

INTRODUCTION

*We have the record of kings and gentlemen ad nauseum
and in stupid detail; but of the common run of human beings, and
particularly of the half or wholly submerged working group, the
world has saved all too little of authentic record and tried to
forget or ignore even the little saved.*

W. E. B. DU BOIS¹

*Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and
give glory to Your Father who is in heaven.*

MATTHEW 5:16

*I've got the light of Freedom, Lord,
And I'm going to let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!*

TRADITIONAL

AS LATE AS 1960, FEWER than two percent of Mississippi's Black adults were registered to vote. During the early summer of 1962, a handful of youthful organizers fanned out across the state to stimulate voter-registration drives. Seldom more than two or three to a county at first, they went into towns that few Americans had ever heard of—Greenwood, Hattiesburg, Holly Springs, Ruleville, Greenville. The

organizers represented a coalition of civil rights groups, but most owed their primary allegiance to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced *snick*), the organization that had, under the watchful eye of Ella Baker, grown out of the sit-ins of 1960.

Wherever they were sent, the civil rights activists found that their initial reception by local Blacks was less than enthusiastic. The movement was generally dismissed as “dat mess.” Reprisals were virtually certain. Those who were even thought to be interested in the movement might lose their jobs. Those who did join could expect to be shot at and to have their churches bombed and their homes targeted by arsonists. People who were able to survive the winter months only because of surplus commodities from the federal government could expect to lose them. Farmers who needed loans to get their crops started in the spring could expect their credit to be withdrawn. People who needed medical care could expect it to be refused. As one white landowner said, with completely unintended irony, to a Black family as he kicked them off his land, “Your food, your work and your very lives depend on good-hearted white people.”²

Nonetheless, a significant number of the Black residents in towns across the state eventually chose to cast their lot with the movement. The first organizers to come to Greenwood, near the heart of the Mississippi Delta, had to sleep catch-as-catch-can. Within a year, the level of movement activity was sufficient to bring the normal functioning of the city to a virtual standstill. Within two years, Black Greenwood was so much behind the movement that it could have slept a small army of civil rights workers (and did). It was one of the decade’s earliest successful campaigns in the rural South.

In part, this book is an examination of that campaign. How was it possible, within a few years, to move large numbers of dependent and, to all appearances, apolitical people—none of them having any semblance of legal rights at the local level, all of them vulnerable to violence—how was it possible to move these people to a position of actively working to change the conditions of their own lives? What did the movement do to them and they to it? In the quotation that prefaces this Introduction, Du Bois reminds us that social history has tended to ignore or forget the record of ordinary people. A great deal

has been written about the various national civil rights organizations and their leaders. The sheer volume of material written from a top-down perspective implies that the dynamism of the movement is to be understood in terms of these national leaders and national organizations. But the more closely one looks at the history, the less comfortable one becomes with reducing the tens of thousands of people across the South who participated in local movements to faceless masses, singing, praying, and marching in the background. Historian David Garrow contends that

what the carefully-scrutinized historical record shows is that the actual human catalysts of the movement, the people who really gave direction to the movement's organizing work, the individuals whose records reflect the greatest substantive accomplishments, were *not* administrators or spokespersons, and were not those whom most scholarship on the movement identifies as the "leaders." Instead, in any list, long or short, of the activists who had the greatest personal impact upon the course of the southern movement, the vast majority of names will be ones that are unfamiliar to most readers.³

Many of the young leaders who spread across Mississippi in 1962 were carriers of a particular tradition of social struggle, and this book is also an examination of that tradition. Bob Moses, himself responsible for much of what made the Mississippi movement distinctive, even among SNCC projects, has written that the civil rights movement can be thought of as having two distinct traditions.⁴ There was what he labels the community-mobilizing tradition, focused on large-scale, relatively short-term public events. This is the tradition of Birmingham, Selma, the March on Washington, the tradition best symbolized by the work of Martin Luther King. This is the movement of popular memory and the only part of the movement that has attracted sustained scholarly attention.

