

Beginnings

EARNEST THOMAS HAD been a fighter all his life. Born in Jonesboro, Louisiana, on 20 November 1935, Thomas was descended from a long line of independent tradesmen and farmers. He came of age in the Deep South under the system of segregation, yet he knew white people as well as his own folk. Racial segregation fought a relentless battle against human nature—against the instinctual longing for companionship and shared joy among members of the human race. The intimacy of everyday life tempted people to disregard the awkward rituals of segregation. In his youth Thomas had frequented the local swimming hole in Jonesboro, a gentle creek that wound its way through the pines. Its tranquil waters welcomed children of all colors. Here black and white children innocently played together, splashing and dunking. At a distance, colors disappeared into a shadow silhouette of bobbing heads, the languid summer air disturbed only by occasional shrieks of joy.¹

Yet inevitably nature surrendered to the mean habits of adult society. Thomas recalled that sometimes the whites would band together and swoop down on a handful of frolicking blacks, claiming the waters as the spoils of war. On other occasions, Thomas would join a charging army of whooping black warriors as they descended on the stream, scattering a gaggle of unsuspecting white boys. The swimming hole wars of his youth provided Earnest Thomas with one enduring lesson: rights were secured by force more often than by appeals to reason and moral argument.

In the summer of 1964 Thomas was swept up in a new phase of the civil rights movement and became a leader of the founding chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. How the most widely known armed self-defense organization in the Deep South came into existence in a remote Louisiana town, far removed from the movement centers and media lime-

light, in itself speaks volumes about a largely invisible conflict within the civil rights movement between the partisans of nonviolence that descended on the South and an emerging working-class movement that resisted pacifism in the face of police and vigilante terror.

In the nineteenth century the pine hills of North Louisiana were a hostile refuge for the poor and dispossessed. Following the Civil War, legions of starving and desperate whites were driven into the pine hills by destruction, drought, and depleted soil in the Southeast. They arrived to find the best alluvial land controlled by large landowners and speculators. The remaining soil was poorly suited for farming, rendered haggard and fallow by millennia of acidic pine needles deposited on the forest floor. The lean migrants scratched the worthless sandy soil, shook their heads, and resigned themselves to the unhappy fate of subsistence farming.

Upcountry whites eked out a living with a dozen acres of “corn and ’taters,” a few hogs for fatback, trapping and hunting for game, and occasionally logging for local markets. Not until the turn of the century, when the large-scale lumber industry invaded the pines, did their hopes and prospects change. Even then, prosperity was fleeting. By the 1930s the lumber leviathans had stripped the pine woods bare, leaving a residue of a few paper and lumber mills. Those fortunate enough to find work in the pulp and paper industry watched helplessly in the 1950s and 1960s as even these remaining jobs were threatened by shrinking reserves and automation.²

These Protestant descendants of the British Isles were the latest in several generations of whites forced west by a slave-based economy that rapidly expended the very soil it arose from. With the end of the Civil War their plight was compounded by more than three million black freedmen surging across the South in search of work and land. Emancipation thrust blacks into merciless competition with whites for the dearth of work, land, and credit.

The freedmen also looked to the pines for deliverance. Blacks who remained on plantations lived in constant fear of new forms of bondage such as gang labor and sharecropping. Thousands of dusty, tattered black families packed their belongings and trekked into the hills to escape the indignities of debt peonage. Like their white competitors, the freedmen sought the dignity and independence conferred by a few acres of land and the freedom to sell their labor.

The pine hills were soon peopled by the most independent and self-sufficient African Americans: those willing to risk everything to escape economic bondage. Their passionate independence flourished in the hills as they worked as self-employed timber cutters and log haulers. By the

middle of the twentieth century many of their descendants had left the land, drawn to the small industrial towns that offered decent wages in lumber and paper mills.

From the end of the Civil War through the 1960s these two fiercely independent communities, black and white, traveled separate yet parallel paths in the pine hills of North Louisiana. In the summer of 1964, in the small town of Jonesboro, these two worlds would finally cross paths—as well as swords.

Jonesboro was one of dozens of makeshift mill towns that sprang up as eastern businesses rushed to mine the vast timber spreads of Louisiana. Incorporated in 1903, the town was little more than an appendage to a sawmill—crude shacks storing the human machinery of industry.

By the 1960s Jonesboro lived in the shadow of the enormous Continental Can Company paper mill located in Hodge, a small town on the outskirts of Jonesboro. The New York-based company produced container board and kraft paper at the Hodge facility and employed more than 1,500 whites and 200 blacks. In addition, many blacks found employment at the Olin Mathieson Chemical Company. Those blacks who were not fortunate enough to find work in the paper mill labored as destitute woodcutters and log haulers on the immense timber landholdings owned by Continental Can.³

Almost one-third of Jonesboro's 3,848 residents were black. Though by southern standards Jonesboro's black community was prosperous, poverty and ignorance were still rampant. Nearly eight out of every ten black families lived in poverty. Ninety-seven percent of blacks over the age of twenty-five had never completed a high school education. The "black quarters" in Jonesboro and Hodge consisted of dilapidated clapboard shacks, with cracks in the walls that whistled in the bitter winter wind. Human waste ran into the dirt streets for want of a sewerage system. Unpaved streets with exotic names like "Congo" and "Tarbottom" served alternately as dust storms and impassable rivers of mud.⁴

