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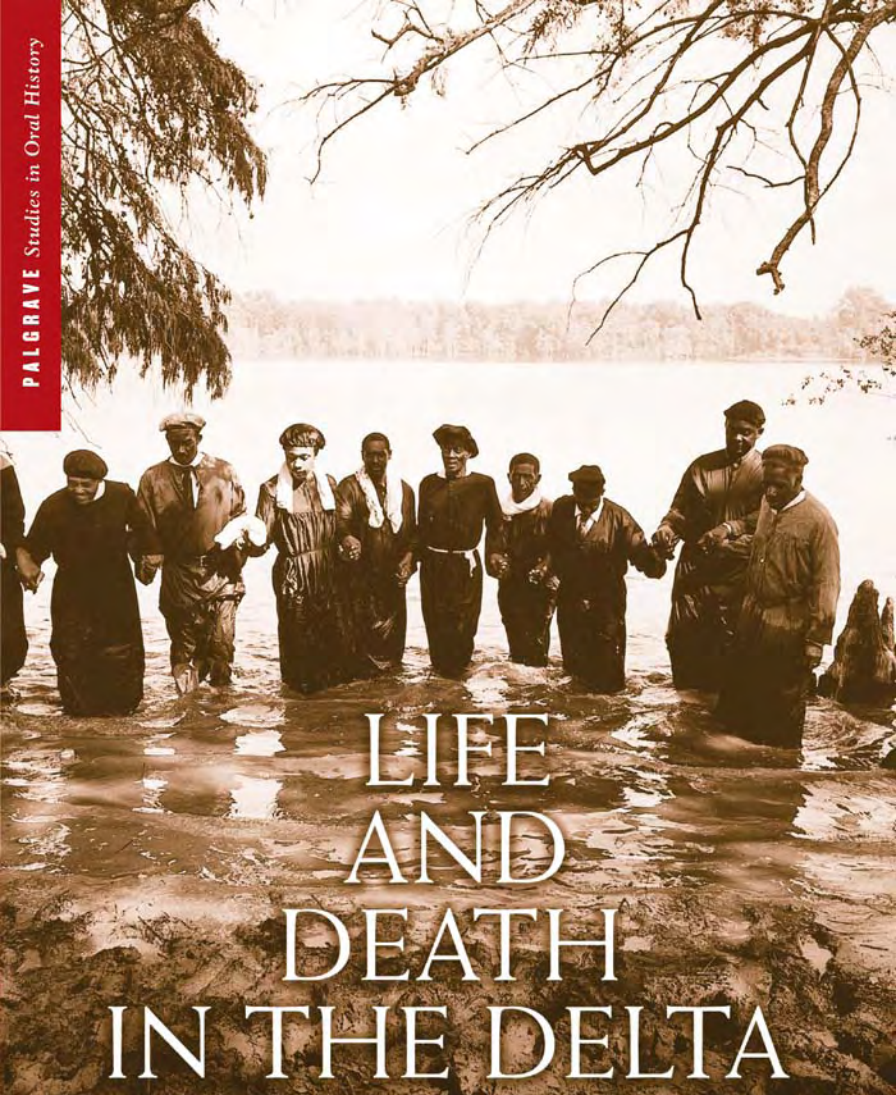

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE DELTA

AFRICAN AMERICAN NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE, RESILIENCE, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

KIM LACY ROGERS

Life and Death in the Delta

Palgrave Studies in Oral History

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Kim Lacy Rogers

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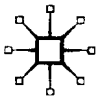

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To colleagues and friends—
Owen Brooks
Tom Dent (1932–1998)
Jerry W. Ward, Jr.
Jewel Williams
—who taught me so much

"Prayer after baptism, Moon Lake, 1990," photograph by Tom Rankin

Contents

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I would like to thank the archivists of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and Ms. Amy Redwine of the *Delta Democrat Times* for research assistance. I also thank Charles Bolton and Nan Elizabeth Woodruff for sharing with me the manuscripts of their wonderful histories of Mississippi's school desegregation, and of the development of an "American Congo" in the Delta.

Finally, I would like to give special thanks to friends and colleagues for their love, assistance, and support. John Lankford, Monte Piliawsky, and Andrea Hinding have been lifelong friends and sources of inspiration. Susan D. Rose, Lonna Malmsheimer, Melanie Lowe, Eva M. McMahan, Valerie Yow, Ann and Jay Hill, Catherine Beaudry, Dan Schubert, and Linda Shopes have been wonderful friends and colleagues who have listened to me think and talk through the issues of this book with great patience and generosity. A special thanks also goes to Elaine Mellen, whose gifted editorial assistance has saved me countless hours.

Linda Shopes and Bruce Stave, editors of Palgrave's oral history series, deserve special appreciation for their faith in this project and their care with the manuscript. The faults and limitations of this work, however, are mine alone.

Series Editors' Foreword

Shortly after Kim Lacy Rogers completed this study of *Life and Death in the Delta*, a jury trial in Neshoba County, Mississippi reminded Americans of a time when that state epitomized intense resistance to civil rights. On June 21, 2005, the forty-first anniversary of the killings of civil rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman near the town of Philadelphia, a jury of nine whites and three African-Americans convicted eighty year old Klansman Edgar Ray Killen of manslaughter. Although not the murder verdict that many desired, the conviction suggested that Mississippi had changed. It was a far cry from 1964 when no one in Neshoba would help the FBI in its probe into the case and the state refused to press murder charges.

While that county is not among those studied by Rogers, she employs oral history to explore change over time in the Delta region of Mississippi, concentrating on the four contiguous counties of Bolivar, Coahoma, Sunflower, and Washington that served as the location of the Delta Oral History Project. Rogers explores the system of poverty and land-holding that frames her study, the struggles over civil and voting rights, federal intervention and its effect on local residents, and the organizing campaigns that changed the American South. In so doing, Rogers is always sensitive to the suffering and trauma resulting from oppressive structural violence and segregation heaped upon Mississippi's blacks before and during the struggle for civil rights.

Unlike most studies of the civil rights movement, Rogers uses oral history not so much as a record of fact but as a means of gaining insight into the perceptions or consciousness of historical actors. Her work significantly contributes to our understanding of the struggle to end segregation and does not shy away from the sometimes very ambivalent assessments that African-Americans made about change in their communities. Well aware that life-stories and autobiographical narratives are constructs that view the past from the perspective of the present, she succeeds in achieving the Delta Oral History Project's goals of discovering "how local activists in Mississippi communities described their lives in terms of stability and change that often structure life stories."

This book provides a fine example of how oral history can be synthesized with written sources to provide an eloquent narrative. Its inclusion in the Palgrave/Macmillan Studies in Oral History series adds another dimension to our effort to demonstrate the versatility of the oral history approach. The series has

permitted us to have a better understanding of not only United States society, but of Latin America, Chinese, and European cultures. It includes single personal narratives and collective memories. It encourages self-conscious assessments of memory and oral history as a source. In this way, the series seeks to shape the field while appealing to a wide audience of readers. We believe that Kim Rogers's work will bring us closer to that goal.

Bruce M. Stave
University of Connecticut

Linda Shopes
Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission

Introduction

The Mississippi Delta of the mid-1990s was a landscape of mile-long rows of cotton growing from rich dark loam that ran flat from horizon to horizon. Delta towns and hamlets were still connected principally by two-lane blacktop highways that often ran past expanses of fields, catfish ponds, and an occasional swamp. The pale blue bowl of the sky could turn troubled and dark in minutes, as thunderstorms swept the highways with floods of water. In winter, storms occasionally coated the flat roads with sheets of dangerous black ice.

Much had changed in the Delta counties since the 1960s. The civil rights movement had opened political parties and offices to African American citizens. Public school students were overwhelmingly black in many towns in rural areas—the consequence of white flight to private academies in the wake of court-ordered desegregation. Most of the plantation shacks that had lined Delta roads and highways were gone in the 1990s, pulled down by white owners who no longer needed the labor of thousands of African American sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Many of these women and men left the rural plantation areas for Mississippi's towns and cities or for opportunities in northern and western cities. Doing so, they became a late-twentieth-century chapter in the successive waves of migration of African Americans who fled the poverty, violence, and oppression of the plantation-dominated districts of the rural South in the twentieth century.

But if the Delta in the 1990s looked different than it did in the 1960s, there were still many of the conditions that had produced a region of African American cultural richness and vitality that had somehow survived terrible poverty and oppression. In the 1990s, a small elite of landowners, merchants, bankers, and corporations controlled the economy of Delta counties. Despite the gains made by the civil rights movement and access to public employment for African Americans, many counties were blighted by staggering rates of poverty, most of which was concentrated in black communities. The black population was still afflicted by the residues of old deprivations: high rates of coronary disease, diabetes, and other ailments plagued middle-aged people and older adults; and a high infant mortality rate, drug trafficking, and gang violence endangered the lives of many young people. Decades of political oppression, random and organized white violence, and poor life chances had left an

enduring fear and distrust of white people among many African Americans who had achieved secure livelihoods and success in their own communities. In the 1990s, some black community leaders expressed a wariness and suspicion toward Mississippi's white population and state government. The oppressive structural violence that had compelled African Americans to live in fear for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had also produced a corrosive bitterness and alienation among many men and women. Numerous individuals who had led the civil rights struggles of the 1960s later believed that the social changes that had come with desegregation had damaged their already vulnerable communities and young people.

This book is about the life stories of African American community activists in the Mississippi Delta from the 1930s through the 1990s. It is based on interviews conducted for the Delta Oral History Project, a collaborative effort of Dickinson College of Pennsylvania and Tougaloo College of Mississippi. Between 1995 and 1998, interviewers Owen Brooks (figure I.1), Kim Lacy Rogers, and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., conducted more than ninety-five oral history interviews with community leaders in four contiguous counties in the Mississippi Delta, as well as several activists then living in Jackson and Canton, Mississippi. We were supported in our research by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and by assistance from Dickinson and Tougaloo colleges.

Over the three years of project research, we interviewed people in towns, villages, and in "the rural" districts of Bolivar, Coahoma, Sunflower, and Washington Counties. Driving along two-lane roads lined with seemingly endless rows of cotton, we saw the occasional catfish farm, crossroads store, family cemetery, and church. The stories we recorded documented a collective history of social suffering and collective trauma—of survival and achievement within the segregated South, and of the transformative experiences of participation and leadership in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. We also heard assessments of the gains and losses in the years since initial political victories were won in the 1960s and 1970s. We heard of more comfortable individual relationships between African American and white workers, better educational chances for bright and ambitious young people, and a widened system of opportunity in the Delta for educated black women and men. But we also heard stories of grief, mourning, and despair from leaders who felt that their communities had suffered tragic losses since the desegregation of schools and other public institutions. Many narrators also mourned for the remembered spirit of all-black communities and their institutions, for the churches, schools, and closely knit extended families of the economically more difficult, but seemingly more socially cohesive past. The interviews that we recorded featured both progressive narratives of growth, development, social learning, and political activism, and counter-narratives of collective losses that, narrators contended, have not been offset by political and social gains. The stories related by Delta narrators document the uneven pace of social change, and of the cultural losses brought by even necessary forms of collective action and political reform.

Figure I.1 Owen Brooks, 1996

The Movement and Mississippi

The African American civil rights movement of the 1960s transformed much of the political culture and social fabric of the state of Mississippi. In the years since the Civil War (1861–1865) ended, Mississippi, like much of the South, had been mired

in mass poverty and destitution, and blighted by a particularly vicious form of racial segregation and white supremacy. From the 1880s, the state led the nation in the number of lynchings of African Americans by white mobs—a practice that white political and economic leaders defended as necessary to protect white women from the desires of African American men. Mississippi's white leaders were notable for the crudity of their racism in a region in which the expressions of prejudice were rarely subtle. Nathan Bedford Forrest, a founder of the white terrorist Ku Klux Klan, was a post-Civil War leader, as was James Kimball Vardaman, a staunch and fervent segregationist. White Mississippi Democrats led the campaign of terror waged against the Republican Party during the Era of Reconstruction (1866–1876), when African American voters and their few white allies were killed, threatened, and driven from the polls. The state's white political leaders effectively disenfranchised almost all African American Mississippians through the use of force, fraud, and "legal" strategies like the poll tax and the "understanding" clause. The latter mandated that an applicant for registration must be able to explain his understanding of the constitution of Mississippi to the satisfaction of the local registrar. Denied political power, African Americans were subjected to a system of economic exploitation and oppression by the intertwined systems of white supremacy and segregation, which achieved perhaps their purest expression in the heavily black counties of the Mississippi Delta.[1]

The Mississippi Delta extends from Vicksburg in the South, to Memphis, Tennessee, cradled between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers. These counties possessed fabulously rich alluvial soil—in some places, the topsoil was rumored to be eighteen feet deep. The richness of the soil had been ensured by centuries of floods, which meant that large-scale agricultural settlement and cultivation was not possible until the region had achieved some flood control through the building of levees that protected farms and towns from the waters that rose with storms and heavy rains. By the late nineteenth century, the levee system had been built, and new pumps had been developed that helped to drain waters from the flat, low-lying expanses that farmers imagined to be perfect for cotton cultivation.

Farming, particularly row-crop cultivation, was a risky business in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Administrations that favored high protective tariffs left domestic producers of corn and cotton at a disadvantage in world markets. Depressions struck financial markets in the 1880s and 1890s, throwing thousands of laborers and workers out of jobs. Farmers themselves were often cash-poor, and parts of the South had suffered significant losses of capital and banking assets due to the Civil War, and later to postwar panics, depressions, poor markets, and bad weather. In the years that followed the Civil War, large farmers and planters had developed sharecropping and tenant-farming agreements that insured that African American farmers would work plantation lands in exchange for supplies, housing, credit at the plantation commissary, and a share—usually half, sometimes a third—of the crop produced. Thus the Delta lands got worked by black and some white tenants, who became bound to landowners by a complex system of indebtedness, intimidation, and legal controls.[2]

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Mississippi was infamous for the violence and brutality of its system of segregation. It was regarded by African Americans living in other states as the worst place for blacks in the country. But it was a harsh place for poor and working-class whites as well: the state regularly stood at the bottom of health, welfare, education, and general economic measures. Nevertheless, working-class and upper-class whites largely supported the system of segregation, even in its brutal expressions such as lynching, sexual predation against African American women, and the widespread cheating practiced by many planters that left their sharecroppers and tenants impoverished and indebted for years at a time.

