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Crossing the White Line: SNCC in Three Delta Towns, 1963-1967

RANDY FINLEY

In November 1965, the red lights of a Gould, Arkansas, police car pulled over a vehicle driven by Dwight Williams, a black activist accompanied by a white female. The constable charged Williams with “crossing the white line.” Although describing a driving infraction, the phrase could also have referred to the repeated violations of racial etiquette that occurred in Arkansas in the 1960s. In that decade, black and white Arkansans witnessed the dismantling of Jim Crow—a system of laws, customs, mores, and values that had encrusted the South since the Civil War. “The Negro population has been waiting for years for this movement and it has finally arrived. It’s a rather incredible experience,” noted one black in the Arkansas delta. Another African American insisted that it was not so much that dreams had suddenly come alive, but rather that life finally approximated “the ways things should have been.”

Some Arkansas whites, on the other hand, dreaded change. Congressman E. C. (Took) Gathings of West Memphis told the House Rules Committee in 1964 that the “lot of the southern Negro isn’t as bad as it is sometimes painted. He understands the members of the white race and they understand him.” “We know our niggers a little better than you,” a West Helena realtor assured an “outside agitator.” But John Bradford, one such “agitator” who came to Helena, did not see the same delta as Gathings and


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the realtor. “The housing is so bad that when you’re inside, you’re still outside. We were renting a room and every time it rained, we got wet. There were no bathroom facilities. They [delta blacks] aren’t living. They’re just existing. They have nothing to be happy about.” A black activist in Gould agreed: “We were being oppressed, depressed, held back, kept down . . . . When you got out of school, you had to migrate to the North or just be stuck in a rut here.” A white former resident of Helena returned for a visit in 1963 and sensed the conflict brewing: “The Negro is bearing more on the mind of southerners today than at any time in history. The white southerner is worried. He knows the Negro is seeking his rights but does not know where the next move will be.”2 The black and white activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were among those plotting these moves.

SNCC was founded at an April 1960 conference at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, after students used sit-ins to integrate Woolworth lunch counters in nearby Greensboro and Nashville, Tennessee. Although no Arkansan attended the April meetings, SNCC leaders immediately recruited students from Philander Smith College, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church institution founded in 1877 in Little Rock. These new recruits joined veteran Little Rock civil rights activists and began sit-ins at downtown Woolworths in March 1960. Intra-group rivalries, poor planning, and fear of police reprisals resulted in failure; seating at Woolworth remained segregated.3

For the next two and half years, relatively little protest occurred in Arkansas. Ruth Arnold of the Arkansas Council on Human Relations wrote SNCC national headquarters in September 1962 asking for someone to be sent to revitalize the movement in the state. A SNCC secretary promised that James Forman, the organization’s executive secretary, or Charles McDew, SNCC’s chairman, were on their way. “They are unpredictable,” she warned, “but they do seem to be moving in your direction. They de-


scend like acts of God over which neither you nor I have any control.” Instead of Forman or McDew, a young white activist from the North, William Hansen, arrived at the campus of Philander Smith on October 24, 1962. I labeled a “professional agitator” by Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, Hansen was, in the words of the Arkansas Gazette, a “lean, intense young man.”

Hansen immediately contacted SNCC leaders at Philander Smith and Shorter Junior College and organized a strategy session attended by seven students. A renewed attempt at integration of downtown Little Rock public eateries was much better planned than the 1960 failure and was undertaken by a more united black community. By New Year’s Day 1963, black and white community leaders had brokered deals that integrated many department stores, restaurants, and bowling alleys.

In early 1963, SNCC leaders scouted new territory—Pine Bluff, in the south central part of the state. Facing stiffer white resistance than in Little Rock, black and white civil rights activists pushed to integrate Pine Bluff’s public facilities through large demonstrations. Boycotts and mass protests revealed the readiness of local blacks for change. “The good white folks are beginning to hurt,” Hansen observed. As a result of the agitation, city officials drew up timetables for integration of public parks, restaurants, swimming pools, and schools.

Successes in Little Rock and Pine Bluff directed SNCC’s attention toward areas of more hard-core racism. Leaving what SNCC activist and historian Martha Prescod Norman called the “beachhead project” of Pine Bluff, activists decided to roil the Arkansas delta. The largest delta county, Phillips County, suggests the challenges they faced. It was home to 25,308 blacks (57.5 percent of the population) and 18,552 whites (42.2 percent) in 1960. But less than one-fourth of those registered to vote in 1963 were black. Sixty-five percent of the black population had less than a sixth-grade formal education, compared to only fourteen percent of whites.