Daily life in Jonesboro painstakingly followed the rituals and conventions of Jim Crow segregation. A white person walking downtown could expect blacks to obsequiously avert their eyes and step off the sidewalk in deference. Jobs were strictly segregated, with blacks allotted positions no higher than "broom and mop" occupations. The local hospital had an all-white staff, and the paper mill segregated both jobs and toilets. Blacks were even denied the simple right to walk into the public library.⁵

On the surface there appeared to be few diversions from the tedium and poverty. The ramshackle "Minute Spot" tavern served as the only legal drinking establishment for blacks. To Danny Mitchell, a black student organizer who arrived in Jonesboro in 1964, Jonesboro's African Americans appeared

to take refuge in gambling and other unseemly pastimes. Mitchell, with a note of youthful piety, once reported to his superiors in New York that most of Jonesboro's black community "seeks enjoyment and relief from the frustrating life they endure through marital, extramarital, and inter-marital relationships."⁶

But there was more to Jonesboro than sex and dice. Indeed, segregation had produced a complex labyrinth of social networks and organizations in the black community. The relatively large industrial working class preserved the independent spirit that characterized blacks in the pine woods. As in many other small mill towns, blacks in Jonesboro had created a tightly knit community that revolved around the institutions of church and fraternal orders. In the post-World War II era, black men in the South frequently belonged to several fraternal orders and social clubs, such as the Prince Hall Masons and the Brotherhood for the Protection of Elks. These formal and informal organizations provided a respite from the oppressive white culture. They offered status, nurtured mutual bonds of trust, and served as schools for leadership for Jonesboro's black working and middle classes.⁷

In the period of increased activism following World War II, most of Jonesboro's civil rights leadership emerged from the small yet significant middle class of educators, self-employed craftsmen, and independent business people (religious leaders were conspicuously absent from the ranks of the reformers). While segregation denied blacks many opportunities, it also created captive markets for some enterprising blacks, particularly in services that whites refused to provide them. There were twenty-one black-owned businesses in Jonesboro in 1964, including taxi companies, gas stations, and a popular skating rink.⁸

The black Voters League of Jonesboro drew its leadership primarily from the ranks of businessmen and educators, such as W. C. Flannagan, E. N. Francis, J. W. Dade, and Fred Hearn. Flannagan, who led the league in the early 1960s, was a self-employed handyman who also published a small newsletter. Francis owned several businesses, including a funeral home, grocery store, barber shop, and dry-cleaning store. Dade was, by local standards, a man of considerable wealth. He taught mathematics at Jackson High School and supplemented his teaching salary with income from a dozen rental houses. Hearn was also a teacher and worked as a farmer and installed and cleaned water wells.⁹

Jackson Parish (county), where Jonesboro is located, had had a small but well-organized chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since the 1940s. In 1956 the Louisiana NAACP was gravely damaged by a state law that required disclosure of membership.

Rather than divulge members' names and expose them to harassment, many chapters replaced the NAACP with "civic and voters leagues." Such was the case in Jackson Parish, where the NAACP became the "Jackson Parish Progressive Voters League." From its inception, the Voters League concentrated on voter registration and enjoyed some success. When the White Citizens Council and the Registrar of Voters conspired to purge blacks from the registration rolls in 1956, the Voters League retaliated with a voting rights suit initiated by the Justice Department. The Voters League prevailed and federal courts eventually forced the registrar to cease discriminating against blacks, to report records to the federal judiciary, and to assist black applicants in registering to vote. By 1964 nearly 18 percent of the parish voters were black, a remarkably high percentage for the rural South.¹⁰

The Voters League never commanded enough votes to win elective office for a black candidate. For the most part, the league was limited to delivering the black vote to white candidates in exchange for political favors. Although political patronage offered some benefits to the black community at large, it more frequently created opportunities for personal aggrandizement. At its worse, patronage disguised greed as public service. Some Voters League critics felt that its leaders were principally interested in gaining personal favors from politicians, and there was credence to the charge.¹¹

In truth, the white political establishment offered a tempting assortment of patronage rewards to compliant black leaders in an effort to discourage them from conducting disruptive civil rights protests. Inducements included positions in government and public education, ranging from school bus drivers to school administrators. White political patronage bought influence and loyalty in the black community. The practice testified to the fact that white domination rested on more than repression and fear: it depended on consent by a segment of the black middle class. Conflicts over segregation were to be resolved by gentlemen behind closed doors. Time and again, civil rights activists in Louisiana found the black middle class and clergy to be significant obstacles to organizing. One activist in East Feliciana Parish reported that the lack of interest in voter registration in 1964 could be attributed to, among other things, the "general fear-inducing activity of the very active community of Toms. Every move we make is broadcast by them to the whole town."¹²

Indeed, the "mass meeting" technique represented a rudimentary form of working-class control over the black middle class and redefined the political decision-making process in the black community. Prior to the civil rights movement, racial conflicts and issues were normally negotiated by intermediaries: middle-class power brokers, the NAACP, or the Voters Leagues.

During the civil rights movement direct democracy mass meetings assembled the black community to make decisions by consensus, a process that functioned not only to build community support for the leaders' decisions, but also to prevent middle-class leaders from making secret agreements and compromises with the white power structure. Plebiscitary democracy guaranteed that all agreements had to pass muster with the black rank and file: the working class, the poor, and the youth.¹³

There were good reasons for the suspicions exhibited by the rank and file. Black leadership was more complex and divided than the undifferentiated, united image reflected in the popular historical myth of the civil rights movement. The movement did not march in unison and speak with one voice. The black community had its share of traitors, rascals, and ordinary fools. In general, though, the leaders of the Voters League in Jonesboro were honorable men who had the community's interests at heart. Nonetheless, it was difficult for the league to generate enthusiasm for voting rights when the ballot benefited only a handful of elite blacks. For most black voters in Jonesboro, elections offered little more than a Hobson's choice between racism and more racism.