Historians commonly regard World War II as a transforming event in twentieth-century America, and have credited wartime prosperity, a full-employment economy, and military service with changing the perspectives of possibilities for several cohorts of Americans. In particular, historians have contended that African Americans' wartime military service was critical to their determination to change the system of segregation upon their return to the Southern states.[3] The war and its relative prosperity—even in the South—had spurred other changes in the state. Although the Delta's white elites were supported by federal agricultural subsidies brought by New Deal-era price supports, many had come to see the necessity of luring industrial firms to their counties and state. With the development of the cold war between the American and Soviet governments, segregation and white supremacy had become embarrassing impediments to the plan to win the "hearts and minds" of the decolonizing third world peoples to the cause of American democracy.

If African Americans began to vote in larger numbers in Southern cities, and if wartime industrial development was dramatically transforming the outlook of business leaders in many Southern urban centers, Mississippi's Delta whites continued to see their own interests as consistent with the values expressed by such political leaders as Theodore G. Bilbo, James O. Eastland, and John Stennis. Eastland, particularly, used the anticommunist hysteria of the cold war to target, harass, and silence any dissenters from the system of segregation. Eastland and his allies in Washington used the powers of the federal government to prosecute African American and white civil rights activists in the postwar era.[4] Many labor unions, fearful of being branded as "communists" or as fellow-travelers, obliged the federal witch hunt by eliminating left-leaning unions and by downplaying the "civil rights unionism" that had been such an important aspect of labor organizing in many industries during the 1930s. Such nationwide rifts, however, meant little in Mississippi in the 1950s—where labor organizers were fearful of the "communist" smear. Within most Delta communities, the oppression of blacks was unquestioned by almost all whites, who themselves lived in fear of social ostracism for any expressions of political or social dissent.

Indeed, Mississippi was characterized as a "closed society" by one prominent critic during the 1950s and 1960s, and that phrase aptly described the intellectual captivity in which segregation held most of the state's citizens.[5] If African American veterans such as Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry had returned from World War II service

determined to alter the rights and opportunities of black people in Mississippi, thousands of African Americans in the Delta still worked from "can see to can't" at sharecropping tracts, and received only a few years of schooling that were scheduled around the demands of the cotton crop. The poverty of these schools and their limited offerings provided the kind of education that many white farmers thought suitable for blacks—enough learning to make an efficient farm laborer and little more.[6]

It was the issue of segregated education that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund had chosen to attack in its long-term project to end institutional segregation in the United States. The decision in the case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1954, which declared segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional and injurious to the development of African American children. In Mississippi, white political reaction to it was almost instantaneous. In Indianola in Sunflower County, a group of planters and businessmen organized the White Citizens' Council, initiating a Southern segregationist movement devoted to upholding the system of segregation. Although the "respectable" members of the Citizens' Councils consciously distinguished themselves from the lower-class barbarity of the Klan, they were nevertheless known as the "Uptown Klan," in Southern communities, and their harassment and economic coercion of African American activists had almost as similar and devastating an effect as the outright violence of the Klan. It was in this climate of "Massive Resistance" to the *Brown* decision and to any federal "intervention" on behalf of African American citizens that Mississippi's black activists began to make their own public protests and organizing drives against segregation.[7]

In Delta counties, black activists could expect violent and often deadly retaliation for public attempts to organize their communities, and register people to vote. The Reverend George Lee and Gus Courts of Belzoini were shot in 1955 for registering to vote and for NAACP organizing. In the same year, 14-year-old Emmett Till of Chicago, visiting an uncle in Money, in Tallahatchee County, was murdered by white men for allegedly whistling at a white woman. The brutality of these Delta murders and the repression levied against local NAACP chapters and members meant that large-scale grassroots organizing had to wait until the early 1960s, when representatives of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) arrived in Delta towns to aid embattled NAACP activists like Aaron Henry of Clarksdale and Amzie Moore of Cleveland. Although real alterations in the numbers of black voters had to wait until federal registrars and lawsuits arrived in virtually every county following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the organizing drives that combined the talents of "local people" like Henry and Moore, their grassroots supporters, and the energy and persistence of the young SNCC organizers transformed the aspirations and knowledge of thousands of African Americans in the 1960s. The organizing process and the political education that activists acquired changed their individual and collective sense of agency and purpose. Many became, in narrator L.C. Dorsey's words, "new people" through the movement. And their home counties

and towns became different and more equitable places for African American citizens, in subsequent decades.

The political history of the movement in Mississippi has been told by a number of historians and writers. Neil R. McMillen, Charles M. Payne, John Dittmer, Constance Curry, Chana Kai Lee, Tom Dent, Todd Moye, Charles Bolton, Kenneth T. Andrews, and Mark Newman have contributed valuable interpretations of the history of the black freedom movement in the state. Their work lays bare the movement's complexities at both state and local levels, and their profiles of individual actors and their communities give the story of the movement a rich grounding in the realities of time, place, and personality.

If the authors of this literature share common themes, they include the following. First, the movement created great political changes in the state. Legal segregation and discrimination have been formally abolished, and the state's black voters have elected numerous representatives and local officials—including the important posts of mayor, membership on the financially important county boards of supervisors, sheriffs and chiefs of police, and members of city councils. The state's system of higher education has been opened to African American students, and with increased federal intervention in the forms of the initial War on Poverty agencies, and ongoing public service agencies, employment has opened up for an African American middle class of professionals and white-collar workers. But these writers also point out that the economic policies of the 1980s, which withdrew much federal support from public programs, further disadvantaged many poor Delta residents who had been assisted by employment programs, educational, and health care initiatives that were begun in the mid-1960s, and which continued in some form through the 1970s.[8] The writers also point out that the industrial development that elites and municipal leaders hoped to lure to Delta counties has materialized in disappointing ways: gaming, catfish-processing, and prisons and corrections facilities have emerged as major employers in the last decades, with relatively low wage rates available for Delta residents.[9]

Additionally, school desegregation and consolidation has resulted in resegregated public schools, with middle-class and upper-class Delta whites favoring to send their children, and their education dollars, to overwhelmingly white academies in Delta counties. With the advent of the academy movement, the region's low expenditures for public education declined relative to the rest of the United States.[10]

Although school resegregation has been a bitter experience for African American activists, the movement sustained significant gains even in counties that developed well-organized and effective countermovements by white segregationists. Counties with strong movement organizations in the 1960s and 1970s received more funding from federal poverty programs than did counties without strong movements. Poverty programs, in turn, helped to provide middle-class jobs for movement activists, and gave them increased independence from white domination. Moreover, counties with strong movement organizations produced significant electoral victories by African American candidates from the 1970s through the 1990s. Even in counties where

movement activists and their successors were not as successful in local electoral politics, African Americans continued to exert significant influence and authority in the public agencies that administered county governments, and that provided necessary services and assistance to the poor.[11]

Most of the Delta's African American population—and many whites—remained poor at the end of the twentieth century, seemingly untouched by the economic boom of the 1990s. In 1996, the most important source of personal income for Delta counties came in the form of transfer payments from the federal and state governments. In 1995, when the national estimate of Americans living in poverty was 13 percent, Mississippi had a statewide poverty rate of 21.4 percent, and the Delta counties had rates that ranged from 31.8 percent for Washington County to 42.1 percent for Sharkey County. In that year, Bolivar County had a poverty rate of 35.2 percent, Sunflower a rate of 41.6 percent, and Coahoma had a poverty rate of 37.4 percent. Additionally, many Delta communities suffered from violent crime and gang-related drug offenses in the 1990s, which left many Delta residents fearful of the young men in their communities.[12]

Origins: The Delta Oral History Project

The Delta Oral History Project (DOHP) was the idea of New Orleans writer and oral historian Thomas C. Dent (1932–1998). Tom Dent had a long history with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and with Mississippi. In the 1960s, Tom had been an organizer and administrator for the Free Southern Theater (FST), a movement-based theater company that performed African American-oriented drama for black communities throughout the South in those volatile years. As a poet and writer, Tom had been inspired by the folk cultures of African Americans in New Orleans, Atlanta, and in Mississippi. I had interviewed Tom a number of times during a long-term oral history project in New Orleans that began in 1978, and ended in 1989. We remained in touch over the years.[13]

In the early 1990s, Tom had begun interviewing former activists in black communities throughout the Southern states for his book, *Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement*.[14] At the conclusion of his south-wide interviews, Tom phoned me several times to say that more interviews needed to be done, particularly in the small communities in Mississippi, where the movement itself had concentrated such energy and hope.

When I visited New Orleans in early 1994, Tom took me to Jackson, Mississippi to meet his friend Professor Jerry W. Ward, Jr., and long-time community organizer Owen Brooks. Jerry was then a professor of English at Tougaloo College, a small, historically rich black college in Jackson, and Owen headed the remnants of projects begun by the Delta Ministry, a social justice ministry headquartered in the Mississippi Delta since 1965. In that year, Owen came to Mississippi to work with the ministry, and then stayed for thirty years. At the time we met, he was a legendary

community organizer who knew the Delta and its people with an unparalleled depth. During this meeting, Tom told Owen, Jerry, and me that he wanted us to organize a large oral history project in several Mississippi Delta counties, and that he wanted us to conduct the interviews. Conscious of the excellent work that had been done by Neil R. McMillen, Charles Payne, John Dittmer, and other writers, we planned to conduct research in counties that had not been thoroughly studied by biographers, or by students of movement organizations, or by historians of Mississippi. This brought us to Bolivar, Coahoma, Sunflower, and Washington Counties—broad, flat, limitless-looking landscapes of cotton fields, small towns, villages, farms, and swamps.

Owen Brooks became our project field director, and identified and recruited our narrators—people he had known in community organizations and struggles since the 1960s. Jerry and I teamed with him to interview schoolteachers, politicians, grassroots activists, lawyers, farmers, business people, and religious leaders in Indianola, Clarksdale, Cleveland, Greenville, and in towns and villages like Drew, Coahoma, Friar's Point, Rosedale, Mound Bayou, Shelby, and New Africa.

This book reflects those journeys and visits to homes, offices, and farms. In the first year, we put twenty thousand miles on our cars, and drove through thunderstorms, ice storms, and, in one instance, a tornado. We saw small shacks and houses that we hoped were not occupied—and then learned that people lived in them. We passed old cotton gins with crude, hand-painted names on weathered signs, and saw what looked to be "jook joints"—rural bars and clubs known for music, dancing, card games, pool, and, sometimes, violent fights. Everywhere were the telltale attributes of the mythical Delta of literature: large and spacious (if sometimes dilapidated) houses, often owned by wealthy, or once-wealthy, whites, and clutches of small houses, brick or frame, that seemed to be occupied by African American families. Some of the suburbs of Indianola, Cleveland, and Clarksdale had large new brick-and-stone houses of African Americans and whites who had prospered in the post-movement Delta. The few cars that traveled on Delta highways between these towns ranged from lumber and commercial trucks to lavish pickup trucks to slow-moving jalopies that seemed to be taped, glued, and welded together by some sort of entropic force. Cars and trucks often slowed to the pace of cotton picking machines that rolled down roads like giant green grasshoppers. There were small "quick-stop" stores that sold gas, fast food (usually fried), and sundries. These were often gathering places for a community's young people, along with the local McDonald's, or Pizza Hut. And in towns, in the middle of fields, at crossroads, or at the edge of a state road were churches, often white, in need of paint, showing signs of neglect or careful tending, still gathering the energies of some small group of believers. Missionary Baptist churches, churches of God in Christ, Holiness ministries, Baptist, Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, Presbyterian, Catholic. A rare synagogue.

At the conclusion of the project, we deposited our interviews in the Tougaloo College Archives at the Zenobia Coleman Library at Tougaloo College, and at the Community Studies Center Archives at Dickinson College. This book is a product—though surely not the definitive one—of our journeys and conversations.

Interviews and Narrators

In recent decades, the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s has been examined by a number of historians and sociologists. Biographers of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, Fannie Lou Hamer, and others have produced an extensive literature that documents and interprets the complexities of movement leadership, and the personal and political costs of such service. Scholars have studied the dynamics of grassroots organizations and the impact of local political changes in a number of communities. Still other writers have documented the interactions between local, state, and national political actors and their representatives that resulted in landmark legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.[15]

We wished to do something different. We hoped to discover how local activists in Mississippi communities described their lives in terms of the patterns of stability and change that often structure life stories. We were mindful of the fact that life stories and autobiographical narratives are constructed to serve contemporary needs and desires, as well as to recount the transitions and turning points that mark junctures of change in individual lives. We also knew that oral narratives often combine seemingly contradictory values and stories: narrators often retain memories and narratives that signify opposite political and moral lessons. What, we wondered, might be the oppositions and dualities that marked narrators' accounts of life in the Delta? How was this seemingly totalizing experience of segregation and discrimination differentiated by men and women in these small communities? Were there generic community stories, and were these stories the products of economic, educational, and status differences among people who would nearly all have been classified as poor or near-poor by the United States Census reports of the 1950s and 1960s? What *were* the significant markers of status and difference within these communities—and how were these differences narrated, and to what effect? Oral histories, which often incorporate norms of subtle but significant difference within canonical cultural narratives, seemed a way to venture into the troubled past of regional poverty and oppression, community activism, and the uneven legacies of social change.

How, we wondered, did local activists view their lives from the vantage point of the 1990s? How did they interpret their remembered struggles from the perspectives of midlife and late life? What were the turning points and significant transitions in their lives? In the larger collective lives of their families? What changes did they see as being beneficial for families and communities? Which changes seem to have impaired the ability of families and communities to survive and achieve? What did they take as evidence of both positive and negative change? And what had journeys of activism meant for people who had brought significant political changes to their own communities? What meanings did they make of their own journeys?