Three percent of blacks had high school diplomas, while twenty-eight percent of whites did. Blacks earned an annual median income of $616, with 1,923 black households earning less than $1,000 in 1960 and only 147 earning more than $5,000.\footnote{Cheryl Lee Greenberg, \textit{A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 182; 1960 Census, http://fisher.lib.va.edu/egi-local/census/cen.pl (accessed October 31, 2003); SNCC Field Report: Phillips County, AR, October 27, 1963, reel 5, SNCC Papers.}

A survey of SNCC’s activity in three towns—Helena (the county seat of Phillips), Forrest City, and Gould—can illustrate the range of the group’s activities and experience in the Arkansas delta. SNCC activists pursued a multifaceted agenda: integrating public accommodations, registering African-American voters and encouraging them to become politically active, improving educational opportunities for black Arkansans, assuring that civil rights were protected, and providing more economic opportunities in the poverty-stricken delta.

Activists John Bradford, Bruce Jordan, and Noah Washington arrived in Helena in late October 1963, after cotton-picking season. Using contacts nurtured by Pine Bluff veterans Hansen and Ben Grinage, SNCC workers visited Mary Johnson of the Helena Life Insurance Company. Rochester Johnson, secretary of the International Woodworkers of America local, whose membership was 20 percent black, was not nearly as enthusiastic as the activists hoped. By contrast, when they met at a local barbershop with Bobby O’Neal, a twenty-six year-old with a pregnant wife, the activists found a man who “wanted to be in the first march down the main street of town.” Several black businessmen and professionals received them warmly. George Miller, a twenty-five-year-old black teacher and Michigan State graduate who owned the movie house, twenty rent houses, a café, and a barbershop, provided their principal support. “He said that he is ready, when we are ready,” Bradford reported. Frank Jordan, funeral home director, would contribute bail for those arrested. Two local dentists named Miller and Profitt and a pair of physicians, a Dr. Douglas and a Dr. Connor, supported the movement, though only behind the scenes.\footnote{SNCC Field Report: Phillips County, AR, October 27, 1963, reel 5, SNCC Papers.}

But other members of the black elite were not as wholehearted in welcoming the young activists. The pastor of King Solomon Baptist Church warmly greeted SNCC organizers James O. Jones and Joseph Wright and insisted that “we are capable of turning this town upside down.” But private promises did not mean public support. Three leading black ministers in Helena, in fact, opposed SNCC’s activities and urged their congregations to stay away from the protests it led. “The preachers...
are holding us back,” lamented Bradford in a report to national headquarters. Still, a number of clergymen did rally to the cause. Rev. J. H. Price of Allen Temple AME opened his church to SNCC rallies, as would Rev. Raymond Lyles, pastor of the Pettis Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, who also participated in at least one SNCC action.9

While one black activist declared, “It’s about time that someone has come to Helena,” many local whites, of course, disagreed. Arkansas attorney general Bruce Bennett, raised in the delta, warned that “whoever is pulling the strings that make William Hansen jump does not know the facts of life of the people of Helena or Phillips County. I remember my father telling me about the Elaine incident.” Bennett seemed to be making a veiled threat in referring to the 1919 race riot in Phillips County that crushed a black union and left scores murdered. Helena police chief Roy Ross warned SNCC workers that “whenever you come across that Phillips County line, we’ve got you. Take that station wagon, that literature and all that SNICK stuff and get out of here if you know what’s good for you. Be sure to tell your buddy Hansen that everything I’ve told you goes for him.”10

In January 1964, during testimony before the Arkansas Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, John Bradford and William Hansen described the climate of fear cultivated by whites in Helena. “At the beginning of the Helena movement,” Bradford noted, blacks “were very much afraid. I think a lot of fear was based on what was happening elsewhere in the world. Most of the people would say ‘I’m glad you’re here—we need you and we’ve been waiting for you. But we’re afraid.’” Hansen agreed that “a general systematic aura of fear permeates the county . . . . The people are doing what ‘Mr. Charlie’ wants them to—or what they think he wants them to do.” He described an “obnoxious” harangue by Helena judge D. S. Heslep about how blacks “should wash inside as well as outside, stop having illegitimate children and so forth.” Whites knew, he concluded, that “their little monolithic empire is subject to elimination if and when the Negro decide to get together and do something.” Organizer James Jones concurred: “Helena is very much a Mississippi type of town . . . . When we first came to Helena

people were completely afraid of anything that was connected or related to freedom."

