonte or Sidney Poitier, or perhaps even with Martin Luther King himself. On one of his trips to Greenwood, King asked to meet Dewey Greene, about whom he had heard so much.³⁸ Within the movement, the traditional status system was relatively inoperative. Belle Johnson belonged to Strangers Home Baptist Church, which thought itself a high-class church. Not everyone thought she was the kind of person who belonged there. The “dicty” attitude of the church toward her angered her daughter June.³⁹ In the movement, Belle Johnson was respected for her dedication; her income and education did not matter.

Pressure at mass meetings could be overt or friendly. At one, Hollis Watkins asked for a show of hands from people who had tried to register. Then he asked how they felt about what they had done. People shouted back that they felt good about it. He asked to see the hands of those who had not yet been down (“Don’t fool us now”) and, after a short pep talk on the importance of what they were trying to do, urged them all to meet him at 8:30 in the morning so they could all go to the courthouse together.

A part of the meeting might be devoted to having people simply recite their life histories, histories inevitably full of deprivation and injustice. At one Greenwood meeting, Cleve Jordan, who had been born near the turn of the century, spoke of how he had spent forty years sawing and hauling logs for a dollar and a quarter a day, working such long days that he only saw his children on Sundays, making forty bales of cotton in a year and having nothing to show for it except the dubious satisfaction of having made some more white people rich.

Other speakers continued in the same vein.⁴⁰ In his analysis of the Chinese revolution, William Hinton argues that an important element in reconstructing the consciousness of peasants was simply having them publicly recite their biographies. Doing so helped turn private and individual grievances into a collective consciousness of systematic oppression. Mass meetings seem to have served a similar function. They also created a context in which individuals created a public face for themselves, which they then had to try to live up to. In his heart, Reverend Such-and-Such may not feel nearly as militant as the speech he gives at the mass meeting, but once he gives it, he has created an image of himself that he will not want contradicted. After playing the role he has defined for himself for a while—and getting patted on the back for it—he may find that the role becomes natural. Before you know it, he may be shaking his head at how rabbit-hearted these other ministers are. What God can cowards know?

Depending on the situation at a given moment, it might be very easy or very difficult to get people to come to mass meetings. When necessary, canvassers went door to door, passing out handbills. Most people seem to have come initially out of sheer curiosity. The meetings were something new, the regular speakers, including Mrs. Hamer, Medgar Evers, Dick Gregory, and Aaron Henry, could hold an audience, and sometimes the speakers were nationally known celebrities.

Then, too, there was the music. It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the music of the movement. The changing fortunes of the movement and the morale of its participants could have been gauged by the intensity of the singing at the meetings. Music has always been a central part of the Black religious experience. Ministers knew that a good choir was a good recruiting device. In the same fashion, many who came to meetings came just to hear the singing. Bernice Reagon calls the freedom songs “the language that focused the energy of the people who filled the streets.” She tells of an incident in Georgia in which a sheriff and his deputies tried to intimidate a mass meeting by their presence. “A song began. And the song made sure that the sheriff and his deputies knew we were there. We became visible, our image was enlarged, when the sounds of the freedom

songs filled all the space in that church.”⁴¹ When things were hopping in Greenwood, SNCC’s Worth Long sometimes brought people over from Little Rock or Pine Bluff to help on the weekends. The mass meetings he saw in Greenwood were different from the ones in Arkansas. Greenwood had more of a singing movement, and the meetings had more of an emotional tone; it was like comparing a Holiness church to a Methodist church. He tried to take some of that feeling back to Arkansas with him.⁴²

People in Greenwood were similarly enlarged by the singing and the emotional intensity of the meetings. Among their other talents, Hollis Watkins, Willie Peacock, and Sam Block were all songleaders. Arance Brooks, recalling the period when meetings were always packed, says, “I loved it. I just felt so much better when everybody would go. Looked like I slept better. The singing and everything. I just loved it.” In spite of threats to his life, the Reverend Aaron Johnson, during a particularly tense period, opened his church for a meeting after the church that was supposed to have it backed down. People were afraid to come in at first, but when they did “We rocked the church. We rocked that church that night. Ha, Ha, Ha. I said, ‘Well, if I die, I had a good time tonight. I had a *good* time tonight.’”