Deep divisions existed between the black clergy and the movement in Jonesboro. Only one church, Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, initially supported the movement. Pleasant Grove had a highly active and concerned membership, led by Henry and Ruth Amos who operated a gas station and Percy Lee Bradford, a cab driver and mill worker. The dearth of civil rights church leaders in Jonesboro was no anomaly. In both large cities and small towns in the South, the attitude of black clergy toward the movement generally ranged from indifference to outright hostility. Medgar Evers, the martyred Mississippi NAACP leader, once grumbled that the ministers "won't give us 50 cents for fear of losing face with the white man." Martin Luther King did not mince words about the complacency of his brothers of the collar in Birmingham: "I'm tired of preachers riding around in big cars, living in fine homes, but not willing to fight their part," said King. "If you can't stand up with your own people, you are not fit to be a leader."¹⁴

The conservative character of rural black clergy was owing to several factors. Church buildings were vulnerable to arson in retaliation for civil rights activities (black churches in the South were frequently located outside of town in remote, unguarded areas). It was common for insurance companies to cancel insurance on churches that had been active in the movement. Moreover, black ministers depended on good relationships with whites to obtain loans for the all-important brick-and-mortar building projects.

But the clergy's conservatism was also emblematic of the contradictory

character of the black church. On the one hand, the church was a force for change. It provided a safe and nurturing sanctuary in a hostile, oppressive world. In the midst of despair, it forged a new community, nourished racial solidarity, defined community values, and provided pride and hope. And when it adopted the twentieth-century “social gospel” theology, as practiced by Martin Luther King, the black church could even be a powerful vehicle for social justice and national redemption.

In contrast to this uplifting role, though, the black church could also lapse into a fatalistic outlook that bred passivity and political cynicism. Fatalism is a rational and effective adaptation in reactionary times when people live on hope alone. Some of the black clergy preached the gospel of resignation—extolling the glories of heaven and eschewing social and political reform—and, worse yet, honored the color line and its attendant traditions of deference. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, black leader E. D. Nixon gave voice to the frustration that many felt with the black clergy. “Let me tell you gentlemen one thing,” Nixon told a group of ministers he had gathered to organize the boycott. “You ministers have lived off of these wash-women for the last hundred years and ain’t never done nothing for them.” Nixon scolded that it was shameful that women were leading the boycott while the ministers were afraid to even have their names published as supporters. “We’ve worn aprons all our lives. It’s time to take the aprons off . . . if we’re gonna be mens, now’s the time to be mens.”¹⁵

In contrast to the spotty record of the black church in the rural movement, the black fraternal orders were frequently the backbone of resistance. Fraternal orders such as the black Masons (e.g., Prince Hall) and Elks were woven into the fabric of rural southern black life in the early 1950s and 1960s. Fraternal halls frequently served as meeting spaces for civil rights activities and self-organized fraternal institutions—free of the constraints of Christian pacifism promulgated by the church—were one of the primary cultural mechanisms for sustaining black masculine ideals of honor, physical courage, and protection of family and community. Nearly all of the male civil rights activists in Jonesboro belonged to one or more of these orders.¹⁶

There were exceptions to the conservative churches, and the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Jonesboro was one of them. The church had attracted several firm civil rights advocates and in late 1963 members of Pleasant Grove, along with the Voters League, invited the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to initiate voter registration activities in Jonesboro and Jackson Parish. Well known in the Louisiana movement, CORE was preparing a major summer project in 1964. Part of the new breed of national civil rights organizations, it was young, energetic, and committed to nonviolent direct

action. At the height of the modern civil rights movement in 1960–65, four national organizations led organizing efforts in the South. The two largest and best financed were the venerable NAACP, working primarily through its local chapters and state offices, and the smaller but higher-profile Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), organized by Martin Luther King. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which grew out of the 1960s sit-in movement, was also initiated by King’s organization, but it soon took on a life of its own and became the dominant national organization in Mississippi. CORE worked throughout the South but Louisiana was one of its strongholds; the group had been active in the state since the 1960 sit-ins.¹⁷

Formed in 1942, CORE originated as a predominantly white pacifist organization, emerging out of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a Christian pacifist group that had been active since World War I. The early leaders of CORE were profoundly influenced by the nonviolent teachings of Mohandas Gandhi. At the center of their strategy was the concept of nonviolent direct action: moral conversion through nonviolent protest. CORE advocated direct action and militant protest without violence or hatred against the opponent. Its principles prohibited members from retaliating against violence inflicted on them. Nonviolence would convert their enemies through “love and suffering.” The organization had pragmatic as well as philosophical reasons for advocating nonviolence in the South: CORE’s black leaders, such as James Farmer and Bayard Rustin, feared a brutal white backlash if blacks engaged in retaliatory violence.¹⁸

Despite its strong commitment to racial justice and community activism, CORE had made only modest progress in the black community in the 1940s and 1950s. Its greatest achievement was the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, a desegregation test of a Supreme Court decision that banned segregated seating in interstate travel. Interracial testing teams attempted to integrate buses in the upper South but encountered strong opposition and failed to galvanize a broader movement. But in 1961 CORE catapulted into the ranks of national civil rights organizations through its role in the electrifying Freedom Rides. Courageous CORE activists led integrated groups on bus rides through the South in a campaign to integrate interstate travel facilities. They braved mobs, beatings, firebombs, and jails. By 1962 they had triumphed in integrating most bus travel and terminal accommodations.¹⁹

In the early years of the movement the membership of both CORE and SNCC took their pacifism seriously. CORE’s roots were in ecumenical religious pacifism, whereas SNCC’s drew on philosophy and modern religion—finding its moorings in Gandhi, the reform-minded social gospel, and existentialism.