Nevertheless, though white resistance would lead to a brief early suspension of SNCC activities in Helena, activists lost little time in pursuing one of their chief goals—integration of public places. Efforts to desegregate Helena’s Henry Drug Store and Habib’s Cafeteria began in mid-November 1963. Police incarcerated over thirty demonstrators, including leaders Noah Washington, John Bradford, Curtis Grady of Pine Bluff, and Granville Miller of the Phillips County Movement, an organization containing SNCC members as well as other activists. Police charged Hansen, Bradford, Bruce Jordan, and Rev. Raymond Lyles with “inciting to riot.” Insisting that their constitutional right to peacefully assemble had been denied, SNCC leaders demanded an FBI investigation, which resulted in their being interviewed by a FBI agent stationed in Arkansas.12

The following June, Joseph Wright, a black twenty-year-old activist son of a Methodist minister from Cincinnati, Ohio, Thomas Allen, an eighteen-year-old black Arkansas AM&N student, and Ellis Ford, a local black high school student, peacefully integrated the Helena Public Library. Trailed by Police Chief Ross, they then peacefully ate in the “whites only” section in Habib’s Cafeteria. An attempt to integrate the swimming pool, though, proved too much for Ross to bear. White and black adolescents would not mingle, scantily clad, in the pools of Helena as long as he was chief of police. He arrested the three young men. Ford and Allen were beaten while in jail.13

That July, Wright, Allen, Ford, Robert Blockum, and Larry Siegal, a New Yorker, tested the Civil Rights Act of 1964 within days of its becoming law. White business owners seemed unsure of what to do. Some refused service one day but offered it the next. The local library, Habib’s Cafeteria, and Henry’s Restaurant served both races peacefully on Monday, July 6. On the next day, however, Henry’s manager closed the fountain. On Friday, July 10, the bowling alley, In-Between Grill, and Ben and Rose’s Restaurant refused to serve SNCC workers. On Saturday, Nick’s refused to wait on blacks, Henry’s served black students without incident, and the bowling alley demanded a membership fee of $5 and recommendations from two leading citizens of the town. No whites re-

acted violently, however, and no blood was shed.\textsuperscript{14} Responses to similar actions in March 1965 were more menacing. SNCC workers peacefully integrated a bowling alley and several cafés and were “cordially served,” but upon leaving the bowling alley they found their car’s windshield cracked. At a Helena truck stop, they received rude service and a bottle whizzed by their heads, exploding on the wall, as they left.\textsuperscript{15}

Amid all this, the Helena hospital remained basically untouched. Black doctors could not practice in the hospital, black nurses could not work on floors with white patients, and black patients could not use the first floor eating facilities. Although in some places change seemed tangible, in the Helena hospital, 1965 seemed much like 1935.\textsuperscript{16}

SNCC similarly tested enforcement of the Civil Rights Act in Forrest City, forty miles north of Helena and home to 10,554 people, and Gould, a Lincoln County community of 1,210 people. On Sunday, February 28, 1965, black SNCC workers entered an all-white restaurant in Forrest City. Although they received many stares, they dined peacefully. Throughout the year, integrated SNCC teams ate at restaurants that previously had served only whites. Often, waitresses served blacks but ignored the white SNCC workers. Owners felt the law forced them to accommodate blacks, but they could not bring themselves to serve the ultimate betrayers—whites who helped blacks dismantle Jim Crow. At times, patrons fought with activists as when Simon Kahu, a twenty-one year-old white student from Maryland, was beaten when he joined black activists for lunch.\textsuperscript{17} In Gould, summer volunteers forced Holthoff’s Restaurant and Knight’s Dixie Queen to integrate peacefully.\textsuperscript{18} Each community set its own pattern of compliance.

SNCC activists understood that mobilization of black political power would best ensure enforcement of civil rights legislation and make African Americans a force that could not be ignored. By early 1964, 77,714 blacks had paid their Arkansas poll taxes, compared to 68,970 in 1961, heartening SNCC activists. By spring 1964, SNCC leaders James Jones and Joseph Wright were canvassing black neighborhoods, knocking on hundreds of doors to discuss the importance of voter registration. They hoped to register 100,000 of the 190,000 eligible voters by the summer


\textsuperscript{15}SNCC Field Report: Phillips County, AR, March 22, 1965, reel 7, SNCC Papers.

\textsuperscript{16}Arkansas Voice, June 9, 1965, reel 19, SNCC Papers.