The music operated as a kind of litany against fear. Mass meeting offered a context in which the mystique of fear could be chipped away. At one Greenwood meeting, a speaker noted with satisfaction that at a recent demonstration where it looked as though things might get out of hand, Police Chief Lary was visibly scared; Lary’s voice had trembled as he asked demonstrators to break it up. Even the police chief is human. At another meeting a boy who had spent thirty-nine days in jail with Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes talked about how jail was not as terrible as most people thought. He had kind of enjoyed it, actually. The community sent them baked chickens and pies and cakes and things, so they just sent the jail food on back.⁴³

Much of the humor at mass meetings was an attack on fear. A song could bring the Citizens’ Council down to size. To the tune of “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know,” they might sing:

Jesus loves me cause I’m white.
Lynch me a nigger every night. Hate the Jews and I hate the Pope,
Jes’ me and my rope.
Jesus loves me, The Citizens’ Council told me so.

“We Shall Overcome” could become:

Deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall keep the niggers down
They will never be free—eee—eee
They will never be registered,
We shall keep the niggers down.⁴⁴

Mixtures of the sacred and the profane, the mass meetings could be a very powerful social ritual. They attracted people to the movement and then helped them develop a sense of involvement and solidarity. By ritually acting out new definitions of their individual and collective selves, people helped make those selves become real. Informed and challenged by the speakers, pumped up by the singing and the laughing and the sense of community, many of those who only meant to go once out of curiosity left that first meeting thinking they might come once more, just to see.

By late 1963, women like Lula Belle Johnson and Susie Morgan and Lou Emma Allen often stopped by the SNCC office just to sit around and visit with one another and the staff and maybe do a little sewing. Old men stopped by to listen to the ballgames or just to argue with one another. For a segment of Greenwood’s Black population, the movement had become as integrated into their lives as the barbershop or beauty parlor. It was not the least significant of the movement’s achievements. Most of the people we are talking about we would have called apolitical twelve months earlier. Within a year, a radical political movement had become woven into their personal and communal patterns.

Of Nate Shaw, a Black Alabama sharecropper who joined a

communist-led attempt to create a sharecroppers' union in the 1930s, Theodore Rosengarten says "Shaw admits he learned little about the origins of the union. He was less concerned with where it came from than with its spirit, which he recognized as his own."⁴⁵ Similarly, local people in Greenwood recognized something of their own best spirit reflected in the early COFO cadre.

Courage was only the most visible part of what accounts for the dynamism of this period. We also have to consider the depth and richness of the personal relationships between organizers and local people, the flexibility of the organizers, their willingness to experiment, their ability to project themselves as men and women of character and the well-honed ability of the local people to read character, to recognize "fullness" when it was there. We also have to consider simple persistence. Our collective imagery of the movement does not include George Greene returning to talk to some frightened farmer for the tenth time or a Mary Lane, taking the registration test eleven times before she is allowed to pass, or Donaldson and Cobb returning at night to a town they were run out of that day. Overemphasizing the movement's more dramatic features, we undervalue the patient and sustained effort, the slow, respectful work, that made the dramatic moments possible.

"Spadework" was a pet phrase of Ella Baker's, popping up with regularity in the reports she filed while traveling the South in the 1940s:

I must leave now for one of those small church night meetings which are usually more exhausting than the immediate returns seem to warrant but it's a part of the spade work, so let it be.

Yes, Madison seems to have done a good job in N.C. He is to be congratulated because it was mostly spade work.⁴⁶

Ironically, later in the decade, as the struggle became, in some ways, more sophisticated, activists seemed less and less willing to engage in the kind of spadework that had made Greenwood possible.

Nine

A WOMAN'S WAR

*Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin'
on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me.*

ZORA NEALE HURSTON
Their Eyes Were Watching God

Women all over the world are less active in politics than men.

MATTHEWS AND PROTHRO
Negroes and the New Southern Politics, 1966

*It was women going door to door, speaking with their neighbors,
meeting in voter-registration classes together, organizing through their
churches that gave the vital momentum and energy to the movement,
that made it a mass movement.*

ANDY YOUNG
SCLC¹

*Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which can
never be shaken, never be moved.*

PSALM 125