We wanted to study the ways in which our narrators structured their stories at both individual and relational levels. We took it as axiomatic that individuals conceptualize and live their lives in relational context.[16] Families, institutions, and

communities often form intimate relational networks that pass on knowledge, values, and aspirations intergenerationally. We knew that in African American communities of the rural South in the last century, churches, schools, and families often worked collectively to socialize and educate children, and to push the talented and ambitious to achieve. Thus we expected to hear narrators explain their own lives in a shuttlecock fashion among family and community relationships, and to structure their assessments of positive and negative changes by comparing their own experiences of family and community in the 1990s with the remembered past of the 1930s through the 1960s. We also knew that individuals tend to valorize those relationships and institutions that they judge as having been critical in their own process of education, growth, and self-discovery—all of which are interactive in nature. So we expected to hear complex narratives that described both past and present in oppositional positive and negative comparisons, both for the individual as a member of the African American community, and an individual who operated as an African American in the larger, white-dominated social structure of segregated and movement-era Mississippi. We expected to hear sometimes inspiring, and sometimes confounding stories of change, as well as disturbing and sometimes contradictory patterns of attribution. We were also aware that even indices of substantial mobility, and improved education, health care, and opportunity do not always bring widespread approval of social change. Rather, individuals whose own lives have been improved by better educational opportunities, health care, and employment can be enraged and despairing about what they feel to be cultural and spiritual losses that appeared alongside evidence of material improvement.[17]

We designed a question list that focused on narrators' concrete memories of ordinary daily life and experience, as well as personal turning points and major decisions. We asked about family stories and histories, because we believed that individuals receive important instructions in "life and learning" from family narratives of positive and negative action. We wanted to hear what messages our narrators received about white people and other blacks from parents, grandparents, and other authority figures. We asked about first experiences of work on farms or on sharecropping tracts, or as day laborers, about how much narrators earned per day, and what their wages would purchase. We asked about schooling and education, and learned about the arduous process of "getting an education" when one's county did not have a public high school for African Americans.

We also queried narrators about historical events and processes of national and regional importance. We asked about the Depression years of the 1930s, and the years of World War II, and of the era of "Massive Resistance" that followed the handing down of the *Brown* decision. We wanted to learn the narrators' perspectives on their own working lives, and on the racial repression of the 1950s and movement years. And we wanted to know about activism: how they became community leaders, why, and at what time. We wanted to learn how they managed family, work, and community activism in an era of racial discrimination and oppression. We asked

what difference their own community leadership had made in their own lives, and what the movement meant for their families and communities. We also asked them to assess the changes that the post-movement era of the 1980s and 1990s had brought.

We selected our pool of narrators in each county through Owen Brooks's highly developed network of political colleagues and contacts in the Delta. Much of our work depended on who had remained in each county, on the health of sometimes very elderly people,[18] and on their willingness to participate in the project. Several individuals were too ill or incapacitated to talk with us; some had moved away, or were then staying with children in other states. Our final pool of narrators, however, reflected both the often difficult realities of aging in the Delta, and the political changes that the movement had engendered. Most of our narrators ranged in age between their 50s and 80s, and many were mature community leaders and parents when the movement came to the Delta in the 1960s. They were generally a robust, resilient group of individuals. Many had weathered great personal and political challenges with optimism and enthusiasm. All shared a fierce conviction of the importance of their lives, and of the contribution that the movement had made to their communities. And a number of them have died in the years since our interviews. Several of these women and men were in their 60s at the time of their death.

Our narrators were individuals who were recognized as important political and community leaders. We interviewed thirty-one people in Sunflower County, of whom eighteen were women, and twenty-five narrators in Bolivar County, ten of whom were women. We also interviewed twenty activists in Washington County, of whom five were women, and nineteen narrators in Coahoma County, which included eight women.[19] Several individuals who had particularly interesting and historically important experiences gave us two interviews. The group included teachers, ministers, lawyers, postal workers, homemakers, farmers, skilled laborers, and small business owners.

In identifying political leaders, we focused on women and men who had held public office or who had run for public office. We also counted among political activists women and men who had participated in the civil rights movement, and in Head Start and other War on Poverty programs. Political leaders were also often active in community institutions such as churches, schools, and professional organizations. A few had developed positions of economic leadership and entrepreneurship from a background in public education, the civil rights movement, and War on Poverty programs.

Our interviews revealed much about the life-chances of African Americans in the era of segregation. While Mississippi was a poor state throughout much of the twentieth century—poor even by Southern standards—the lives of black farm families in the Delta were threatened by numerous internal and external dangers. We found that the systems of oppression that operated against African Americans in the Mississippi Delta for much of the twentieth century resembled the conditions that sociologists and

anthropologists have identified as collective trauma and social suffering.[20] The suffering of individuals and populations under conditions of collective trauma is caused by the myriad forms of structural violence that support conditions of extreme oppression. Oppressive systems that impose structural violence on targeted groups and individuals are typically characterized by extreme income inequality and the consequent impoverishment of selected groups. The deprivation and suffering that result from impoverishment are kept in place by an extensive apparatus of legal, official, and extragovernmental controls. In the Delta and in other black-belt districts, the cheating of workers by white farmers was enforced through practices such as the eviction of troublesome tenants, beating, and occasionally killing workers who disputed a planter's authority, and by visiting official or vigilante violence on any African American who happened to stray from the "place" decreed to him or her by the etiquette of white supremacy. Thus, it could be dangerous for an African American in Mississippi to own a good car, to drive a car, to have a romantic or sexual relationship with a white, to confront a white authority on any matter, or to acquire too much education, property, or status in the African American community. Political activities such as attempting to vote or to enact the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights could result in an individual's death, and a general destruction visited upon his or her family.

Collective trauma, if endured for long durations, can produce ill-health, high stress levels, and early death in individuals and communities.[21] Throughout much of the twentieth century, Mississippi, and especially the Delta counties, had high rates of morbidity from stress-related diseases like hypertension, stroke, diabetes, and obesity, and high rates of infant mortality, childhood illness, and death. Delta counties also suffered from low levels of education and aggregate income, and from inadequate health care services. I will argue in subsequent chapters that conditions of structural violence and oppression informed the narratives of almost all of the African Americans we interviewed in the Delta. This backdrop of overt violence, political and economic oppression, and widespread deprivation affected all of those African Americans who matured in the Delta of the 1930s through the 1960s. Even those who did not directly experience poverty, poor educational chances, or violence knew that all three conditions existed within their communities for black people who were unlucky enough to be propertyless, or defenseless, or assertive around white people. Our narrators' stories, then, are related in equally revealing words and silences. Many seemed reluctant to remember the worst abuses of the time before the movement, but, having been favored by self-made and providential good fortune, often created progressive and optimistic narratives from the painful past. Still others created narratives that emphasized the continuities of poverty and oppression that ran from the 1930s through the 1990s. What the activists' narratives underscore is the residue of collective trauma that marks the stories of an oppressed community's hardiest survivors and achievers. That residue of trauma is often expressed as continuing fear, distrust, and dread of whites, of other African Americans, and of a threatening world beyond that seemed a place of danger.

In the following chapters, I suggest that narrators used interpretive strategies to describe the personal and collective politics of their experience. Most activists considered themselves to be agentic individuals who acted on behalf of themselves, their families, and their communities. These women and men expressed a personal optimism and determination that yielded progressive life stories. Their accounts often stressed an individual's triumph over obstacles, and a general satisfaction with the life that he or she had lived. Many proudly related the educational achievements and mobility of their children and extended families.

Commonly, narrators came to activism from families and schools that had stressed hard work, frugality, restraint, and education as keys to individual and collective success. This ideology of uplift helped to form the habits and life ambitions of striving African American families in the early to mid-twentieth century. Uplift teachings posited a beneficial reward for striving, discipline, and service, and also carried an undercurrent of disapproval for those families and individuals who did not "live right" or prosper according to the dictates of churches and schools. It was very important for the aspiring teachers and leaders of African American communities of the early through mid-twentieth century to differentiate themselves, and their social virtues, from the stereotyped racist characterizations of pathology that denigrated the black poor.[22]

Optimism and uplift were only two of the central values expressed in many narratives. It is important to be aware that the interviews of this book were the products of lifelong projects of self-creation and the continual process of remembering. Following a number of students of memory and life histories, I assume that life stories are continuously constructed throughout our lives, and that these narratives are both cultural and individual improvisational acts.[23] Moreover, I believe that personal narratives reflect the values and cultural narratives of a given society. We do not force our life experiences into culturally alien forms when we relate them to others: we use the accepted story forms of our society and culture in order to make our lives intelligible to others.[24] We recall our life experiences selectively and purposively; we retain memories that fit our personal goals and self-image. Thus, our stories are creative and culturally determined projects, and through them we express our values and the norms of our societies.

In this book, many life stories span almost a century of wrenching agricultural, political, and racial change. Many narrators were the children of a preindustrial African American rural culture, which depended on the family economy—the labor of all able members of a family—for survival. They saw their world change from a cotton- and row-crop dominated landscape to a postmodern consumer culture saturated with media images, fast food, and computer technology. And most participated in a social movement that they believed would transform the lives of all people in their communities and regions. Many placed utopian hopes on the movement's outcomes. Their stories describe personal journeys from the times before this transformation to the validating, disappointing, and often confusing years later.

The interviews were themselves the results of interactive processes. In most instances, either Owen and I, or Owen and Jerry, interviewed narrators. The women

and men we interviewed thus talked with a local political figure whom many knew and trusted, and with two college professors who were strangers—even though Jerry, as an African American and a Mississippi native, had more of an assumed likeness with our narrators by virtue of his origins and status as a Tougaloo College teacher. We noticed differences in the way that narrators addressed each of us in the team: black men often talked more frankly with other black men about matters of sex, white harassment, and white targeting of black women than they did when I was present. African American women tended to describe intimate details of their childbirth and health experiences with another middle-aged woman than they did when a man was present. All of these interviews, however, were products of the complex interactive world of conversational narrative that is oral history.

Of Structures and Stories: Organization

It became apparent in the course of our research that the narratives of women and men whose families had been landowning farmers or who had enough resources to rent land outright had far different perspectives on the past than did the landless and propertyless working poor of the Delta. Landowning, which was common among the narrators from Bolivar County, conferred a social and psychological advantage to a family and its children. Even a small family-owned farm signified a respected independence from the vagaries of exploitative white control. And Bolivar County also contained several all-black or largely black communities, within which narrators developed a greater sense of individual and collective self-esteem than did many members of the landless poor. Within all-black communities like Mound Bayou, for example, education was more available for African American children, and property owners often did not need the full-time labor of their children for survival. Their children could and did go to school. As adults, most Bolivar narrators expressed a remembered optimism and ambition that contradicted the social system of segregation—they welcomed opportunities to improve themselves and to obtain the rights that they believed they deserved as Americans.

Narrators whose families were part of the landless poor, working as day laborers or sharecroppers, grew up in a world that they experienced as dangerous and threatening. While they longed for education and for self-improvement, the necessities of the family economy compelled them to sacrifice time and energy to the cooperative effort to survive. These women and men often brought a desperate hopefulness to the civil rights organizing campaigns: it seemed as though the sacrifices of the past could only be rectified by a heroic transformative effort, an effort that would change the conditions of all African Americans in Mississippi and beyond.

While organizing this book, I decided to explore in depth the narratives of these two sets of narrators—the landless poor, and the property-owning farmers and schoolteachers. Accordingly, I chose many of the landless poor from the narrators from

Sunflower County—a county notorious for the brutality of its segregation, and for the ferocity of its countermovements against the African American freedom movement. The Sunflower County movement of the 1960s was in fact a "poor people's movement," led and organized by many propertyless and working-class African Americans. Confronted with punishing organized violence from segregationists, Sunflower activists developed transformative hopes for political and social change. The halting and incomplete changes in African American communities—so visible in the 1990s—led many narrators to express a wry and ironic disillusionment at mid- and late life.

Although some narratives from Sunflower County recount the experiences of property-owners, I chose to highlight many of the narratives from Bolivar County as both aggregate, and individualized expressions of the more optimistic perspective of small landowners. Although it is essential to recognize that all of these narrators would have been considered poor by most other Americans from the 1930s through the 1960s, it is nevertheless necessary to understand the importance of the small, but vitally essential differences in status that marked their coming-up years in order to understand the positive and negative assessments rendered at mid- and late life. Women and men whose values of self-worth and citizenship had been nurtured in independent communities brought to their movement experiences an expectation of general social progress and community uplift. Their fervent faith in opportunity and progress was in some cases betrayed by the state government's continuing recalcitrance and resistance to African American political gains through the 1990s.[25] Many of these narrators also expressed disappointment in successor generations within their communities, and blamed younger parents and children for failures ranging from a lack of ambition to self-indulgence and a destructive consumerism.

This book is divided into five chapters, each of which examines different iconic narratives that were rooted in specific conditions and opportunities. All chapters, however, share several emphases and assertions. All deal with the struggle of families and communities to survive and achieve under conditions of segregation and poverty, and all relate individual and collective struggles for education and improvement. All emphasize the unfairness of the conditions that led narrators into activism, and describe the supportive relationships that enabled them to pursue political and economic goals through the civil rights movement. The chapters also reveal narrators' varied assessments of the post-movement years. But even canonical stories are differentiated by the life stories of particular narrators, the nature of their communities, and the impact of the gains and losses they encountered.

Chapter one, "Conditions of Life and Death," and chapter two, "Change and Movement Among the Poor" describe the lives of propertyless sharecroppers and tenant farmers, and the effects of movement participation on their lives. A majority of the narrators matured in Sunflower County, one of the most violent places for African Americans in the Delta. The county was the home of Senator James O. Eastland, and of the notorious Parchman Prison Farm. Chapter one details the social suffering and collective trauma that were visited upon the poorest and most

oppressed African American farming families in the Delta—the landless day laborers and sharecroppers—who were most dependent upon the dictates and whims of plantation owners, riding bosses, and whatever authorities constituted the law in some rural districts. This section, particularly, reveals the very different impact of the sharecropping system on relatively healthy and intact families as opposed to families that suffered from poor health, early death, or in which a mother had been widowed, divorced, or deserted. In the last instance, a mother's strength, resilience, and will were required for survival and some achievement. Additionally, such mothers needed an iron discipline over their children, whose labor was critical to family survival.

Chapter two, "Change and Movement Among the Poor," offers a graphic portrait of the risks and achievements of the civil rights movement in Sunflower County, and of the immediate and long-term costs of personal experiences of terror and deprivation. For many dependent and vulnerable narrators, the movement represented an opportunity to redeem the suffering of the past and the sacrifices of their families. The movement was the door to a better world. Many of these women and men expressed profound disillusionment and grief when they assessed the economic and social problems that still plagued Delta communities in the 1990s.