The Mississippi movement reflects another tradition of Black activism, one of community organizing, a tradition with a different sense of what freedom means and therefore a greater emphasis on the long-term development of leadership in ordinary men and women, a tradi-

tion best epitomized, Moses argues, by the teaching and example of Ella Baker—and, I would add, by that of Septima Clark. That tradition, and placing the history of Greenwood within it, is the second major theme of this book.

The book's structure is partly chronological and partly topical. Chapters 1 through 3 argue that in fact the initiative that made change possible was far more widely dispersed in Black communities than we ordinarily realize. The first chapter is partly a reminder of how utterly vicious the old system in Mississippi was and partly an outline of some of the systemic changes that made challenges to that system increasingly possible after 1940. The next two chapters are concerned with continuity; organizationally and intellectually, the well-known movement of the early sixties was predicated on the activism of an earlier, socially invisible generation. Chapters 4 through 9 examine the way the activists in the sixties built on and elaborated that legacy, concentrating on Greenwood between 1962 and 1964 and on the role that local people there played in the process. The period before mid-1964 is special because it marks a time when the Mississippi movement had only the most minimal resources. The federal government was still criminally lax about protecting the lives of civil rights workers, there were no large numbers of volunteers from outside the state, no consistent interest from the national media even when civil rights workers were killed, no particular reason to believe that the movement was ever going to achieve anything to justify the sacrifices it required. Those who became a part of the movement in that period really were trusting themselves to the air. The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1964 Freedom Summer Project signaled a shift to a different kind of movement. Chapter 10 discusses that shift. Chapters 11 and 12 look at Greenwood in the middle to late sixties, finding that the experience of the early years was sufficiently transformative—empowering, if you will—that local people who had become active in that period were able to create and sustain several movement-related institutions, even in the face of decreasing help from the outside organizers who had first brought many of them into political motion. Their very success contributed to the erosion of the climate of relationships that had helped energize the pre-1964 movement. The two

final chapters deal with the decline of the organizing tradition and its relative invisibility in both activist communities and popular media. The bibliographic essay discusses the same issue as it applies to scholarship.

“I’ve got the light of Freedom” is a line from “This Little Light of Mine.” A staple of Black church music, “This Little Light of Mine” is an appropriate symbol of the movement’s rootedness in the cultural traditions of the rural Black South. Depending on tempo and emphasis, it can carry a variety of messages. In the small sanctified church in which I was raised, it was sung during collection, presumably signifying that whatever one had to give mattered to the Lord. In Mississippi particularly the song became an anthem of the movement and a special favorite of Fannie Lou Hamer’s. One activist wrote: “It was sung in churches, in freedom schools, on marches, on picket lines, at jails and in Parchman [prison] where hundreds of demonstrators were jailed. The song became a force.”⁵ The idea that everyone had some part of freedom’s light was close to the heart of the message that organizers both carried into the Delta and found there.

There are heroes and, emphatically, heroines enough in this history. Yielding to the temptation to focus on their courage, however, may miss the point. Part of the legacy of people like Ella Baker and Septima Clark is a faith that ordinary people who learn to believe in themselves are capable of extraordinary acts, or better, of acts that seem extraordinary to us precisely because we have such an impoverished sense of the capabilities of ordinary people. If we are surprised at what these people accomplished, our surprise may be a commentary on the angle of vision from which we view them. That same angle of vision may make it difficult to see that of the gifts they brought to the making of the movement, courage may have been the least.

Unreferenced quotations are from my own interviews with the person named. Several of the people interviewed have changed names since the sixties. I have followed a practice of using whatever name an individual was or is using at the time referred to. Idiosyncratic spelling and grammar in quotations have been retained except where they might interfere with clarity. Finally, within the movement, Ella Baker

was always Miss Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer always Mrs. Hamer. Southern Blacks had to struggle for the use of “courtesy titles” and thus often had a different appreciation for them. More particularly, the use of titles was self-consciously a token of the respect and affection that women like Miss Baker and Mrs. Hamer commanded even from young men and women who were frequently contemptuous of social convention. I have followed their usage.