\textsuperscript{18}Arkansas Voice, July 16, 1965, reel 19, SNCC Papers.
SNCC IN THE ARKANSAS DELTA

primaries. But their success brought difficulties. They moved from house to house as no one considered it safe to permanently lodge them. 19

As temperatures sizzled in August, voter registration efforts brought Helena close to the boiling point. As bus-loads of blacks arrived at the Phillips County Courthouse to register, SNCC workers exulted. Joseph Wright observed, “progress has been slow, but it’s come along pretty good now. When we first came here, people were very pessimistic about the movement, but now they are beginning to realize that something can happen here.” At night, cars driven by whites encircled Freedom House, a meeting place for SNCC volunteers and community activists. A young black woman active in SNCC had her house peppered with shot five times. Two whites firebombed a dwelling in West Helena that housed a SNCC worker. Hansen described the situation as “very tense. They’ve got some angry young Negroes over there.” Police arrested three SNCC workers—Wright, Larry Siegal, and Robert Blockum—on “vagrancy” charges. Siegal and Wright received fines of $250 and three-month jail terms, and Blockum received a thirty-day sentence and a fine of $150, further infuriating many blacks. Sensing the town’s fears, a Helena World editorial headlined “Rumors, Rumors, Rumors” urged all to stay calm. The editor wanted to make sure that Helena did not become another Birmingham, Alabama, complete with national media exposure. Helena and West Helena white and black business owners and ministers created the Good Will Movement pledged to interracial dialogue and improved race relations. Although the black business owners and ministers disavowed the activism of SNCC, they did capitalize on agitation, demanding that the city hire a Negro for the police force, another for the fire department, and black workers at city hall. Hansen insisted, “Gestapo tactics . . . are not going to stop us from our voting registration drive. This is a very tense, angry Negro community and I just hope that the police have more sense than to push something until there is an explosion.” 20

SNCC also pursued black empowerment in Forrest City and Gould. In early January 1964, James Jones and Pearlie Sneed launched an attack in Forrest City. At first, local blacks refused to direct SNCC workers to the home of a Reverend Keys, a Methodist pastor, but the activists eventually located him, and he allowed them to speak at his church. Jones and Sneed also talked to people in barbershops and cafés, urging them to register to vote. They attended the quorum court to better understand the


Local and state officials blamed William Hansen, director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Arkansas Project, for much of the racial unrest that roiled the Arkansas delta in the mid-1960s. Courtesy Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
county and its white power structure. They cultivated the support of Mrs. J. O. Clay, a black funeral home owner, whom they hoped would help them. In Gould, Mayor A. L. Butcher believed the two SNCC workers who enrolled voters intended “to stir up trouble.” The mayor acknowledged SNCC’s right to work in the area, but he warned the students that “if they broke any laws, blocked the streets or anything, we’d throw them in jail. We’d stick it to them just like we do the local people who break the law.” Seven black teachers, with an average of three years of experience, lost their jobs at Lincoln County High School when they joined SNCC voter registration drives. ²¹

The fruits of SNCC’s labors became apparent with the 1964 school board, city council, legislative, and presidential elections. The percentage of eligible black citizens registered to vote rose from thirty-four to forty-nine. In many cases, they overcame violence, psychological intimidation, and apathy. One black woman in Helena wondered if women over sixty-five could vote. Ninety-four-year-old Anna Clay registered, noting, “I went down to register to vote to see what that equality was all about.” Harassment continued until election day, though. Sheriff Edgar P. Hickey of Phillips County placed a black poll at the beauty shop of what SNCC workers believed to be one of the county’s biggest Uncle Toms, infuriating activists and intimidating countless black voters. By November, whites accepted blacks transporting other blacks to the polls, but whites performing the same task infuriated them. White bullies in Helena beat white SNCC activist Frank Cieciorka, a twenty-five-year-old native of San Jose, California, as he drove black voters to polls. ²²

Eight black candidates sought seats in the state legislature in 1964, including one from Lincoln County. SNCC leader Rev. Ben Grinage lost, but Arthur Miller won his Pine Bluff School Board race when the white vote divided. Florence Clay, a black woman from Helena, lost to incumbent E. C. Gathings in a race for a seat in Congress. That she, Ethel Dawson from Pine Bluff, and Velma Hamilton from Marvell campaigned suggests how not only racial equality but gender equality had become a dream to be realized. In Helena, Rev. James D. Alexander appeared to have won a city council seat, but a precinct box mysteriously arrived


three days later and negated his forty-eight vote lead. He “officially” lost by 200 votes. Although black Arkansans counted only one electoral win in local elections, they gained a better sense of their potential. Countless others decided that they could run and win in the future. The following July, Julian Bond and John Lewis, national SNCC leaders, spoke at West Helena and inspired two hundred people to go to the courthouse the next day to register to vote.23