Chapters three through five focus largely on leaders from Bolivar County, which contained the all-black communities of Mound Bayou, Renova, and Winstonville. These settlements typically featured significant numbers of independent landowning black farmers—something relatively rare in the Black Belt of the 1930s. These communities provided important resources for surrounding African Americans, and were fondly recalled by the women and men who had grown up in them in relative security and safety.

Chapter three, "Achieving in the Rural Independence and Leadership in Bolivar County," tells the stories of some of the women and men who emerged as community leaders in the years that followed World War II. Unlike the landless laborers of sharecropping families, these individuals came from families that had enough resources so that they could remain in school through high school, and some even attended college. Such families either possessed enough land to be somewhat independent of white control or skills that commanded higher wages than those allotted to day laborers or sharecroppers. This chapter also describes the alterations that World War II and the cold war brought to the lives of black leaders in Bolivar County. For some men, military service provided crucial benefits from the G.I. Bill that allowed them to learn a skill or to receive an education, or preferential treatment in federal employment. Other narrators recalled higher wage rates during the war and postwar years, as African American migrants continued to leave the Delta for urban centers in the north and west, a long-term historical process that had quickened since the 1930s.

Chapter four, "The Wilderness of Social Change: The Movement and Head Start," charts the transformations engendered by the civil rights movement of the1960s and the introduction of War on Poverty Programs—particularly, Head Start—in the Delta. The Head Start story is a gendered story of growth and change: activist women became

teachers' aides, community outreach workers, and other employees of the early childhood program. The Head Start story demonstrates how effective even limited opportunities are for women and men who have been oppressed—but not made helpless—by structural conditions of poverty and discrimination.

Chapter five, "The Limits of Political Power," provides a bittersweet assessment of postmovement gains and losses by African American community leaders in Bolivar County of the 1990s. Several individuals who achieved an education and political office convey their personal disappointment with the nature and pace of social change in the Delta. Reflecting on the economic stagnation and cultural losses of their communities, leaders conclude that the structural nature of the economic oppression of African Americans has not changed much since the 1960s. Additionally, a number of narrators express a profound disappointment with individuals and institutions within their African American communities. The patterns of attribution that emerge from these narrators are often contradictory and complex. What they most powerfully communicate is a sense of mourning and despair: grief for the past and its injuries, hopelessness about the present and near future. It is as though the Delta's African American communities, however politically transformed, cannot fully escape the damage inflicted by the past. This damage, several narrators note, has remained an enduring burden for successor generations.

This book, and the narratives upon which it is based, describe two commonly held, but not exclusive, explanations of life, time, politics, and change among African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. It is a work that perhaps sacrifices a comprehensive viewpoint for a more localized, physical, interpersonal, and community-based portrait of representative lives. The narrators are representative because they were, and some remain, community leaders and activists. Their stories are also representative because they focus as well on the everyday, the ordinary, the physical. A social movement as important as the civil rights movement of the 1960s had its origins in ordinary deprivations, angers, and hopes. Adults who remembered walking to school as children while white children rode by in school buses, and who enumerated the way that landlords cheated their families at settlement time on plantations used their memories of powerlessness and injustice to fashion a hope for deliverance. That such deliverance came only partially, fitfully, and incompletely should not diminish the important causal relationships between the experience of ordinary historic injustices and the creation of transformative redemptive hopes.

The destructive conditions of segregation destroyed and damaged the lives of thousands of African Americans in the black belt South between the 1880s and the 1970s. But this system—and the men who governed it and profited from it—failed to entirely subdue a resilient hope that would flower in the African American freedom movement of the 1960s. This is a story, then, of extraordinary hardships and oppression that failed to crush the spirit of the region's strongest and most creative people—the women and men in struggling black communities who risked everything to change the future.

ONE

Conditions of Life and Death

Sunflower County is justly famous in Mississippi's civil rights history. The county seat, the small town of Indianola, was the birthplace of the White Citizens' Council, a segregationist organization that opposed the school desegregation ordered by the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954. The councils quickly became a South-wide network of organizations, and drew their members from property-owning and politically powerful whites; council leaders included planters, businessmen, judges, and other officials. But Sunflower County was also the home of a vigorous poor people's movement that fought for voting and rights of economic equality despite terrorism and violence from hostile whites. The tiny towns of Ruleville and Drew were the homes of sharecropper activists Fannie Lou Hamer and Mae Bertha Carter, women who displayed considerable courage and determination despite evictions, job losses, and threats to their families. The town of Indianola itself was the home of grassroots African American activists Cora Fleming, Alice Giles, and McKinley Mack.

To the north of Indianola, Senator James O. Eastland ruled the plantation community of Doddsville, and symbolized all that was oppressive about segregation to multitudes of African American activists. And northern Sunflower County was also the home of the notorious Parchman Farm, the prison plantation that was considered "worse than slavery" by its inmates through much of the twentieth century. Like many other massive plantations, Parchman made money—the crops grown by inmates and their labor in prison enterprises made profits for the state. And throughout the Delta, the labor of thousands of sharecroppers made planters prosperous.

By the last years of the twentieth century, Fannie Lou Hamer and James O. Eastland were long dead, and Parchman had been forced to enact numerous reforms in its treatment of inmates. Indianola was still a small town draped around the brown waters and cypress trees of Indian Bayou. Local residents worked at places like Wal-Mart, at Modern Line, a light manufacturing company, and at the massive

Delta Pride catfish processing plant. The county was still burdened by high rates of poverty, and the schools were largely segregated. Court-ordered integration had spurred massive white flight into private academies, and the poorly funded public school system had an overwhelmingly African American student population. Still, African Americans owned large new homes in suburban tracts, and a lawyer and civil rights leader, Carver Randall, sat on the powerful county board of supervisors.

In this chapter, I examine the conditions of life and death in the Delta counties in the decades between the end of World War I and the 1960s. The harsh conditions of African American life in the region have been documented by numerous historians and demographers, as well as in the oral histories conducted between 1995 and 1998 by the staff of the Delta Oral History Project. I will discuss the desperately poor life chances that were ordained for African Americans in the Delta by the systems of segregation and sharecropping. Historical material and the narratives of women and men who had survived the poverty, segregation, and violence of Mississippi in the early twentieth century provide a portrait of the lives of the region's poorest farmers. I argue that many, if not a majority, of sharecropping and tenant farming families lived in conditions of chronic social trauma and structural violence that compounded widespread economic exploitation and poverty with recurring vigilante, Klan, and state-sanctioned authorities' assaults on individuals and groups of African Americans. The systems of segregation and sharecropping thus produced conditions in which structural violence and collective violence and exploitation "normalized" a constant fear of complete destitution and white terrorism among thousands of black farmers who worked the famously rich Delta lands.

The narrators of these chapters are primarily women and men who grew up in sharecropping and tenant farming families—those African Americans who occupied the "bottom rung" of the Southern agricultural ladder. From the turn of the twentieth century through the 1960s, few African American farmers in the lower Southern states owned their own land. Few even had the status of "renters" of land—those men and their families who owned their own mules, tools, and had enough capital to rent farmland outright from planters and white farmers. Without land, tools, or mules, farmers entered the world of perpetual debt virtually guaranteed by the inequities of the sharecropping system. Sharecropping was an arrangement in which a landless tenant and his family entered into a contract—usually unwritten—with a landlord in which the tenant promised one-quarter to one-half of the proceeds of a year's crop to the owner in return for a tenant cabin or shack, the loan of mules, and the "furnishings" of seed and tools, and provisions from the plantation commissary.[1]

The sharecropping system and the system of segregation were developed in the years after 1865. Both were constructed as interlocking systems that would guarantee white farmers and landowners a steady and docile supply of socially subordinate cheap labor—a labor force that could be controlled by low wages, a lack of legal protections, and by intermittent eruptions of social violence that targeted individual blacks, their families, and, sometimes, their communities. The extremely low wages

and restricted opportunities to provide balanced diets for sharecropping families, when coupled with a chronic lack of medical care, led to high rates of nutritional diseases, malnutrition, ill-health, and early death among African American sharecroppers and tenants.[2]

Poverty, ill-health, and early death were the results of the structural violence of the systems of white supremacy and segregation. Delta narrators who had experienced these "violences of everyday life" remembered their families' deprivation and fear with anger. They had grown to adulthood knowing that the suffering of their families and communities was the systematic and deliberate product of a malign social system that was set up in order to diminish African Americans' capacities for agency, ambition, and independence.[3]

Conditions of Survival

Women and men born to sharecropping families in the early and middle years of the twentieth century told complex life stories. Many reported accepting the seemingly inevitable hardships such as poverty or the ill-health of family members during the Great Depression of the 1930s. But narrators also voiced a sense of outrage at the unnecessary cruelties inflicted by violent whites and unscrupulous bosses and planters. The survival of individuals and families was often contingent upon the luck of good health and abundant harvests, and upon the goodwill of plantation owners who displayed a modicum of fairness. Even with such good fortune, life was often short and difficult for sharecropping families.

Rural white and black families in the plantation-dominated Southern states were frequently plagued by high rates of infant and maternal mortality, and by widespread illness and early death among children and adults. Deficiencies of basic foods and minerals from substandard diets caused diseases and infections that depleted the stamina of rural people. These included pellagra, hookworm, tuberculosis, and small pox. Additionally, malaria plagued Delta residents until the 1940s, when screened windows and pesticides reduced its power. Before those innovations, as many as one-third of the Delta's people suffered from this "swamp fever" each year.[4]

High rates of disease and poor medical care meant that white babies born in 1900 could expect to live about 51 years, but black babies might not live past their fortieth birthdays. By 1940, life expectancies for both groups had risen by about ten years—rural Southern whites born "in 1939 could expect to live about 64 years if they were male and more than 67 years if they were female." Blacks born in 1939 could still expect to live shorter lives than whites, males to perhaps 56 years, and females to 58 years. Adult death rates remained high among rural African Americans: "nearly 18 percent of all twenty-year-old blacks (male and female) could expect to die before turning forty-five. The comparable risk was substantially lower for Southern whites—9 percent for males and 7 percent for females." Maternal mortality due to

death during childbirth was a large part of adult mortality for black women. Maternal deaths were in part a product of the widespread absence of affordable prenatal and obstetric care for African Americans.[5] Some telling figures emerge from the records of Mississippi's Bureau of Health Statistics. In 1940, 14 percent of births occurred in hospitals. Whites predominated among those favored by hospital care: 27 percent of white babies were born in hospitals; but only .039 percent of black babies had hospital births. In rural Delta counties, the absence of health care for African Americans was even more evident. In Sunflower County, .07 percent of white babies were born in a hospital, as were only .004 percent of black infants.[6]

Infant and maternal mortality rates reflected the widespread lack of medical care: in 1940, the state's infant mortality rate was 55.6 deaths per 1,000 live births, with a death rate of 46.3 among white infants, and 60.9 among blacks. In Sunflower County, the total death rate was 60.1, with 36.6 among white babies, and 66.6 among African Americans. The state's maternal death rates for 1940 were 5.9 per 1,000, with rates of 4.5 among white mothers, and 7.0 among blacks. National infant mortality rates for the 1940–1944 period reveal similar disparities: a nationwide rate of 42.6 per 1,000 was unevenly divided among whites and blacks. The white infant mortality rate was 39.2, the nonwhite was 67.2. According to researchers W. Michael Byrd and Linda A. Clayton, "In 1940, when 52 percent of all U.S. infants were delivered in hospitals, the White proportion (56 percent) was more than twice the black proportion (22 percent).[7]

High mortality and morbidity rates throughout the tenant farming South and in the Mississippi Delta were in part a consequence of the poor diet upon which many plantation workers subsisted. Dorothy Dickins, a home economics agent, made a study of the diets of black tenant farmers and sharecroppers in 1926. She found evidence of severe deficiencies in food intake of many sharecropping families. Black tenants' diets were seriously deficient in calories, and in protein, calcium, phosphorous, and iron. Tenant families consumed less meat and milk than they needed, and this caused the high incidence of pellagra in Delta counties. Blacks' diets were also deficient in essential vitamins, a deficiency that diminished their resistance to infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies also made children prone to developing rickets, a disease that resulted from a shortage of calcium and phosphorous.[8] Black tenants consumed high amounts of fat, and insufficient amounts of protein, vegetables, and fruits. The poor diets were caused by a combination of factors: a lack of incentives (or even opportunities) to grow supplemental gardens on some plantations, a lack of education about nutrition and diet, and, perhaps most importantly, the "inadequate income" upon which many tenants were forced to survive.[9] This situation continued through the Depression years of the 1930s, when researchers found that half of all schoolchildren in the Black Belt counties of the South had poor teeth, and estimated that half of the children subsisted on inadequate diets. In the Mississippi Delta, 95 percent of farm tenants were African Americans.[10] A generation later, poor African Americans' nutritional struggle was not much

improved. Health workers found that many of the children of the poor and sharecropping African American families suffered from rickets, anemia, malnutrition, and infectious diseases, which could have been easily prevented by adequate nutrition and health care. One survey of 501 families found that as many as 60 percent received less than two-thirds of the "generally recognized minimum daily dietary requirement. This figure stood in stark contrast to a national figure of only 13 percent. . . . The [infant] mortality rate for black infants in the Delta was 30 percent higher than for other Mississippi blacks and 109 percent higher than for whites. The infant mortality rate among black Mississippians actually rose as the farm economy modernized, climbing from 40.8 deaths per 1,000 births in 1946 to 55.1 in 1965."[11] It is likely that the infant mortality rate climbed as a result of the accelerating modernization of cotton agriculture, which left many displaced tenants and sharecroppers without any income at all.