Nonviolence and its faith in moral suasion were embedded in the genetic material of SNCC at its founding Raleigh Conference, in 1960, where King proclaimed that the “philosophy of nonviolence” was a central theme of the conference and the idea of “reconciliation” with one’s enemies—in this case, he meant white southerners—was paramount. “Our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community,” declared King. “The tactics of nonviolence without the spirit of nonviolence may indeed become a new kind of violence.” Later, when the organizers were drafting SNCC’s goals, Nashville sit-in leader James Lawson opposed making “integration” the first and foremost goal; instead, he insisted that it should be nonviolence. He won the day.²⁰

SNCC activists attempted to apply their Gandhian strategy in Greenwood, Mississippi, the first major SNCC project launched in 1961. Bob Moses, SNCC’s most influential leader, initially attempted to persuade local blacks not to take up weapons in self-defense. As time went on and the hope for federal protection waned, for many SNCC and CORE activists nonviolence became more a political tactic than a universal imperative. By 1963 and the Birmingham campaign, even Martin Luther King had abandoned hope of winning the hearts of white southerners; he opted for a strategy of confrontation with the white South to gain sympathy from the white North. Some SNCC activists turned a blind eye to local armed self-defense, and by 1964 many SNCC staffers carried weapons themselves. But whatever misgivings SNCC activists had about pious nonviolence, they kept their concerns to themselves. From 1960 to 1965 SNCC consistently and assiduously cultivated a public image as a devoutly nonviolent organization. As late as the spring of 1964, when many black intellectuals and activists were questioning the effectiveness of nonviolence, SNCC leader John Lewis told *Dialogue Magazine* that although SNCC was reexamining its pacifist doctrine, “The shedding of blood is not part of our framework; it’s not a part of our philosophy,” and he personally accepted “the philosophy of nonviolence.” When asked if this doctrinaire commitment to pacifism was at odds with the mass movement’s growing dissatisfaction with nonviolence, Lewis admitted that SNCC had a problem. “I’m not sure whether SNCC as an organization is ready and prepared to catch up with the masses,” he said.²¹

Indeed, the debate on armed self-defense did not make its way onto SNCC’s national agenda until near the end of the movement, when the organization finally supported the right of local people to defend themselves—something black Mississippians had been doing all along. At a national staff meeting in Atlanta on 10 June 1964, the issue emerged when the SNCC leadership learned that Greenwood SNCC staff were arming themselves. Re-

ports during the meeting left little doubt that guns in the SNCC Freedom Houses were the least of their concerns; local people everywhere in Mississippi were arming themselves and encouraging SNCC to arm as well—much to the consternation of many SNCC staff members. Hollis Watkins noted that although local people had always kept guns in their homes for protection, the mood had changed. “There was a nonviolent attitude then,” said Watkins. Charles McLaurin reported that members of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a black Marxist nationalist group, were successfully promoting armed self-defense among black farmers in the Mississippi Delta, despite the best efforts of SNCC staffer James Jones to “stamp out the ideas brought in by outside groups” that were “killing formerly workable ways.” Some staff wondered aloud if armed self-defense might lead to a bloody pogrom against blacks. The dangers posed by the upcoming Freedom Summer were undeniable, but black staff member Prathia Hall reminded the group of its nonviolent faith in redemptive suffering and how, as Martin Luther King had argued in the early days of the movement, white violence that met no resistance would eventually shame the federal government into intervening. “We must bring the reality of our situation to the nation,” said Hall. “Bring the blood onto the white house door. If we die here it’s the whole society that has pulled the trigger by its silence.” Hall’s comments reflected the prevailing attitude among the devotees of nonviolence: the blood of the persecuted, not the persecutor, was the only blood of salvation. Still, many staff members were reluctant to not accept the protection proffered by local people. After intense debate, SNCC passed a resolution that local people had the right to defend themselves and SNCC would not discipline staffers who local people happened to protect. SNCC then reaffirmed its policy that no weapons were allowed in the Freedom Houses or in any SNCC office or project; nor would SNCC staff or volunteers be allowed to carry weapons; if volunteers were caught with guns, they would be expelled from the organization. Moses dispatched Stokely Carmichael to Greenwood to squelch the armed self-defense project. SNCC continued to proselytize for nonviolence during the 1964 Freedom Summer, and its training programs flooded the South with hundreds of new idealistic adherents of nonviolence. At the Freedom Summer volunteer training center in Oxford, Ohio, more than nine hundred volunteers went through nonviolent training led by devout pacifist ideologues like James Lawson. And in most projects, local African Americans drawn into the movement were required to undergo non-violence training in preparation for attacks by police or vigilantes. So even as SNCC activists became disillusioned with nonviolence and the black/liberal

coalition, particularly after the disappointing 1964 Democratic National Convention, the public image of SNCC and the national civil rights movement, for friends and foes alike, remained a nonviolent one.²²