Voter registration accelerated after Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Arkansas Project director Ben Grinage urged the U.S. Civil Rights Commission to send observers to the delta to prevent the fraud he knew to be pervasive. “Continued denial of effective suffrage,” he warned, “can be expected to erode people’s faith in social justice.” The Civil Rights Commission scheduled hearings in Forrest City on April 23, 1966, to investigate Grinage’s concerns. As the hearings approached, Grinage decided SNCC would not attend because the commission refused to hear from citizens of several counties who could attest to past election fraud. “We are refusing,” he insisted, “to participate in any parody of a meaningful investigation.” But Grinage changed his mind and appeared before the commission. He eloquently described an election process that “systematically disfranchised Negroes.” He revealed scores of irregularities involving absentee voting and recounted how white officials took much longer to process blacks’ voter registration forms than those of whites, causing blacks to leave in frustration after interminable waits. Ultimately, the commission sent two field workers to the delta to supervise absentee voting and elections. This action represented the first federal intrusion in an Arkansas election in the twentieth century.24

SNCC’s empowerment campaign contributed to a turn in Arkansas’s political history in 1966. In the August Democratic primaries, SNCC operatives campaigned for gubernatorial candidates Sam Boyce and Brooks Hays, recognizing that Hays pushed hard for black votes. But after segregationist Jim Johnson won the nomination, SNCC activists backed Republican Winthrop Rockefeller, urging blacks to vote en bloc for him. He won, receiving 80 percent of the black vote and becoming the state’s first Republican governor since Reconstruction. But in Gould,


Carrie Dilworth, a black activist since the 1930s, failed in her bid for mayor.25

In addition to desegregation of public accommodations and enfranchisement, SNCC sought to improve educational facilities for black Arkansans. Before the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which used the prospect of massive federal aid to encourage southern public schools to integrate, blacks and SNCC activists pushed for implementation of Brown v. Board of Education (1954). SNCC leaders James Jones and Joseph Wright encouraged black parents in Helena to send their children to previously all-white schools, and, by mid-April 1964, thirty-five black students had registered to integrate Helena schools in August. Activists in Gould pushed for a new school. “We’re working to get one,” Mayor A. L. Butcher insisted. But neither he nor SNCC could figure out how to fund it.26

The most significant confrontation over schools in these years exploded in Forrest City. Local blacks loathed the “freedom of choice” plan, which allowed whites to sidestep the Brown decision by permitting students to attend the community school of their choice. Most blacks considered “freedom of choice” an illusion. Enormous pressure was exerted on black parents to keep their children in all-black schools, and, in any case, some blacks preferred equitable funding for their racially separate schools to integration. When a handful of black students entered the previously all-white junior high school, they were forced to eat lunch in a separate room. School officials insisted this deterred violence, but many blacks believed it but a façade for continued segregation. Other black parents vehemently protested the inferior facilities assigned to predominantly black schools. They charged that schools were rat infested and lacked adequate science laboratories and libraries. Over 1,000 students and 500 parents petitioned black principal C. T. Cobb, demanding better facilities. After the principal stonewalled, a boycott of schools began in mid-September, 90 percent of the black students participating.27

On September 16, police arrested nearly 200 students and SNCC workers for disturbing the peace. The arrests overwhelmed the St. Fran-

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26Helena World, April 9, May 24, 1964.

cis County jail, forcing authorities to hold many protesters at the swimming pool, the civic center, or the dog pound. The jail included the “Bullroom,” a filthy, dark cell teeming with lice and chiggers. Toilets overflowed. Meals consisted of peanut butter sandwiches. As parents and SNCC leaders scurried to come up with the $25,000 bail, city officials reportedly told parents that charges would be dropped if they signed documents promising to keep their children away from SNCC’s Freedom Center and out of future demonstrations. On September 20, the school board broke off discussions with local black leaders. The next night, police broke into the Freedom Center at 1:30 A.M. to harass workers. By September 22, the town “crawled with state troopers.”28