Exploitation and Terror

Sharecropping families typically worked the cotton season from "can see to can't." The families rose around 4:30 AM, and ate a breakfast that might include biscuits, fried okra, salt pork, and grits or gravy. The family worked in the field from 5 AM until 11 AM, before the oppressive noontime heat sent them inside for a dinner: usually some cooked greens with corn bread dipped in the greens' "pot likker," more pork, and sometimes cake or pie. The family rested an hour or more, then returned to the fields where they worked until dusk. Supper included leftovers from the noon meal.[12]

The cotton season stretched from early March through around November. Sharecroppers readied their fields and planted their crops in early spring, then "chopped cotton" or cleared the plants from April to early June. Families also tended their own gardens in the summer, growing vegetables to eat and can, and fattening hogs and steers for slaughter. The cotton blossomed in September, and nearly all black people picked the crop, whether as tenants, renters, or day laborers. According to historian David Oshinsky, "Along the rows the pickers bent, trailing six- or nine-foot long white cotton sacks behind them, strapped over a shoulder, the open end at waist level on the left. Using both hands, they reached into the hard-shelled brown bolls, avoiding if possible the sharp edges, pulling out the white lint with seed. A man averaged up to three hundred pounds a day. Sometimes a woman could beat him."[13]

The lives of sharecropping families were extremely harsh and difficult because the system itself was premised upon exploitation, and encouraged gross exploitation and cheating by white planters and large farmers. In the 1920s, black and white sharecroppers and tenants barely survived as cotton prices declined. The 1930s inflicted staggering losses on these farmers: the Mississippi River flood of 1927 had hit the region hard, and a disastrous drought blighted 1930 and 1931. The relief and

recovery programs promoted by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal further damaged the tenant farmers and sharecroppers: planters retained control of most relief programs, pocketed the parity payments made for crop reduction, and kept sharecroppers in a tightening noose of deprivation and debt. Added to the ranks of impoverished croppers were many previously independent black and white farmers, who had lost their lands after falling behind in mortgage and tax payments.[14]

Planters and big farmers had every economic incentive to invest the New Deal's parity payments in tractors and other pieces of machinery and to turn sharecroppers off of plantations and onto highways that led elsewhere. Sharecroppers who remained on plantations were treated to brutality and terrorism when they tried to organize and strike for higher wages—as many did in the 1930s. During the mid-1930s' strikes in the Arkansas Delta, planters and local elites used time-honored methods of labor control. Historian Nan Woodruff writes, "Planters and their riding bosses had retained their workers for decades through terror and violence. In the plantation region, state and civil society were one, and both sustained sharecropping and peonage through disenfranchisement, segregation, lynching, beatings, and theft of black peoples' property. Law enforcement existed to support white supremacy."[15] Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker, conducting research in Sunflower County in the 1930s, made an estimate that "not more than twenty-five or thirty percent of the Delta sharecroppers got an honest count on Settlement Day."[16]

Sharecropping families took what landlords allotted them at settlement time, no matter how unfair they knew the system to be, because they knew what the consequences of challenging a white man's word could be. The interlocking systems of sharecropping and segregation were underwritten by violence—a violence that might explode into lynchings, casual murders of African Americans by whites, and the "disciplines" of beating or flogging disobedient blacks on plantations. Between 1889 and 1945, the state of Mississippi led the nation in the numbers of African Americans lynched by mobs of white men who sought to avenge a real or imagined transgression against the enforced etiquette of white supremacy and African American obedience. In this period, Mississippi had 476 of the "3,786 recorded lynchings" in the United States according to historian Neil McMillen. Since many covert lynchings or "disappearances" were not recorded, the death toll from vigilante violence was possibly much higher. In the Delta, Sunflower and Coahoma counties had nine lynchings each in this era; Washington and Bolivar counties had thirteen each. Lynchings functioned as occasions to terrorize the black community, as they were often conducted with great spectacle and cruelty before crowds of white men, women, and children, who sometimes journeyed for miles to attend the festival of an announced lynching. White mobs hung, shot, flogged, tortured, and burned their victims to death before the crowds of onlookers. Mob members sometimes cut off body parts of the victims to take home as trophies of the event. Frequently, local police, and other law enforcement officials turned suspects over to armed lynch mobs, which then transported the victim to a designated place where they carried out the killings. Almost all of the

narrators interviewed by Delta Project staff had heard stories of lynchings, or even recalled lynching stories from their own families.[17]

Mississippi had long nurtured high rates of violent crime among African American and white males, but blacks were overwhelmingly both the victims and perpetrators of violent crimes. Between 1900 and 1930, African Americans accounted for "67 percent of the killers in Mississippi, and 80 percent of the victims," according to Oshinsky. Most of these killings "involved liquor, gambling, and personal disputes," and often occurred during Saturday night revelry at the notorious country "juke joints" where people congregated on the weekends to dance, gamble, make music, and drink. Observers like anthropologists John Dollard and Hortense Powdermaker differed in their interpretations of black-on-black violence, but both agreed that it was a product of the intense frustration and rage that many young men felt at the system of white supremacy, and that this intra-racial violence expressed their angry inability to strike out at the people and system that kept them poor, marginalized, and humiliated.[18]

After the Saturday night shootings, knifings, and fights, perpetrators were only erratically punished. Many times, the killers went free, due to the lax enforcement of the law in the areas of black-on-black crime. In response to the disorderly conduct of some sharecroppers and itinerants, other tenant families often maintained strict rules for their children's behavior and friendships. An invisible class structure existed even among sharecropping families, and "good" churchgoing families who yearned for respectability and "improvement" kept their children "close to the house" and away from the families and individuals who lived fast and dangerous lives.

Surviving the Sharecropping System

Sharecropping and tenant families survived and sometimes flourished through the combined fortunes of good health, an extended kin network, hard work, and mutual assistance. Absent any of these resources, families faced hunger and destitution. Single mothers, particularly, needed enormous strength and resourcefulness—and an iron discipline over the labor of their children—to produce an adequate life from sharecropping.

Corrine Bankhead, a resident of Bolivar County, found her life difficult and impoverished after her husband, terrorized and pauperized by local whites, died. In late life, she described the reduced and sometimes destructive choices available to women widowed or left without a partner. Bankhead was born in 1910 and married an older man, Walter Bankhead, in the late 1920s in Edmondson, an all-black town in the Arkansas Delta. Walter Bankhead owned a small store, a funeral home, the family home, and forty acres of land. Because he was a substantial property owner and economically independent of the nearby planters, Bankhead decided to act as a spokesman for the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), an integrated union of

sharecroppers and agricultural laborers. The STFU was organized in the Arkansas Delta by two Socialist Party members in response to the harsh treatment and exploitation of sharecroppers and tenant farmers during the Great Depression years of 1929–1941. For his efforts, Bankhead was arrested, jailed, and beaten by local law enforcement officials in Arkansas, and he and his family were eventually spirited out of Arkansas by the STFU. In the process, he lost all of his property.[19]

Bankhead's arrest, documented in the papers of the STFU, was described by one of his associates in the Arkansas union—a man then writing to the STFU office in Memphis from Chicago. He had fled Arkansas following Bankhead's arrest and the violence that engulfed the STFU organizers and members in Delta counties when croppers struck for higher wages. Between 1935 and 1938, law enforcement authorities and local planters shot, beat, evicted, and even killed some of the sharecroppers who tried to organize and strike for $1 a day wages for cotton chopping and picking. The planters defended their paternalism and exploitation as necessary responses to the threats posed by "outside" organizations and forces. In the aftermath of the strikes and retaliatory violence, New Deal agencies ignored the planters' obvious violations of agricultural policies, and of state and federal laws.[20]

The STFU relocated the Bankheads at Hill House, a cooperative farm in Bolivar County, Mississippi. Corrine Bankhead recalled that the owners of the co-op opened some land for settlement and sale to co-op members in the 1930s, but her husband didn't attempt to acquire land. "He just started moving on the white folks' place, from one place to the other. It was strange, my husband had never worked sharecrops before, but he did that. He wasn't in good health at that time. I guess he was sort of broken down, too." Her husband, she said, "seemed like he lost his—wasn't ever any more good, he never was more no good, you know, just like he had been. He was a very vibrant person, liked having a good time, but after he lost everything, he—it's just interesting how a person can lose and just get down to nothing, so I can imagine it made him feel bad." In around 1940, the Bankheads moved to Shaw. Then Walter Bankhead wanted to move back to his home in Arkansas, so the family moved to the area near Edmondson, onto the land that belonged to his stepchildren. There Walter Bankhead died. "You know, he was just discouraged and weakened by losing everything."[21]

Corrine Bankhead then hoped to make a crop on her stepson's land, but needed a man to plow. Her husband's relatives told her that to get her land plowed she needed to marry or choose a mate, so she entered into an arrangement with a man from the area. But she and her four children stayed only a year in Arkansas. Her new husband, she said, broke the land for a crop. But he also "rambled all through my things. I had a gun, he rambled through all my things and tried to ramble to find my money." She made a bag and pinned her money on her daughter Lee's waist under her clothes. Bankhead then took her gun to her husband's son-in-law's house. The young man wanted her gun, and told her one day that her new husband had gone to Memphis, so it was safe for her to try to leave. Corrine Bankhead recalled that she left

her freshly done wash, her Thanksgiving cooking, and the family's slaughtered hog, and loaded her children onto the son-in-law's truck, and he took them to the highway to Memphis. There, Bankhead and her children got a bus to Memphis, and then took another bus to her mother's house in Rosedale in Bolivar County. From there, Bankhead and her children moved to a plantation near Shaw, just below the town of Cleveland in Bolivar County. She wanted to make a crop with her children. Soon Bankhead married again, but the marriage was not happy.[22] "He wanted to take charge of me, you know. But he put me out. He wanted to remarry again. He saw a good-looking woman. He had children, too, and they were very devoted to me, and they was angry with him about wanting to put me out. My husband put me out." On this time in her life, she observed:

> You can glory in your experiences sometimes. It seems hard when you reflect on them, and the time when you are living it seems very unbearable, but if you get—well, I decided that I would move to Shaw after he put us out. I said, "We're not going to move anymore. When we move again, we're going to make a crop. Wherever we stay we're going to make a crop, and we're going to save our money until we can buy a house."[23]

While Corrine Bankhead's bitter memories recall the hardships of women and children left unmoored from a husband's death, Mary Tyler Dotson's early memories of the 1930s reveal the fears that a mother might have for a disabled daughter. Dotson was born in 1917 to a sharecropping family in Sunflower County, Mississippi. She was one of fifteen children, of whom only ten reached adulthood. She began losing her eyesight when she was around 5 years of age, but retained some sight until she was 24: "then I had the measles, and a shade dropped down over my eyes." As a near-blind child, she did not have to work in the fields, but had other chores around the house. At age 17, she was sent to the Piney Woods School, a private school for blacks outside of Jackson, which had a special program to educate blind young people. Dotson was glad to go to school, she said, because "at the time I didn't want to get married." Her parents expected their daughters to marry young and leave home to start their own families. "I said, 'I don't want to marry, because Mama's going to make me marry, and these men ain't treating these women right what got these two good eyes.' " She explained that "my daddy was good to my mama. I never heard them fuss or fight or nothing. But a man lived up the street from us, he would whoop his wife and children. I said, 'That man ain't treating the people right what's got two good eyes. I know they ain't going to treat me right.' "[24]

Dotson's mother feared for her blind daughter's welfare. Aside from urging Mary to find a husband, "Mama would pray and ask the Lord to take me. She wanted the Lord to take me, and I got mad with Mama. I said, 'Why does Mama want me to die?' " After several years at Piney Woods School, Dotson returned home, valued as an educated daughter who had learned to read. Her father taught her to pay bills and

taxes, and her mother expressed joy that Mary had not died young:

> Mama said, "Yeah, I prayed for the Lord to take my daughter, but the Lord knows what to do, because I didn't want to die and leave my daughter behind. If I die, she would stay with her sister, and her brother-in-law wouldn't treat her right, and if she stayed with her brother, then the sister-in-law might not treat her right."[25]

Mary Dotson's mother's fears for her welfare and safety were realistic, given the often tenuous nature of marriage and gender relations among the rural poor. In hard times, especially, men frequently deserted their families, leaving women and children faced with coercive choices. Poor women often entered into common-law arrangements because they needed a man's support and labor on a sharecropping tract. Family violence was common, especially among the rough-living families on plantations—those who drank illegal corn whiskey and partied in the dangerous country "juke joints" on weekends.[26]

Dotson's family survived the Depression on sharecropping tracts through the collective labor of parents and children. She remembered her parents as good farmers: "My daddy raised truck garden patches then. My daddy made molasses. A man had a molasses mill, and my daddy raised sorghum cane and ribbon cane, all such as that, and my daddy would go over there and give them some of his cane to get some syrup. And then he would raise hogs, and then when hog killing time come, my daddy would kill a hog, and whoever stayed next to us, the people over in that place there would come over and help, and everybody had meat to carry home. Everything was cheap. You could get a pound of lard back then for five cents. And then you were raising hogs. See, nowadays people are not shifty like they used to be. They don't raise gardens and they don't raise hogs and chickens and stuff like we had in that time. We had a cow. She was giving milk, and time that cow stopped giving milk, she goes dry, then the fellow over yonder, he had cows, we'd get milk from them. . . . There was a lot I didn't know, the struggle, probably, my daddy and them was going through, but they raised greens the year round.[27]

Dotson's memories of rural self-sufficiency and of family production that included milk, meat, vegetables, and molasses were echoed by many other Delta narrators who spoke with pride of their families' abilities to provide varied and sufficient food for all members of the family. These memories of rural plenty and farming skill underscore a persistent theme in rural survival: the absolute necessity of collective labor in a family economy, coupled with the rigorous frugality and self-discipline needed to evade the perpetual debt and poverty almost guaranteed by the sharecropping system. Such memories of abundance are also testimony about the world of impoverishment that could engulf the unfortunate, ill, or improvident rural folk. Narrators, like Mary Tyler Dotson, frequently spoke of the families with whom they shared their extra milk, greens, cornmeal, and meat. The production of plentiful food was not only proof of a family's ingenuity and hard work, but also a bounty to be

shared with neighbors in the mutual relationships that helped to ensure community survival. Thus, abundant home production was both necessary to a family's survival and a resource in the ongoing process of community relationships. Discussions of abundant food production were also testaments to family devotion and virtue: in a world of real deprivation and hunger, productive families were indeed blessed.

Although most of the community leaders interviewed for the Delta Project came from families that produced the diverse foodstuffs necessary to give their children basic health and security, several narrators recalled hunger and desperation in their childhoods. Robert Cableton was born to a sharecropping family in Arkansas in 1938. His mother later moved her children to a plantation in Sunflower County owned by John Hough, who would become an early leader in Mississippi's segregationist White Citizens Councils during the 1950s and 1960s. Cableton's father had deserted the family when the children were small, so the four children and their mother worked a small tract on the Hough plantation together. Although Cableton's mother made an effort to see that her children attended the local schools, their schooling was clearly secondary to the collective effort to survive. Cableton recalled that his childhood was "rough." Although his family received a regular "furnishing" of meal and food from the plantation commissary that was supposed to carry them over the winter until the time came to chop and pick the cotton, surviving on their rations often left them hungry.