CORE in Louisiana began with the same kind of commitment to nonviolent idealism as SNCC. Dave Dennis, who later became a major movement leader, recalled that members of the New Orleans CORE chapter engaged in fasts and vows of silence to prepare themselves for the discipline of nonviolence. CORE volunteers were required to take an oath that they would “meet the anger of any individual or group in the spirit of good will” and “submit to assault and will not retaliate in kind by act or word.” The young white CORE workers tended to be the more devout pacifists, according to CORE leader Ronnie Moore, a black native-born Louisianan, and there was always a division between the national CORE leadership based in New York and the chapters in the South. Moore’s introduction to the movement occurred when he attended a workshop on nonviolence in the fall of 1961 while a student at Southern University in Baton Rouge. But after two years in the trenches—including fifty-seven days in solitary confinement for a charge of “criminal anarchy” (attempting to overthrow the government of Louisiana)—Moore regarded nonviolence as more of a tactic than a philosophical precept. Civil rights workers had varying levels of commitment to the principle of nonviolence: some were “philosophical” Gandhians who believed that nonviolence was a universal moral imperative; that it was the only path to lasting peace; that redemptive suffering could indeed transform enemies. Other activists fell within the “strategic nonviolence” category: they felt that there were occasions when defensive violence was necessary and acceptable, but that by refraining from violence, the movement could assert moral superiority over racists and win sympathy from liberals and the world community. Still to others, nonviolence was merely “tactical”; they held no illusions about converting enemies. For them, nonviolence was an expedient protest method, valued because it won sympathy for the movement; more important, it deprived racists of an excuse to escalate their violence during an encounter. Movement people were constantly cautioning community members that defensive violence would invite a “bloodbath.” One young black volunteer from Tallulah, Louisiana, told an interviewer that, although he was not a pacifist, he accepted the doctrine because CORE had told him that “all the southern white man wants is for the Negro to hit him so he can kill him.” The volunteers streaming into the South for the 1964 summer projects reflected all these viewpoints, often with overlaps, but most agreed on one thing: nonviolence was the most effective way to appeal to the conscience of northerners and encourage federal intervention.²³

Ronnie Moore clearly fit into the tactical nonviolence category. In 1963 he caused a minor controversy when he publicly suggested that armed self-defense was justified in CORE's campaign in St. Francisville, Louisiana. But, as in the case of SNCC, Moore remained discreet about the armed self-defense activities around CORE projects, primarily to assuage the national office's fear of losing white liberal support. Moore kept his silence on armed activities even during the rise of the Deacons. "So I guess the deepest prayer in the [national office] was that whatever comments that we make in support of the Deacons, that they would never hit the *New York Times*," recalled Moore with a laugh. "And so we didn't make too many public statements." Local blacks also guarded several CORE Freedom Houses in the Deep South as early as 1962, according to movement veteran Michael Flug, but even the black defenders "were not interested in publicly advocating armed self-defense." The movement was "playing to the media," recalled Flug, and publicizing armed self-defense "tactically . . . wasn't a good idea."²⁴

In 1964 CORE planned an ambitious "Louisiana Summer 1964" project, CORE's counterpart of the Mississippi Freedom Summer. The Louisiana project was to focus on voter registration and desegregation of public facilities and public accommodations. CORE had already established several local projects in the state, including a beachhead in North Louisiana in Monroe, about sixty miles east of Jonesboro. Monroe's moderate NAACP leadership had invited CORE to organize the community, but CORE had little success until it linked up with more militant working-class union leaders at the Olin-Mathieson paper plant. Police harassment and an uncooperative registrar of voters seriously hampered CORE's efforts. From the outset, the civil rights group's presence rankled the Ku Klux Klan, and it was not long before the Klan burned crosses on the lawn of the house where two CORE workers were staying.²⁵

The first CORE organizers to visit Jonesboro were representative of the social mix of CORE's field staff. Mike Lesser was a white northerner with no experience in organizing in the South; in contrast, his black colleague Ronnie Moore was a seasoned organizer with eighteen arrests. Beginning in January 1964, Lesser and Moore made several trips to Jonesboro to assist the Voters League and local high school students in launching a voter registration campaign. Their initial success prompted CORE to assign several task force workers to Jonesboro in the late spring of 1964 in preparation for the summer project.²⁶

One of the first arrivals for the summer project was Catherine (Cathy) Patterson, a young African American from Birmingham. Patterson had been deeply moved by an experience at the George Washington Carver High

School, in Birmingham, where she was a classmate of Fred Shuttlesworth Jr., the son of Birmingham's firebrand civil rights leader, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. One day young Shuttlesworth arrived at school with his face badly bruised and swollen. A racist mob had mercilessly beaten him and his father during a demonstration. "When I heard about that, it just moved me to action," recalled Patterson. "I guess I was outraged. It's one thing to hear about it, and it's another thing to see it on television. But to see someone that you are sitting next to in class severely beaten . . . he was a child, just like I was."²⁷

The incident inspired Patterson to plunge into political activism, first leading demonstrations in Birmingham and later joining CORE after graduating from high school in January 1963. She was first sent to Gadsden, Alabama, for nine months of organizing and then on to Atlanta for nonviolence training. At the training session, Patterson met most of the team that would be assigned to the summer project in Jonesboro. Among them was Ruthie Wells, a young black from Baton Rouge, and the two white activists: William "Bill" Yates, a Cornell University English professor, and Mike Weaver.²⁸

After completing her training, Patterson was dispatched to Jonesboro in the spring of 1964, joining Danny Mitchell, a Syracuse University graduate student. Eventually the Jonesboro summer project contingent comprised half a dozen activists; four blacks and two whites. Fear in the black community was so acute in Jonesboro that no local black family offered to house the CORE activists. The task force workers had to settle for a small house on Cedar Street in the black community, lent to them by a sympathetic black woman who had moved to California. The CORE workers christened the small home "Freedom House" and set about organizing voter registration.