Blacks refused to back down. Over 200 protesters maintained a silent vigil outside the courthouse when SNCC worker Tex Lowe was sentenced to a year in jail and fined $1,000 for “contributing to the delinquency of a minor.” Prison officials at the Mississippi County Penal Farm in Luxora beat him severely. The boycott continued throughout late September. Fourteen Forrest City blacks journeyed to Washington, D.C., to provide Justice Department official John Doar with eyewitness accounts of the events transpiring in their hometown. White officials expelled two black students and arrested nine for planning to hold a “learn-in” at the white high school. Three state education department officials toured the community in November and warned students: “Be glad nothing worse has happened to you; people in Mississippi and Alabama have been beaten.”29 L. C. Bates of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Dr. Earl Evans of the state Office of Economic Opportunity eventually brokered a deal between the school board and black parents. The board dropped all charges and promised to investigate the complaints brought by blacks.30 An uneasy peace had come to Forrest City, but four years later the firing of a teacher by the all-white school board prompted a black boycott of local businesses. Subsequent racial unrest prompted the dispatch of National Guardsmen to the city.31

In 1965, African-American parents in West Helena and Gould joined those in Forrest City in protesting the inequities of “separate but equal” school systems and the façades of choice in freedom of choice plans. In West Helena, parents documented that only eighteen black students opted to attend the “integrated” grades of one, four, seven, and ten. They also

29 SNCC Field Report: Forrest City, AR, September 18, 19, October 4, 15, November 12, 15, 1965, reel 16, SNCC Papers.
31 Johnson, Arkansas in Modern America, 168.
complained that they only received a week’s notice about the freedom of choice plan, that whites paid smaller book fees, and that some black teachers had not finished high school. A West Helena delegation lobbied their congressman in Washington for improvements to their children’s schools. Gould parents organized a black Parent-Teacher Association to pressure school officials, but white leaders locked the high school to prevent their meeting.32

In an effort to gain more control of the educational process, SNCC workers in Helena encouraged local women to join the Women Voter’s League to prepare for the upcoming school elections. Over thirty black candidates ran in Arkansas school board elections held on September 28, 1965. SNCC activists encouraged voter turnout and black candidates. Rampant voter fraud revealed whites’ fears that blacks would at last win. Policemen, often accompanied by dogs, used excessive force in monitoring black voting precincts. At Forrest City, according to a SNCC report, a white man marked ballots for illiterate blacks, casting their votes for the white candidate regardless of blacks’ preferences. Temporary deputies in West Helena warned blacks not to vote for SNCC-backed candidates. As if white intimidation and fraud were not enough, blacks in Helena fragmented when Joel Hines, supported by SNCC as a “new kind of Negro,” was spurned by the black elite because of his working-class background. The elite at first proposed their own candidate, Henry Jordan of Helena Insurance and Real Estate, but he quickly withdrew.33

Twenty-nine of the thirty black candidates who ran for school boards in 1965 went down to defeat. In Gould with a black population of 82 percent and in Helena with a 56-percent black population, black candidates lost decidedly. SNCC workers quickly attributed the mysterious voting patterns to white fraud and demanded Justice Department investigations.34

Whether pushing for civil rights, political empowerment, or improved educational opportunities, SNCC activists knew that raising political consciousness and stoking racial pride were critical if Jim Crow was to be breached. They focused on school children and young adults in establishing Freedom Houses or Freedom Centers as places where

341965 School Board Report, reel 19, SNCC Papers. The only black candidate to win was Arthur Miller, who survived a bitter race for a seat on the Pine Bluff School Board.
youths could meet with friends and hear SNCC workers explain their next moves. Helena leaders established a Freedom House in that city in 1964. Two cars, two typewriters, and one mimeograph machine helped spread the message of social justice, but the work was slow. A mob of 150 menaced the Freedom House in early 1964, forcing SNCC workers to spend the night in a cornfield. Paint peeled from the Gould Freedom Center, located in a dilapidated house owned by a local black. Cardboard boxes covered broken windows, cracks in the walls allowed the cold winter air in, and the bathroom fixtures needed repair. But each afternoon and night scores of African Americans entered to prepare themselves for new opportunities they knew they would soon grasp. Workers helped youngsters prepare for college entrance exams. They studied *Negroes in American History: A Freedom Primer*, which one student insisted "is a history book about us. It is about a history that has been denied us by lies about what we are and what we have been." The Freedom Center in Forrest City, originally a funeral home, consisted of eleven rooms—two of which could seat one hundred people each and four of which housed workers. Two local teachers and two SNCC activists worked with from fifteen to thirty students twice daily. Such centers allowed black people the necessary physical and psychological space to construct new identities and envision new dreams.\(^35\)