In a 1995 interview, Cableton recalled a significant incident in his childhood. Hough, he remembered, loved dogs: "he would come with loaves of bread and neck bones and pieces of scraps that he had found in these local stores, and bring them out to each [tenant's] home and feed the dogs. Now that stuck in me, even to this day. But he wouldn't see how the people were fed." Hough had earlier brought a big white dog named Flop to Cableton's mother and had told her to look after the animal. On one winter day, said Cableton, "he brought a box of neck bones and ends of baloney and told my mother—her name was Cora—, 'Cora, now when you finish, put this up and feed Flop tomorrow morning.' So to make a long story short, we had to eat that food ourselves in his absence because my mother thought that we were more greater than the dog, but it was done in his [Hough's] absence. We'd eat the food that was brought for the dog."[28]

Cableton recalled that he attended school through the sixth grade, but quit to work. "When I was 11 years old, I was picking two hundred pounds of cotton. Eleven and a half, twelve. Started early. You know, that was part of the race bringing up. All of us started early." Although life on Hough's land was difficult, Cableton's mother stayed on that plantation until the planter angered her by refusing to pay for a doctor to care for Cableton's pregnant sister. The young woman miscarried, and their mother moved the family into Indianola. There, she found life equally difficult, facing the difficulties of meeting rent, water, lights, and other bills. She then moved the family back to another plantation outside Indianola. When young organizers for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of

Figure 1.1 Juanita Scott, 1995

Federated Organizations (COFO) came to Sunflower County to organize voter registration drives in the early 1960s, Cableton eagerly joined the effort. He became involved, he said, because of "our condition, basically, and the racial prejudice thing that was reaching out with arms like an octopus. I mean, I just couldn't sit still."[29]

If Robert Cableton's narrative revealed the hardships endured by a sharecropping family deserted by a man, Juanita Scott's memories were stamped with the imprint of her mother's enormous strength, resilience, and ferocious discipline. Scott grew up in a sharecropping family in Sunflower County. She was born in 1939, and her father deserted her mother and his eight children when Juanita was 5 years old. In a 1995 interview, Scott (figure 1.1) recalled that year as a "very confused time in my life." But Mattie Scott (figure 1.2), Juanita's mother, quickly took charge of her household full of children. "From that time on, every move that was made was made by my mother. She was the backbone of the family. I remember my mother with eight children, pregnant with the ninth, had to make all the decisions made. She would gather us together like a chicken with her chicks, sit us down, and explain to us what our chores were. We all knew what we had to do, and we knew how to do it. We all had a CS and FST degree at an early age: it was Common Sense and Fireside Training." Mrs. Scott organized her children's time into specific farm and household chores, and the children were all expected to achieve in school as well. Juanita Scott had vivid memories of the work:

> The oldest children were girls. They had to cut wood, and when I say cut wood, we had to go into the woods, cut down trees the sizes they could handle, drag them

Figure 1.2 Mattie Scott Pace, 1995

> outside of the break, and hope someone with a wagon would come along and help them get the wood to the house. If not, one would get on one end and one on the other and get the wood to the house. My job, along with my brother Joe, was to pick up chips in a number-three washtub. We would find the chips in the spots where men had cut down a large tree, which made large chips. After the wood was home, my sisters would use a crosscut saw to cut the wood to fit the stove, the heater, and the fireplace. This type of work was done on Saturdays only.[30]

On weekdays, the Scott children went to school or worked in the cotton fields. All attended church, and Sunday afternoons were reserved for games and play. The two "next oldest girls" did the house chores, which included "the cleaning of the house, washing the clothes, and cooking dinner." Although the family had sufficient food, clothing, and shelter in a standard sharecropping cabin, they lived without electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing. Scott remembered, "I had to cook for the whole family at the age of eight." Mattie Scott made the family's clothing, ordering ten- and fifteen-cent-per-yard material from a Sears-Roebuck catalog. She taught her daughters to sew on the family's treadle Singer sewing machine. The family's cash money came from the annual cotton crop, and Mattie Scott used this "settlement" to order the family's winter clothes and shoes from the Sears catalog.

The family produced their own food. Mrs. Scott had a calf and hog slaughtered every year, with the beef canned, and the pork cured and smoked. The family raised chickens and had eggs and chicken year-round. Scott and her children also kept a

garden and a "truck patch" that grew sweet potatoes, corn, and peas. "We had canned vegetables in the winter and fresh vegetables in the spring and summer, which included the greens, the beans, soup, okra, corn, beets, tomatoes, carrots, and the fruit consisted of peaches, pears, and blackberries." The family also grew peas and beans, and stored the dried beans and peas in half-gallon Br'er Rabbit molasses jars. "Through these processes, we, as children was taught survivorhood," said Juanita Scott. Mattie Scott also taught her children self-respect and pride. In the 1960s, Juanita became involved in the civil rights movement in Sunflower County, and she and her mother worked in the movement-based Head Start program.

Juanita Scott considered her mother to be a model of strength, self-respect, and "survivorship." Scott recalled that her mother moved the family off of two plantations because the "boss man, the plantation owner, would come and ask my mama where were her children, and she would ask, 'where are yours?' And that's all she would say. But we had to go to school." Scott recalled a familiar experience among African American narrators: she and her siblings walked to school, while white children rode past them in school buses—Mississippi made no provision for buses for rural black schools. Although Scott remembered the stories of violence and repression that became part of the Delta's bloody history of terrorism—like the murder of Reverend George Lee in nearby Belzoni in 1955 for registering to vote—she asserted that her mother had taught her children not to fear whites, but to do what they believed to be right. When the family heard the news of the Emmett Till lynching in 1955, and how Till's killers "came and got Emmett Till from his grandparents' house that night, Mama said, 'That would have never happened to me because they would have had to kill me through that night, because ain't no way in the world that I would stay in a house and they carry my son out.' "[31]

Juanita Scott's narrative of her childhood and family in Sunflower County of the 1940s and 1950s describes the immense discipline and hard work necessary for collective survival and achievement among sharecropping families, and the enormous strength of her mother, Mattie Scott. Among Delta narrators whose families possessed neither the strength nor the determination of Mattie Scott, or who were weakened by sickness, bad luck, or early death, stories of struggle, confusion, and luck dominate survival and adult work. Ida Mae Turner, born in 1910, in Sherard, Mississippi, had an early life dominated by insecurity, deprivation, and loss, the result of her mother's early death, and the lack of a supportive extended family that could have taken her in.

Ida Mae Turner's memories of her early life were hazy. She was born to an unmarried young woman, Bessie Stavin, who already had an older child, Eddie. Turner did not know her real father until she was 13 years old. After her mother had a third child, a baby boy, she died. "I remember them putting her in a coffin, because I didn't know what the coffin was because they tell me I would go there and talk to her." Ida Mae and her brothers then stayed with a man in the house who she thought was her father. The new baby died, and the stepfather was taken by his employer to a

new landholding. The stepfather left Ida in the community: "He didn't want me with him. I was called a bastard child, you know." And she was "bright"—more light-skinned than others in the community, and she had a speech impediment.[32]

The years that followed involved shifting about for the little girl. One family with whom she lived was "cruel": "Many days I can remember that I had to wait until the children [of the family] ate, and whatever was left, they would scrape out one plate to another, and give me." Finally, a Mrs. Whitehead took Ida Mae in. There followed other shifts to other families, and infrequent visits with a much older half-sister, Bea, a short-tempered woman who married often and fought anyone who irritated her. It was during one of her stays with Bea and her then-husband that Bea left, and Ida Mae became ill. "I took sick with a fever that caused my hair to come out," said Ida Mae. She never knew how word came to her father that she was ill and that her "sister went off and left me," but he appeared one day, and took her back to his sharecropping cabin on the Sherard plantation. Hostile and suspicious of a new stepmother, Ida Mae at first resisted her stepmother Clara's affection, but the woman won her over. "I was nasty to her, but she being a Christian woman, didn't care how nasty I was, she was always smiling. She said, 'You haven't had the right kind of training, but you're going to get it here.' . . . I was between thirteen and fourteen years old. I didn't know A from B. I didn't know Monday from Wednesday. I just didn't know." Ida Mae had never been to school.

Turner's new stepmother tutored her and taught her to read. Ida Mae also became part of a church community, and eventually led a Sunday School class in her teens. Around age 17, she left her father's house because he had threatened to whip her with a power line after hearing a rumor about her and a boy she knew. Ida Mae recalled that she told her father that the rumor was not true and that he shouldn't whip her. He told her that she must take her whipping or "hit the road." Ida left. She found another couple who took her in for awhile and tried to find work in Clarksdale. All she knew how to do at that time, she said, was "how to chop cotton," but she felt that God had looked after her due to the prayers of her stepmother;

> I didn't want to be like some of these girls that I had growed up with. They had turned out to be the Saturday night club, you know, and they had started drinking what we call "moonshine." I just didn't want to do that. And they would go to the Saturday night country ball, and they wouldn't be able to come to Sunday School and church Sunday morning. I just didn't want that. I stayed out of School for seventeen years, and [then] I went back there.[33]

As a young woman, Ida Mae married a man much older than she was, and they lived quietly until his death. Then, as a young widow some 40 years of age, she was encouraged by a Sunday School teacher to return to school so that she could teach more advanced Sunday School classes. Between her days spent chopping and picking cotton, Ida and a friend attended classes at Coahoma Agricultural High School, one

of the few public high schools open for blacks in the state. She eventually taught grade school in the church where she had first entered Sunday School. She continued to teach in Coahoma County for more than twenty years.

Memories of Exploitation and Terror

Even narrators from moderately comfortable rural families remembered the Depression years as "rough," and the system of segregation as violent and frightening. Alice Giles, whose father was a "renter," and who owned his own tools, mules, and supplies, remembered that during the 1930s and the war years, "we knew to stay in our place. We knew we had to stay in our place. That's what you call staying in your place. We knew how to act. We knew how we better act, because we didn't want to get in any trouble." Giles's use of repetition underscores the fixity of African Americans' condition under segregation. Her father had told her stories of lynchings of blacks that he had witnessed in his own lifetime. "And growing up, I mean, you just really felt that the way they [whites] saw us, that we wasn't even human."[34]

Dr. L.C. Dorsey (figure 1.3), who grew up in a sharecropping family near Drew, Mississippi, in Sunflower County, recalled asking a multitude of questions as a young girl—most of which could not be answered. "I didn't understand why people sat down and went to sleep immediately after sitting down. Like we got run out the field with a shower. A few minutes after we were out, all of the adults would be asleep, and I couldn't understand why they would be asleep. I remember asking questions about that and not understanding just chronic fatigue, where these people worked so hard they were just rundown and they were constantly tired and needing sleep. As an adult, with some understanding about the psychology and the mental burden of living in the Delta, I'm sure some of them were also depressed."[35]

Dorsey also could not understand why her family never seemed to have any money—no matter how many bales of cotton they produced each season. Dorsey's father, who could not read and write, insisted that all of his children attend school. L.C. became adept at math, and she believed that she would help the family by writing down and totaling all of the year's expenditures, and subtracting that sum from the market price that she figured their cotton would return. With cotton selling at forty cents a pound in 1952, Dorsey figured that her family should clear $2,400 after "plantation expenses" were deducted. She was devastated when her father returned from his settlement meeting with just $200. Her father said nothing. "He understood from life experiences and from having spent most of his life in the Mississippi Delta doing work, that there was absolutely nothing that the white person who he was working for was bound to honor in this whole business of keeping records." Her father knew this because he had lived through the Joe Pullen experience, which became an object lesson to any black who attempted to challenge his employer's judgment.[36]

Figure 1.3 Dr. L.C. Dorsey, 1997

The Pullen incident occurred around 1922, and was the stuff of legend when Dorsey was a child. Joe Pullen, a black World War I veteran, returned to the Delta with his service pay, determined to rent land rather than sharecrop. In return for his renting land, his landlord was supposed to keep one quarter of the proceeds. Instead, at harvest time, the owner pocketed all of the profits. Pullen then made arrangements to move in with a black farmer, which angered his white landlord, who demanded that Pullen take no property—his own or anyone else's—off the landlord's place. Pullen sent his family away from the area, but stayed at the tenant cabin guarding his stock and equipment. The planter and a "mob crew" approached the cabin to "take him out and kill him or beat him up, or put him in this place." Pullen shot several members of the white mob, and then escaped to a ditch and a swamp, and, legend had it, shot thirteen whites before one of the white men poured gasoline into the water, lit it afire, and forced Pullen out. After the whites killed him, said

Dorsey, "they tied him to a car and drug him through the streets of Drew, cut off his ears, I think, or castrated him—I can't remember which one—but it was something they did, and put it in jars in the city."[37]

Many versions of the Joe Pullen story were told in the Delta, and African Americans of Dorsey's father's generation were well aware of the consequences that awaited people who challenged the unwritten rules of the system of white supremacy and sharecropping. Although Dorsey's parents did not overtly question these rules, her father carried his rifle with him when he went to the fields, and also walked his children to school carrying his gun. And every weekend, said Dorsey, "we had to sit down and listen to Mama read the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*," well-known African American newspapers that promoted civil rights and black progress in politics, employment, and public affairs. Like many other rural African Americans, Dorsey's father "kept guns. Most houses had guns, and they had guns for the very simple reason that it was very dangerous in the Delta and your life didn't mean very much and you had no protection." Like many other families, Dorsey's parents "shopped" for good plantations, and only moved to those where landlords kept up the tenant houses, and allowed tenants to keep livestock and gardens. They avoided those places where the owner exercised absolute authority, or who was notorious for beating or even killing tenants who challenged him.[38]

McKinley Mack, born to a sharecropping family in 1946, believed that the hard work of his childhood taught him and his twelve sisters and brothers "that anything you want out of life, you've got to work for it, and to always be honest and to treat people the way you want to be treated, which I'm proud we did." His parents, he said, "taught us that everybody's created equal. My father always told us that the color of a man's skin doesn't make him a man, that you have to look beneath that, and you treat a man the way he treats you. I'm still that way today. If you respect me, I'm going to respect you. Color wasn't never no issue in our household."[39] Mack's parents insisted that all of the children finish high school in Indianola, and were even able to send four to college. The children all worked in the fields with their parents after school and during the summers.