The young Jonesboro activists took seriously the idea that their enemies could be converted by the moral strength of nonviolence. As one CORE volunteer in Bogalusa put it, they felt that if there was violence against the movement, "the good people, who have a good conscience, will recognize the brutalities, and it will work on their conscience." In this sense, they were more idealistic than most of the Freedom Summer volunteers, the majority of whom probably regarded nonviolence as a path to hearts in the North—not the South. Nonetheless, Cathy Patterson had been schooled in nonviolence by devoted Gandhians like James Bevel, and when she arrived in Jonesboro she immediately began earnestly searching for sympathetic white supporters among town locals. It was a short search. Virtually all the town's leaders were segregationists, including Sheriff Newt T. Loe (a "rabid segregationist," noted Danny Mitchell) and Police Chief Adrian Peevy. CORE dis-

covered only one sympathetic white person, the town pharmacist, but this lone convert preferred to keep his conscience to himself.²⁹

The new CORE activists were undeterred by these failures, remaining confident in their nonviolent faith and secure in the knowledge that history was on their side. For the young crusaders, nonviolence seemed to be sweeping the world, drawing sustenance from Gandhi's success in India—one of the first fruitful anticolonial revolutions following World War II.

But theirs was a misplaced confidence, rooted in a limited—if not naive—understanding of southern history. Gandhi's strategy would be difficult to transfer to the United States: "Bombingham" was not Bombay. There were critical differences between India's anticolonial struggle and the black liberation struggle unfolding in the Deep South. East Indians were the vast majority in their homeland, far outnumbering their oppressors, who constituted little more than a tiny occupying army. Support for colonialism by the British people was waning in the postwar years. In general, British workers did not believe that their social and economic status depended on the continued exploitation of Indians. Cold War rhetoric exalting democracy and freedom made it difficult for the British to use force to suppress the rebellion. Thus, Gandhi had the advantage of engaging a distant enemy that was constrained from using violence by domestic indifference and international opinion.

The United States was a different matter. In contrast to East Indians, blacks were a tiny minority surrounded by a white majority. And unlike the British working class, white southerners were invested in domination. Slavery protected whites from the most degrading forms of labor and provided them with relative economic security, status, and privilege. The slave system had transformed poor whites into gendarmes for white supremacy. Time and again, whites demonstrated that they were willing and eager to defend their caste position at the expense of black life and freedom. Moreover, the geographic proximity of whites facilitated their use of terror as a political tool. And use it they did. Emancipation made little difference. Whites resorted to wholesale violence to overthrow the biracial Reconstruction governments. In the years of de jure segregation that followed, white social and economic status continued to be predicated on black subjugation. The benefits of segregation constantly reinforced white loyalty to racism and violence. While international opinion may have influenced the British peerage, it meant nothing to planters in the Mississippi Delta, let alone "corn and 'tater" whites in the piney woods.

It was these underlying material and social interests that made segrega-

tion resistant to moral appeal. Few in the United Kingdom believed that Indian independence betokened the end of British economic security or culture. But southern society rested on white supremacy. The death of segregation meant the death of the old social order. Segregationists were not far from the truth when they charged that integration was revolution. The new abolitionists were asking southern whites for more than their hearts and minds: they were demanding their caste status and the privileges pertaining thereto. It is little mystery, then, why nonviolence failed to evoke love and compassion in the hearts of southern whites.³⁰

The old social order was not going to relent without battle in Jonesboro, and the reality of violence soon became a concern for the CORE task force. Police harassment had always been troublesome for civil rights activists in the South, and the Jonesboro police did occasionally tail activists during their voter registration visits in the countryside. But by southern standards, Jonesboro's police department treated CORE reasonably well. Danny Mitchell described the police chief's policy toward CORE as "I'm here to protect you . . . but we don't want any demonstrations."³¹

The Klan and other racist vigilantes posed a graver danger. From the outset, menacing carloads of young whites targeted the Freedom House as they cruised through the black community and shouted obscenities and threats. This type of harassment was not new. For years, whites, acting with impunity, would drive through the black "quarters" verbally harassing and physically assaulting residents. The practice, referred to as "nigger knocking," was a time-honored tradition among whites in the rural South. But the presence of black and white civil rights activists in the community added a frenzied intensity to the ritual. It was not long before verbal assaults turned to violence. In one foreboding incident, a gang of young whites broke several windows at the Freedom House. The black community responded to the attacks with a mix of concern and uncertainty. They had never been confronted with the challenge of defending strangers in their midst. Caution was the order of the day. A reckless display of armed self-defense might provoke whites to retaliate with deadly force.