With this sort of encouragement, many stripped off the mask of acquiescence they had worn so long. One Helena youth questioned the gradualism of the movement and wondered, "When are we going to start shooting?" One SNCC worker complained that local retailers sold blacks only shotguns and prohibited them from purchasing rifles. When a note "a Klansman was here" surfaced at the Helena home of black activist Cornelius Perkins, people from the community armed themselves and guarded the house around the clock.\(^36\)

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights activists were discovering in Chicago and elsewhere in 1965, Jim Crow could be defied more readily than systemic economic changes could be brought about. By that year, African Americans were pressing beyond voting rights and desegregation, publicly linking equality to economic opportunities. After a series of meetings organized by the integrated St. Fran-

SNCC IN THE ARKANSAS DELTA

County Achievement Committee that involved SNCC activists, blacks picketed downtown Forrest City stores that hired only whites, using Title Seven of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which dealt with fair employment practices, to gain federal government support. Hearing that whites planned to shoot up a strategy session, two FBI agents and scores of armed black residents guarded the meeting place. Picketing began in late June 1965. The city council countered by prohibiting demonstrations of over fifteen protesters. The Achievement Committee responded by limiting the picketing to groups of ten. In Phillips County, SNCC encouraged black citizens to sue Mohawk Tire Company and Mobil Corporation for discriminatory hiring practices. SNCC activist Myrtle Glascoe trekked through Phillips County, urging blacks to build up black-owned businesses. Rich white farmers of Phillips County controlled the region, and an economic boycott of white businesses, she argued, could bring justice and economic opportunity to the region. In Gould, activists protested disparity in agricultural pay, poor neighborhood roads, lack of job training, and whites’ refusal to hire blacks in downtown stores.

SNCC activists paid a price for their efforts to bring equal access, political power, and educational and economic opportunities to black residents of the Arkansas delta. From late 1963 until 1966, local police constantly beleaguered activists and arrested them capriciously. Police often invaded protesters’ homes to see what they could discover. Activists asserted that the Phillips County sheriff ordered landlords not to rent office space to SNCC, making finding a workplace difficult. In Gould, two SNCC workers hid at night to escape the police. The town’s police also raided five black activists’ homes and monitored even the smallest activities, as when Gould’s chief of police, Harold Pierce, arrested deaf sixteen-year-old Tee Harvis Cox for wearing a t-shirt that proclaimed: “Harold Pierce I’m Going to Kick Your Ass.” Gould’s chief warned Laura Foner, a white SNCC worker, that whites would cut her head off and throw it in the river. When SNCC protesters sought help from the FBI, agents seemed more interested in the nineteen-year-old Foner’s New York father, historian Philip S. Foner. FBI Arkansas agents received warnings from national headquarters to monitor the younger

Foner since her father had spoken at a Fair Play for Cuba rally in New York City in November 1963 and taught at the New York School for Marxist Studies. 39

The plight of Noah Washington, a nineteen-year-old SNCC field secretary from Pine Bluff who was an Arkansas AM&N student and one of the first activists to arrive in Helena, illustrates the dilemmas young blacks in the movement confronted. Believing the activities of SNCC far more important than calculus or literature, Washington, Bruce Jordan, and James Jones spent much of September 1963 in Lincoln County urging blacks to register to vote and encouraging student participation. In November, he joined other SNCC activists and secretly planned demonstrations to desegregate public catteries in downtown Helena. After Washington was arrested with thirty others and placed in the Helena jail, something in the young man snapped. Facing Judge D. S. Ieslep on charges of “inciting a riot,” he pleaded with the judge that “had I known what this was all about I would never have participated.” The Arkansas Gazette headline, “Negro Youth Begs Forgiveness in Helena Sit-In,” must have elated many whites. Washington also admitted that he had been “brainwashed” and “duped” (key Cold War motifs), descriptions sure to please many local whites, confident as they were that outside agitators had stirred up the trouble. Pleading guilty and receiving a sixty-day suspended sentence and fine, he swore, “I just want to get this over and forget about it. I want to start my life over.” Doubtlessly, pressure from his parents, his youthfulness, the nightmare of a winter’s night in a delta jail, and the prospect of many more such nights of incarceration wore down the young activist. 40

Class conflict exacerbated tension among African Americans. A Helena black voter’s league shunned the black working class and student activists, negotiating instead directly with the white power structure. The black community, facing violence and loss of jobs, seemed hopelessly divided, and, as James Jones lamented, “they tell the white people everything.” Lost jobs were no abstract threat for many activists. For instance, officials fired Cornelius Perkins, a black employee at the Helena City Water Company, after he housed SNCC workers. Office space proved

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difficult to obtain. “I get the impression,” Jones observed, “that nobody wants us to have an office near them.”