Mack remembered hearing family stories about sharecroppers being cheated out of their earnings by landowners. Recalling his own family's experience, Mack believed that their landlord "had to be" cheating his family out of the income he made from marketing their cotton. "He had to be, because if you're doing seventy-five acres of land and you're picking—I think we picked forty-eight bales of cotton by hand one year. Then when the year was up, then he tells my dad that we just broke even for the groceries that we had gotten that year. I know that wasn't fair. I know that."[40] When McKinley Mack joined some young people who formed the nucleus of Indianola's civil rights movement in the 1960s, his parents were "scared to death. They were scared to death, because they knew the situation and things that we was going to come up against, especially my father, because he knew once I set my mind into something, I'm dedicated to that. I'm going to see it through. He was just scared to death."[41]

McKinley Mack's minister father maintained strict behavioral and work rules for his children, as did L.C. Dorsey's father. In the almost invisible hierarchy of sharecropping families, their parents maintained "good" households and families—with hardworking, studious children. Within the worlds of Delta plantations, however, "good" families coexisted with rougher plantation people because they did not feel threatened by even unruly blacks as they were by whites. Dorsey said that families such as hers "just shook our head" at the people who "got drunk or got in a fight or got cut. . . . These were the folks who did this every Saturday night." But, she said, respectable families did not fear the eruptions produced by the community's "misfits." The real fear among Delta African Americans was of the "mob crew":

> The violence was very clearly the mob crew, and it was identified as the mob crew. And the feeling that it evoked that I can remember from my earliest memories is fear. There was a tremendous amount of fear in the community and in almost every house of this faceless group of people who arrived at your house at night, on horses and in cars, when cars got available and plentiful, to drag you out and kill you for any little infraction of rules that you didn't always know about. People worried tremendously about their sons and their menfolk in their families. People worried if a white man looked at a black girl, and they tried to keep them in the background because they couldn't protect them. They couldn't protect their wives and stuff. . . . What you remember about it was fear, that there was no way to be protected. . . . It was all this fear that these people had of white folk, that they would come and get you in the middle of the night and kill you. I understood the fear so strongly that it wouldn't let them talk out loud.[42]

The "mob crew" was sometimes the Ku Klux Klan, sometimes a group of friends of an aggrieved party. Such crowds murdered Mississippi blacks for a number of reasons: allegedly for the "rape" of a white woman, or for "reckless eyeballing"—looking at a white woman the "wrong" way—or for killing a white, or for disrespecting a white adult or child, or for acquiring too much property, or for any kind of political assertion—like organizing an NAACP chapter, or attempting to vote.

White men could also violate black women and girls with impunity. Families and communities responded to these threats by developing long-distance survival systems with other African American family members and friends. Dorsey recalled that if a white man "put his eye" on a black woman or girl, the father of the young woman knew "that the structure prevented him from being able to take care of his child in a normal way. So that night they [the young woman's family] put her in a car and took her somewhere else to a relative, who understood it was their responsibility because the white man had put his eye on Mary Sue, and she wasn't safe. If they put their eye on you, there was no limit." A father who tried to protect his daughter from a white man's advances might be killed. "So when girls got that age, and if people started hanging around them and doing things, if they could, [the parents] got them away.

If they didn't have a way to do that, it was part of the thing that happened." Whereas Dorsey's generation did not see much of this predation due to the far-flung network that had been developed by Delta migrants to other regions, in her mother's generation, she recalled, "there was a lot of it, because many people didn't have as many avenues of escape as they did when we were there." Nevertheless, Dorsey's parents protected their children by keeping them "close to the house" and imposing strict rules. Dorsey's father would not allow his daughters to work in the houses of whites as domestics or babysitters "because he understood very clearly what risk that put us at." When white men came to the houses of plantation workers, men like Dorsey's father sent their wives and children inside their cabins, and dealt with the white foremen or peddlers.[43]

Far-flung networks of friends and family operated as "survivor systems" for plantation workers, said Dorsey. These systems also operated to spirit to safety young men who might have been desired by white women or girls, or who angered whites in any way. "If the white girl on the plantation started hanging around somebody's son, he was soon got out of town, because everybody understood very clearly that if she wanted to play and he didn't, he was dead. If he wanted to play and she didn't, he was dead. If they both wanted to play and they got caught, he was dead. He was dead any way it went. So he was gotten out of town. That was all part of the way people understood survival to be." Nevertheless, Dorsey knew of some instances in which white men took married black women as their mistresses, with the understanding that the woman's husband would "go hunting or fishing" when the white man came to visit his wife. In this instance, the husband was powerless to protect his wife from a white man's determination to have sex with her. Nor were black women in this situation free to resist: they had "no say-so on who is going to sleep with you, and to protest might result in your husband being killed. Your husband has no say-so." Dorsey wondered how African American couples survived this kind of violation, and how the women felt when one of their babies looked obviously like the child of a white father. "How do you not hate that kid," she asked. "And how do you not hate the man who's doing that to your family?"[44]

Some narrators recalled their families' fear of the Klan, and of other faceless people who could murder African Americans with impunity. Mary Tyler Dotson recalled an incident that followed a young black man's having been jailed for some infraction of the law. He escaped from jail, and hid out in the countryside. Dotson recalled that whites "would come by the house at night in a wagon with the old mules with pads on their feet, and you couldn't hear them walking. We'd be sitting on the porch. My Daddy would say, 'Yonder comes them old Ku Klux Klan'. Down they come. They were looking for that boy." The men never caught the young man, said Dotson, but "We were scared to sit on the porch. Mama and them were sitting out there, but we'd get up and go in the house when we saw that wagon-looking thing come with them old mules. They had cushions on their feet so you couldn't hear them walk."[45]

Dotson's oldest brother Frank—called "Sport" by his family and friends—was killed by unknown men in Jonesboro, Arkansas in 1931. He and a friend had wanted

to travel, so they left Indianola and went to St. Louis to work for awhile. The two then "hoboed" to Jonesboro, Arkansas, with their savings from St. Louis. Her brother's friend left Arkansas before Sport was due to travel and arrived at Dotson's family's house to tell them. "Sport says he's coming home. He's leaving, coming home such and such a day." But the family then learned that her brother had been killed. Someone in Jonesboro claimed that "he was out there in the round yard playing and ran into the train. He didn't have no scar or nothing but on his cheek. That's what our boss man told: Jimmy Heathman told him [Dotson's father]." Sport had been carrying cash from his earnings in St. Louis, and Mary was convinced that he was murdered for his money. Dotson's father tried to borrow a wagon to go claim his son's body, but Heathman said, " 'No. I'll advise you don't go up there, Frank. I'll advise you don't go to Arkansas.' They was going to kill my daddy if he went up there. Some of them white folks [that] did it. . . . They had done killed him and buried him." Dotson's family grieved over her brother's death. "That just hurt them so bad, and they felt like the white folk, there was something they weren't saying, because they did kill him. They had no business to kill my brother. And that was a long time before I started having love for any white folks. The little white children was out there playing with us and everything, and I said, 'Old white children, what they doing over here?' "[46]

Lynching, other forms of racial violence, and exploitation provoked predictable responses within black communities. Many African American families feared and distrusted white people. A number of narrators were trained by their families to avoid contact with whites, because they were, in one man's words, "dirty and cruel." In response, families often cultivated a sense of racial pride, self-respect, and hard work among their children, and followed the virtues of restraint, frugality, and self-help preached in churches and schools. Prophetic Christianity blunted some of blacks' more corrosive and self-destructive feelings toward whites, but a general anger, resentment, and suspicion of white folk remained strong. Researchers in the 1930s found that more than 30 percent of African Americans in Bolivar County said that they "hate[d]" white people. Moreover, African Americans outside the state considered Mississippi to be "the worst place in the entire country for Negroes."[47]

The narratives in this chapter contain many of the complex elements that mark the life stories of Delta activists and community leaders. All the narrators remembered the harsh economic conditions of the past—conditions of poverty and unremitting hard work by rural black families. But they also recalled pride in their families' survival, and anger at the exploitation practiced by plantation owners and their bosses. And they remembered an embodied condition of dread and fear: fear of white violence, "Klans," the "mob crew," and fear of whites' anger and hostility. These memories of fear underscore the powerlessness that sharecroppers and other Mississippi blacks felt under the system of segregation. And embodied memories of powerlessness and fear created in many narrators an anger at the injustices of the past, and at those who profited from the system, as well as an anger at later generations of African Americans who seemed to be released from the driven compulsion that

narrators and their families shared as they struggled to survive and maintain their dignity. Among a number of narrators, the embodied fear, the sense of physical and emotional threats, and the real dangers they endured led to physical illness, depression, and early death, or to frequent sickness and early death of family members. Some other narrators managed to develop a more tempered assessment of successor generations, in large part due to both religious beliefs and a grounded understanding that as imperfect as the Mississippi Delta was for African Americans in the 1990s, the conditions of life were far better than they had been in the segregated past.

But what, it might be asked, were the likely emotional costs of such survival and achievement? What kind of emotional stresses were produced by the hovering presence of terror, the fear of destitution, and the internalized sense of the absolute necessity of unceasing effort and discipline? How did these experiences affect children, and the adults that they became? And how did those early fears and desperate efforts shape long-term attitudes toward themselves and others?

Gerontologists have noted that individuals tend to valorize the experiences that shaped their lessons of "living and learning" when young, and we can certainly see that in Juanita Scott's proud recollections of her mother's strength, and of the early discipline of hard work that enabled the family to survive the sharecropping experience with plenty of food.[48] Also evident is the pride that she took in her family's record of schooling and education—particularly remarkable when one realizes that these achievements were accomplished at a time when relatively few African Americans in the Delta finished high school. We can also see the evident pride in upbringing in McKinley Mack's testimony, and in L.C. Dorsey's memory of her father's strength and determination that his children receive an education.

The language of these narratives reveals the mental, emotional, and spiritual costs of the struggle to survive. Corrine Bankhead recalled how her husband "wasn't ever anymore good, he never was more no good" after having been arrested in Arkansas, and been stripped of his property. In his last years, he was, she said, "sort of broken down, too," and "just discouraged and weakened by losing everything." L.C. Dorsey's description of adult sharecroppers and day laborers being "constantly tired" and "needing sleep" from the conditions of their work and lives also underscores the physical pressures of survival.

African American farm laborers' lives were also diminished by the knowledge that whites considered them to be less than human, and, in one case, worth less than a planter's dogs. Alice Giles remarked, "the way they saw us, we wasn't even human." Robert Cableton recalled that his mother fed her children the neckbones left by the planter for his dog because she believed "we were more greater than the dog." And L.C. Dorsey recalled that her father expected to be cheated out of his earnings because "there was absolutely nothing that the white person he was working for was bound to honor in this whole business of keeping records."

Contesting this system invited terror and violence—a kind of totalizing violence that could be arbitrary, cruel, and inhumane. Dorsey's father had been schooled to

expect exploitation by the story of Joe Pullen—which ended with Pullen's murder and dismemberment—by his symbolic erasure and transformation into a hunting trophy, with body parts displayed in town. Dorsey recalled fears of the "mob crew," and the conviction that "there was no way to be protected." This fear was so deep and pervasive that it robbed adults of speech: "I understood the fear so strongly that it wouldn't let them talk out loud." McKinley Mack's parents were "scared to death" when he joined young SNCC workers to challenge segregation in Indianola. And Mary Tyler Dotson recalled the ominous sounds of mules' padded feet when the Klan went looking for a young black male: her family was afraid to remain on the porch, because they understood that whites might target anyone in their search for an offender. And Dotson's brother Sport was himself erased, murdered, and his family left without a body to honor and bury. This language speaks of trauma, of terror, of silence, and of knowing that the world offered no sanctuary for African Americans unlucky enough to get caught on the wrong side of segregation's elaborate code.

If white supremacy itself threatened terror, almost equally cruel suffering might be imposed on deserted mothers or other unprotected women. Corrine Bankhead endured mistreatment by two men after her husband died, and Robert Cableton's deserted mother struggled against poverty, hunger, and ill-treatment as a sharecropper. Juanita Scott's formidable mother organized her family with an awesome precision that provided a bounty of food despite the rigors of sharecropping. Ida Mae Turner came to adolescence ignorant and adversarial because she was abandoned after her mother's death, and mistreated by a succession of people. Deserted, orphaned, or impaired women could expect no protection in a system in which a family was an economic resource, and in which marriages and support were easily shattered. Even women within stable families could expect harassment and mistreatment from white men. As L.C. Dorsey recalled, "If they put their eye on you, there was no limit," because "you had no say-so on who is going to sleep with you."

The gendered implications of these stories are clear: black men could expect to be hunted, killed, burned, or dismembered as *things*, as hunting trophies, if they crossed whites. African American women could be raped, exploited, and abused as *things* by white men if they wanted to do so. But black women were also extremely vulnerable to the losses inflicted by the death of a spouse or by desertion by a mate. Without the support of a man or an extended family, a woman with children might go hungry, become destitute, or be forced to enter a common-law marriage with someone who could provide the labor needed for survival.

Our narrators survived this system, often through the heroic efforts of family members. The conditions of their survival sometimes imposed very real spiritual and emotional costs. Some narrators valorized the discipline and values that their parents had exhibited in their drive to feed and educate their children. This is a very common tendency, especially among individuals who have flourished despite hardship and deprivation.[49] This valorization exacts a price, however. Very few human beings in the narrator's everyday life as an adult can equal the strength, will, and self-sacrifice

exhibited by those in previous generations who achieved family stability and survival in the terrible systems of sharecropping and segregation. Thus, some narrators' veneration of their parents and communities handicapped their ability to see the black Delta communities of the 1970s through the 1990s on their own terms.