The unwritten racial code of conduct in the South forbade blacks from using collective forms of self-defense, a prohibition that stemmed from ancient fears of bloody slave rebellions. The black community in Jonesboro anxiously searched for a way to defend their charges without violating the racial code, but the imminent threat of violence left few alternatives. Within a few days, a small number of local black men began to quietly guard the CORE activists. Slowly they appeared, unarmed sentinels, silent and watchful. At first they did nothing more than sit on the porch of the Freedom

House or follow the activists like quiet shadows as they went about their organizing work.³²

Among this initial group of guards was Earnest Thomas. The short, powerfully built twenty-nine-year-old supported his five children as a paper mill worker, mason, and handyman. His life centered on the institutions and amusements of small-town African American life: he was an occasional churchgoer, a member of the black Scottish Rite Masons, and a devotee of barroom dice games. Held at arms length by the “respectable” black middle class, Thomas nonetheless commanded community respect for his courage and martial skills. His street savvy and cool, intimidating demeanor earned him the nickname “Chilly Willy.” “Chilly was very firm,” recalled Annie Purnell Johnson, a local CORE volunteer. “He didn’t care. Whatever he said he was going to do, he did it.” His determination was accented by his penchant for force. “He was violent too,” said Johnson. “He could be very violent if he wanted to be. If you pushed his button, he *would* deliver.”³³

Thomas attended high school in Jonesboro through the eleventh grade, then dropped out and served a stint in the air force during the Korean War. Like many young blacks in the South, military service dramatically changed his attitude toward Jim Crow. Three years and eight months as an airborne radio operator had afforded him brief and seductive glimpses of a world free of segregation. He met northern blacks who, with a better education and more opportunities, were increasingly impatient with the slow pace of change. Thomas absorbed their restless craving for freedom. The military also provided him, and thousands of other southern blacks, with the tools to realize this dream of freedom: leadership skills and an appreciation of the power of disciplined collective action. Discharged from the service, Thomas spurned the South and journeyed northward to Chicago. He worked for one year at International Harvester but soon returned to Jonesboro to raise a family.

Thomas was eager to work with CORE, but he had serious reservations about the nonviolent terms imposed by the young activists. He admired their devotion and energy, but the college students seemed dangerously naive about the potential for terrorist violence. CORE made it clear to Thomas that it was unwilling to compromise its stand on nonviolence. It had a long-standing policy that activists should not accept armed protection from local people. In Gulfport, Mississippi, one Freedom Summer participant recounted how the volunteers had rebuffed offers of protection, much to the dismay of local residents. “We had a problem with a man . . . who took it upon himself to protect us from the white men who visited us yesterday,” the volunteer wrote. “He came over at night with his friends and brought along a

machine gun and ammunition and told us not to worry. But he finally got ticked off at us, because we got ticked off at him. That machine gun had us edgy.”³⁴

If the CORE activists sounded like missionaries, there was a good reason. Theirs was a religious style of organizing, characterized by an evangelical faith in doctrine and an unswerving belief in a bipolar world of good and evil. Religious doctrine, as immutable truth, could not be compromised to suit the sinner. One either accepted or rejected the divinely inspired word. One was either saint or sinner.³⁵

Like most black men in the South, however, Earnest Thomas thought it better to be damned than dead. He and the other men in the defense group politely resisted CORE’s attempt to dictate the terms of the local movement. Indeed, there was little support for the nonviolence that CORE was advocating among black southerners. Even James Lawson, the movement’s foremost spokesperson for Gandhian nonviolence, admitted later that there “never has been an acceptance of the nonviolent approach” in the South and the idea that blacks had initially accepted nonviolence and then became disillusioned was “nonsense.”³⁶

Thomas quickly emerged as the leader of the defense group. No doubt his military training had accustomed him to organization. While other men would come and go, Thomas made it his responsibility to elevate the level of organization and instill discipline and order. During the day, the guards simply watched and kept their weapons concealed. But at night the veil of darkness provided cover for hooded terrorists. The guards knew that a show of weapons would discourage Klan violence. So the night brought the moon, the stars, and the guns.

Guns posed a dilemma for CORE from the very beginning. The defense group had no difficulty in accepting CORE’s right to determine its own non-violent strategy and, on the whole, thought it an effective one. But its members were not prepared to abdicate their responsibility to defend their community. They were unwilling to extend nonviolence to all aspects of the black freedom movement, particularly in the center of a Klan stronghold. That would be suicide. They were outnumbered two-to-one, and the police offered no protection.

Underlying the conflict over nonviolence was a deeper issue of autonomy. Who would determine the local organizing strategy for the black movement? Should it be the national organizations, with their imported strategy, dominated by a coalition of middle-class blacks, organized labor, and white pacifists and liberals? Or would the local community, with its own strategy determined by local experience, prevail? CORE initially won the philosophi-

cal argument, overcoming locals with superior debating skills and the force of a coherent worldview and strategy. But slowly “Chilly Willy” and his working-class colleagues began to find words for their thoughts and gain confidence in their own judgments and opinions.

Thomas’s quest for autonomy was not self-conscious and deliberate. But instinctively he and the defense group began to assert their authority over local matters. They wanted the right to defend their community with force if necessary. CORE had balked at these terms and suggested a compromise in which the guards concealed their weapons during the day. The debate found its way into many late-night discussions around the kitchen table in the Freedom House. Cathy Patterson remembered the activists admonishing Thomas, “Chilly, if you guys are going to be out there with guns, you have to hide them.” Thomas would ask why. “Because you’re going to invoke violence,” replied the activists. “If you have a gun, you have to be prepared to use it. And we don’t want people to get hurt.” Thomas patiently listened to their arguments and then answered firmly, “You’re stepping on *my* toes. *We’re* doing this. We know this town. We know these people. Just let us do it.”³⁷

CORE relented. “What happened was that Chilly Willy and them started going out with us,” recalled Ronnie Moore, “and their position was, ‘O.K., you guys can be nonviolent if you want to . . . and we appreciate you being nonviolent. But we are not going to stand by and let these guys kill you.’”³⁸