As much resistance as SNCC faced in Helena, Forrest City, and Gould, the demise of its efforts in those places had more to do with the disintegration of the national organization. SNCC head John Lewis apologized to Arkansas activists in late 1965 when national headquarters omitted Arkansas from their new four-year plan. Also, racial tensions among SNCC activists were becoming more prevalent as the Black Power movement emerged. This impulse filtered down to the local level. In Helena, Myrtle Glascoe began pushing for “books by Negroes, about Negroes.” “This is not a Panther-Party type thing,” she insisted, but many whites feared their imminent expulsion from SNCC. In February 1966, white Helena worker Howard Himmelbaum instructed the national SNCC office that “we will not accept any white people except under unusual circumstances.” The growing racial tension among state and national activists, coupled with burgeoning financial difficulties, forced a disillusioned Ben Grinage to admit to Vernon Jordan in early 1966 that “our financial state suggests that it would not be unduly pessimistic to expect the liquidation or collapse of Arkansas SNCC within the next few weeks.”

Grinage’s despair deepened after a May coup at a national SNCC conclave near Nashville, Tennessee, replaced John Lewis with the firebrand Stokely Carmichael. The conference voted to allow whites to work only in white communities. Grinage, who attended this conference, strongly objected to Carmichael’s insistence that “racial integration is irrelevant,” declaring:

> It is our position that the announced new emphasis of SNCC will not ultimately be in the best interests of the deprived Negro in Arkansas. We are committed to the dignity of all mankind, black and non-black alike. We don’t feel that integration is irrelevant, but is vital if this country is concerned with showing the rest of

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42Lewis to Grinage, October 26, 1965, reel 1, SNCC Papers; Riffel, “In the Storm,” 415-416.


44Lewis, Walking With the Wind, 380-384.
the world that peaceful coexistence is really what we are trying to achieve.

He sadly surmised that "we as individuals may no longer be able to work under the banner of SNCC, but our commitment is to the people of this state and this country, not to any particular organizations." Carmichael journeyed to Arkansas in early July to stop the hemorrhaging and to solidify his control over the organization. He denounced Grinage's management of SNCC's financial affairs in Arkansas and attacked Grinage and Hansen for criticizing the organization in the national media. Grinage resigned as Arkansas Project Director. Hansen also stepped down.45

The new leadership of SNCC thought investment in rural areas nonproductive; Los Angeles and Chicago, not Gould or Forrest City, needed attention. Arkansas SNCC, which had received one-third of the paltry $12,000 operating budget of the entire organization from January to March 1966, could expect far less money and support from national headquarters.46

Only a handful of SNCC workers remained in Arkansas by early 1967, as money and volunteers evaporated. Robert Cableton, still working in Gould in January 1967, observed that the defeat of Carrie Dilworth's mayoral campaign had further demoralized the movement. Since 82 percent of the town's voters were black, large numbers of them had obviously voted for her white opponent. He urged more political education classes but added that SNCC workers had distributed clothes and toys to the few needy families he could help. Icy weather reflected the gloomy spirits of the activists in the death-rattle days of SNCC in Arkansas.47

Although SNCC ended its work in Arkansas not with a bang but a whimper, it instigated staggering changes. An Arkansan absent from the state for the mere thousand days spanning 1963 to 1966 would not believe that in January 1967 blacks voted in large numbers and ran and elected African-American school and government officials, black and white children sat peacefully in the same classrooms, people of all colors dined together at McDonalds and in cafés across the state, or that blacks and whites might work together for roughly equal pay. Tangible signs of the death of Jim Crow appeared everywhere—in Helena, Forrest City, Gould, and across the state. The young activists of SNCC, playing the

45Arkansas Gazette, May 25, 1966; Arkansas Staff meeting notes, June 6, 1966, reel 3, SNCC Papers; Riffel, "In the Storm," 416-417.
role of Socratic gadflies, challenged white Arkansans to accept as inevitable the relatively peaceful dismantling of Jim Crow in Arkansas and emboldened African Americans to demand justice and equality. SNCC helped blacks cross the previously uncrossed white line and move, at long last, toward genuine freedom.