The defense group’s objection to the nonviolent code went beyond the issue of guard duty. Many of the men, including Thomas, declined to participate in any nonviolent direct action, including pickets and marches, because of the rules of engagement set by CORE. “If you were attacked, if you were spat upon, if you were kicked or jeered, we were very clear that we were not to respond to that,” noted Cathy Patterson. CORE quickly discovered that the black men of Jonesboro were unwilling to endure the humiliation attending these restrictions. “There was too much pride to do that,” said Patterson. Nonviolence required black men to passively endure humiliation and physical abuse—a bitter elixir for a group struggling to overcome the southern white stereotype of black men as servile and cowardly. For the black men of Jonesboro, nonviolence appeared to ask them to sacrifice their manhood and honor in order to acquire it.³⁹

Nonviolence also demanded that black men forego their right to defend family members who joined nonviolent protests. This tested the limits of their forbearance. The institution of white supremacy was a complex web of social and political customs, proscribed behaviors, government policies, and laws. Some aspects of racism were more endurable than others. At its most innocuous, segregation was little more than demeaning symbolism. For the

most part, blacks and whites drank the same water, ate the same foods, and rode the same buses. But some racist practices were intolerable insults to black manhood. Compromising the sanctity of family was one of those transgressions. “The things that go with racial segregation . . . you lived with that,” said Cathy Patterson of separate seating and other peculiarities of physical segregation. “They were things you just had to accept.” But violence against family and home violated the ancient right to a safe hearth and home. “When they saw their own children get hit or beaten,” the men “reacted very differently.” Nonviolence obliged black men to stand idly by as their children and wives were savagely beaten, a debasement that most black men would not tolerate. They clung tenaciously to their claims to manhood and honor. Ultimately, nonviolence discouraged black men from participating in civil rights protests in the South and turned the movement into a campaign of women and children.⁴⁰

The precepts of nonviolence clashed with black men’s notions of self-respect and honor. At times this conflict placed black men in painful quandaries, as when women activists called men to task, questioning their manhood if they refused to walk the picket line. In nearby Natchez, Mississippi, where another Deacons chapter would soon emerge, Jesse Bernard, a young NAACP worker, stood before a mass meeting and challenged black men to rise to the occasion. “If the children walk the line, you can protect them,” Bernard admonished the men. “All I want to say is every man in here with idle time, if you can’t walk the picket line from tomorrow on, won’t you come by and sit on the side somewhere and see what’s happening, so that if some of those people come up to hurt some of your children, your heart will be right. . . . I want to see every man who stood up and said he was a man be out on that picket line.”⁴¹

Things were not that simple. African American men stayed off the picket lines for good reason: the physical and emotional risks that black men assumed when they joined a nonviolent protest far outweighed what black women and children suffered. In the moving short documentary *Panola* by Ed Pincus, the film’s subject, an African American man named Panola from Natchez, ends the film with a stunning soliloquy in his one-room shack. As he delivers his angst-filled words, Panola constantly returns to the theme of “kill or be killed.” For Panola, the choice on the picket line was “kill or be killed.” Bound by notions of masculine honor, black men had much more to lose than women and children: what was at stake was their pride, manhood, and, very likely, their life. Not only were men more likely to be attacked—witness that black men were virtually the only victims of lynching—but if attacked, many believed that upholding their dignity left but two choices:

kill or be killed. Nor would their sense of honor allow them to sit idly and watch their families be brutalized. From the perspective of most African American men, walking the picket line meant making a choice between life and death. James Jackson, a Deacons leader from Natchez, summed up the dilemma: “When I grab that sign and get on the picket line, I couldn’t say that I’m not afraid, man . . . I still have fear, you know, but I’d stay right there and die before I turned around.”⁴²

The CORE activists in Jonesboro began to slowly grasp the predicament they had created for black men. The compromise with armed self-defense provoked “intense philosophical discussion and debates” within the CORE summer task force. The controversy eventually led some activists, like Mike Lesser, to leave CORE. But for most activists, the palpable fear in Jonesboro gradually eroded their faith in the grand intellectual theories. There was a conflict over the issue of nonviolence, observed Cathy Patterson, but “there also was enough fear that the conflict was more intellectual than it was real.” Patterson herself arrived at what she considered a principled compromise: “During the day I thought it was inappropriate to have anyone with us bearing weapons. But when it got dark, we were in a great deal of danger. I had no objections to their presence at night. We were defenseless at night.”⁴³

Self-defense became an immediate concern as the movement shifted from voter registration to direct action desegregation demonstrations. CORE’s initial voter registration drive provoked some harassment—generally limited to white teenagers driving through the community and shouting taunts. Most whites regarded CORE’s presence as a nuisance more than a menace. Voter registration organizing confined CORE activists to the black community, so the organizers seldom crossed paths with local whites. The subdued response by whites was understandable. Despite its symbolism, black voter registration posed little threat to white supremacy and the segregated caste system. Even if all blacks in Jonesboro were registered, they would comprise only one-third of the vote. At best, the black vote could be bartered for influence, but it would not fundamentally alter social relationships. White businesses would continue to thrive on segregated labor, white jobs would remain secure, and life would amble along as usual in the little mill town.⁴⁴

But desegregation was another matter. Segregation was the foundation of the social and labor systems of the South. Desegregation challenged the system of privilege that ensured whites the best jobs, housing, education, and government services. If the segregation barriers fell, white workers lost substantially more than a separate toilet. The conflict over segregation was ultimately a deadly contest for power—as Jonesboro blacks would soon discover.