Many of our narrators had internalized their own parents' extravagant hopes for their children's education and improvement. As adults, these narrators attached similar hopes for the social salvation and transformation of their communities through movement activism. When political activism and the transformative movement vision did not yield a promised land, a number of leaders felt betrayed. Behind them stood the ancestors and parents: strong, upright, and determined. Few contemporary young women and men could measure up to this ideal of relentless sacrifice and effort. And the complexity of their own life options would not be sufficiently appreciated by many older leaders. The young people of the 1990s could not reasonably be compared to the heroic parents and ancestors of the sharecropping past, because those ancestors had been exceptional people in their own lives. And no matter how much Americans desire to generalize mobility and success from the individual case of the Booker T. Washington, the Malcolm X, or the Mary McLeod Bethune, such desires are doomed to be thwarted. Individual ambition, opportunities, luck, and health cannot be generalized to populations. The heroic past, whether of a family or a community, is an insufficient model for an unknown future.[50]

TWO

Change and Movement Among the Poor

If the New Deal reforms did not significantly improve the lives of the sharecropping and tenant farming families in Mississippi, World War II changed the Mississippi Delta in contradictory ways. Wealthy planters consolidated their hold on local and state power, and their position was strengthened by continuing agricultural price supports from the federal government. The high wages of war industries had drawn many African Americans to urban areas in the North, West, and South, and raised the wages of remaining sharecroppers and tenants in the cotton-growing counties. The influx of young men into the segregated military, however, raised aspirations among many soldiers and veterans in the 1940s. Returning black veterans would form a core of local leadership in many community civil rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s. As after World War I, returning black veterans found a hostile reception from small-town Southern whites, who seemed threatened by the appearance of an African American man in a military uniform. But the extreme destruction and ravages of the war years had also created a heightened sense of the injustice of racism among returning veterans who were all too aware that they were fighting for freedoms that they did not have as black soldiers and citizens. As the writer James Baldwin noted in 1963, many black Americans were not surprised by the Nazis' extermination of Jews and other minorities during the Holocaust, because in 1945 black Americans had lived as a community besieged and wary for nearly three hundred years.[1]

The social movement that blossomed in the Delta of the 1960s was a product of the complex national and international changes brought by World War II, and by continuing black migration out of the region as agricultural modernization increased. In the late 1940s, black veterans like NAACP leader Medgar Evers organized groups of blacks to register to vote, but found armed whites blocking any

attempt in numerous polling places throughout the state. Still, new chapters of the NAACP were organized or revived in many black communities in Mississippi. In Indianola, the effort was led by black professionals such as physician Clinton Battle and Bob Love, a World War II infantry veteran. Yet these chapters were quickly harassed and their members targeted after the *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision was handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. This decision, which declared public school segregation unconstitutional, was seen as an intolerable assault by many white Southerners who had believed the institution of white supremacy to be divinely ordained and necessary for the "way of life" of even working-class whites. In Mississippi and elsewhere, state legislatures and local white elites swung into a campaign of "Massive Resistance" to the *Brown* decision and vowed to fight federal "interference" with all legal (and extralegal) resources and institutions available to white communities. Sunflower County was the founding home of the White Citizens' Councils, eventually a statewide and South-wide organization dedicated to preserving segregation and white supremacy by "legal" means. Council leaders carefully distinguished themselves from the lower-class vigilantes of the Ku Klux Klan, whose preferred method of intimidation against individual African Americans and their communities was the "mob crew's" brand of grisly violence. Yet, as studies of lynching have indicated, even the most barbaric "spectacle lynchings," which involved torture, mutilation, and the immolation of the suspect, were usually sanctioned by the "best people" in any white community—the lawyers, judges, and economic elites. In Indianola, whites harassed the members of the NAACP between 1955 and 1958, when Clinton Battle, its leader, was forced to leave the county.[2]

The economic elites who organized the White Citizens' Councils on a statewide basis helped to create an almost hysterical atmosphere of fear among whites, which, in turn, was receptive to a vitriolic and threatening rhetoric that urged all whites to defend their homes, communities, and state against the twin evils of racial integration and communism. Chief among the horrors that the White Citizens Councils would help to protect white Mississippians against was "mongrelization," the mixed-race offspring of interracial marriages, which were luridly cast in terms of black males lusting after white women. This perceived threat had long been a staple in pro-lynching white rhetoric, but it was now employed as a massive justification for the use of state funds to resist the threat of school desegregation by launching a campaign of legislative defiance of the federal government, and a campaign of intimidation, economic reprisals, and murder against black activists.[3]

Many whites accepted the segregationists' arguments, and were convinced that racial integration was part of a communist plot to undermine the integrity and safety of white Americans. This linkage of racism and anticommunism was of recent origin in the South, and reflected Southern white elites' hostility to black activism, organized labor, and immigrants. Depression-era union campaigns, New Deal labor reforms, and the aspirations of sharecroppers who joined the Southern Tenant

Farmers' Union (STFU) and the Communist Party-backed Sharecroppers' Union (SU) fused these threats for wealthy Southern whites. By the 1950s and 1960s, white conservatives characterized the political efforts of the integrationist NAACP as part of a "communist conspiracy" to "mongrelize" America through "race mixing."[4]

The rhetoric that conflated communism, African American aspirations, and racial liberalism had predictable results. In the summer of 1965, Dorothy Height, the head of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) saw the results of this conditioning. In the early 1960s, the NCNW had launched several innovative interracial programs in Mississippi. On the basis of the organization's success, the director of the education department at the University of Mississippi asked Dorothy Height to teach groups of public school teachers and administrators how they might prepare for the inevitability of school desegregation—since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had mandated changes in the segregated systems. Height learned a great deal from the meetings. "I was astonished . . . that when I discussed the report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and its recommendations about school desegregation, the white people in the class, all educators, were convinced that I was reading from a Communist document. They could not believe that anyone in the United States of America could speak 'officially' in such terms."[5]

During the 1950s, repression tightened against signs of African American organizing and self-assertion in the Delta. In 1955, the internationally famous murder of Chicago teenager Emmett Till took place in nearby Money, Mississippi. And in Belzoni, in neighboring Humphreys County, Reverend George Lee, an African American Baptist minister, was murdered after he had registered to vote. Indianola's black middle class, composed mostly of schoolteachers and a few professionals, was terrified of violent reprisals by local whites.

Many black churches (figure 2.1) were loathe to get involved in any civil rights activities because their mortgages were held by local banks, which could quickly foreclose the loan on any property that seemed to support civil rights activities. Organized civil rights activities did not take hold in Indianola until the early 1960s, when two Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field organizers began making forays into the town. A larger group of SNCC organizers settled in Indianola during the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, and a number of local people joined the organizing efforts.[6]

In the 1990s, thirty years after the movement, narrators voiced painful and proud memories of their movement years. Many also expressed a sense of grief and despair for conditions in their communities in the 1990s, years when the African American population of the Delta still featured high rates of poverty, violent crime, and death from conditions exacerbated by stress and poverty. Their narratives convey the terrible struggles that individuals made against the soul-killing structural violence of oppression and early poverty. They also attest to the lifelong imprint that such conditions leave upon even successful lives.[7]

Figure 2.1 Rural Church, Delta

The Stories

McKinley Mack recalled the genesis of his activism. He had been attending "some meetings" in the county in 1962, when an incident occurred, which compelled him to act. When his parents had moved from the country into Indianola, Mack had found part-time work bagging groceries at a local store. The store had two water fountains, one labeled "white," and one "colored." The grocery also had segregated rest rooms—two for women, two for men. One day Mack took a cup, and got water from the "white" fountain. The man in charge fired him.

> He fired me. He fired me. He fired me for that. And it dawned on me then that there was a lot of injustice being done at that time. . . . At the time we had a Freedom Hall, and I went down there, and I got to talking with some of the guys down there, and they told me, you know, sat down and talked to me and stuff, because I was very upset. And they sat down and started talking to me, and said, "Well, why don't you come on and help us change it?" And that's when I got into the Civil Rights Movement, right then, on that day.[8]

When SNCC organizers came to Indianola in 1964, Mack became involved in voter registration, and in protests against municipal segregation. He remembered SNCC as "real nice. I never saw an organization like that before. What made me feel

so comfortable in there, we was all in the same boat. We were looking for something. It was like we were looking for something to do, and the thing to do was to change." The interracial SNCC teams aroused curiosity and hostility from whites in 1964. Mack recalled walking to the post office with a young white woman, a SNCC Freedom Summer volunteer. "We went uptown to get the mail, went to the post office, and we saw people coming out of the stores and stuff." As the young people walked back to the SNCC office, Mack said, "Oh, God, you wouldn't believe it. People had literally just come out of their stores and standing on the sidewalks, you know. Just looking. It was because it was something that they'd never seen before. . . . She [the white activist] was scared to death. I was scared, but I wouldn't let her know it."[9] Later, said Mack, "I thought about it and I was really scared. I said, 'Look, man, people have got killed just for whistling at [white] people, and here you go out there walking, you know.' But we got along real good in the movement, a big laugh all the time. I guess we was laughing, really to keep from getting scared. Nobody wouldn't let one know that the other one was scared."[10]

Mack and his colleagues, Otis Brown and Linda Jenkins, all from Indianola, tested restaurants and public facilities in Indianola throughout 1964 and 1965. He recalled that the local police ritually picked them up many Friday evenings, jailed them for the weekend, and let them out on Monday morning. But police chiefs and local police officers made sure that the young people were not harmed or attacked by other inmates—Mack believed that they were afraid that a Klan murder like the highly publicized killing of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney might happen in Indianola. So the local authorities made efforts to keep the abuse of the workers under their control. The local NAACP had also become reactivated in those years, under the leadership of Nelson Dotson, a television repairman who had earlier married Mary Tyler. Mack admired Nelson Dotson:

> That man wasn't afraid of anything. . . . He was a really well-educated man. He didn't have that much college education, but the [SNCC] kids from out of town, that was here to do voter registration, they sat down and they taught him. That's how he got the knowledge that he had. He would go up against the City Council, anybody; it didn't make no difference.[11]

The police and segregationist whites resisted integration of public facilities. After being turned away from the public library when they requested library cards, Mack and some SNCC colleagues called local SNCC organizer John Harris, and organized a march on the facility for the next day. "We had about a hundred kids and went over there. Oh, man, it was something. Beat us with night sticks and kicked us. Because, you know, we had already been taught and we taught everybody the defense fold you get into when you was approached. Just lucky wasn't nobody injured real bad."[12]

Mack believed that some of the leading white people in Indianola secretly backed the movement and supported voting rights and civil right for Indianola's

African Americans. Some donated money or sent groceries to the young people, but silently, however, out of fear that they would be targeted for the same ostracism and violence that the Citizens' Councils and Klan had successfully used against other white Southerners who had dissented from the segregationist ideology and its violent methods of social control. The power of the segregationists in the white community was demonstrated by threats and attacks that local white men made against activists and their families. "At that time, my dad and my brother that's next to me would have to sit up all night long, for fear of the house being bombed." From the screened-in front porch, the two men watched the street that ran past their house. Twice carloads of white men came to bomb the Macks' house, only to be frightened away when his father, armed with a shotgun, shouted, "I've got this gun. I'm going to blow your head off, because everybody is going to know who you is." Although Mack accepted the risks of retaliation against himself as a possible cost of doing movement work, the harassment and targeting of his family members plagued him. "I hated putting my parents and them through that. At the time, I didn't know what they were going through, because when I left in the morning, they didn't know whether they'd see me in the afternoon or when." But his parents, although frightened, remained supportive of his activism.[13]

Mack believed that Indianola police moderated their responses to demonstrators due to the orders of the community's white leadership. But, he asserted, no moderating influences existed on the big plantations "in the rural," where often the landowner's word was law. Many planters resisted any "interference" with their workers, and threatened civil rights organizers who tried to register voters. These men also hated any federal assistance to poor blacks, and they were especially hostile to any economic help given to rural sharecroppers. Commodity foods—available to the poor through federally funded programs—undermined the tight grip that planters and their commissaries tried to maintain over black tenants. One notorious opponent of federal assistance to the black rural poor was Senator James O. Eastland, who owned a 3,000-acre plantation in Doddsville, Mississippi, above Ruleville in Sunflower County. Eastland opposed the Civil Rights Act that Congress passed in 1964 and also fought the food stamp provision of the War on Poverty program when it was debated in 1964. Eastland claimed that blacks on his lands "got plenty of money," but a 1957 article claimed that a "sharecropping family of four working at least twelve hours a day on the Eastland plantation could expect to earn a maximum of three cents an hour."[14] When food stamps initially came to the Delta via War on Poverty programs, recipients initially were required to pay for them. Such payment was impossible for many of the poorest sharecroppers, who often saw no cash income for their labor. Many sharecroppers thus had to borrow money from their landowners in order to purchase food stamps. Eastland "reportedly charged 'interest' on such loans [for food stamps] at 'two bits on the dollar,' " according to Cobb. In 1966, Eastland had "received $168,524 in price support and acreage reduction payments, and then sold the choice cotton he did produce for an estimated $280,000."

Throughout the mid-1960s and late 1960s, some 65 percent of Sunflower County's population worked and lived in poverty.[15] The enforced poverty of the tenants exaggerated the economic and political power of planters like Eastland.

Many activists from the Delta reported frightening encounters with planters and their foremen when they tried to persuade sharecroppers to register to vote. During one voter-registration drive in the mid-1960s, McKinley Mack and several colleagues drove onto Eastland's plantation to talk sharecroppers into coming to town and registering to vote. Mack remembered that

> We pull up to this house and got out and started to do the registration, and this one lady that was living at the house where we stopped, she said, "I'm going to tell y'all, y'all better go. Here come"—and I can't think of the man's name now—"and he's going to kill y'all if he catches y'all up here." And this truck was coming down this dirt road with dust flying, I'll bet you, a mile high in the air. The fear that everybody could get out in time and get back uptown to safety and get away, that's what mostly scared me. And that man was protected by the law of Senator Eastland. Now, if you was out there on that plantation, its trespassing. So anything could happen and nothing be done about it. That's one of the scariest times I had.[16]

Cora Fleming was another Indianola activist who was subjected to intimidation and danger due to her organizing work. Fleming had been raised in the Mississippi Delta, and recalled times of hunger and scarcity in her farming childhood. Her parents were "hill people," African Americans who had maintained a spirit of independence and self-reliance in their long history of trying to scrape a living from the soils in Mississippi's hill country. They'd moved to the Delta, as had many hill people, in search of richer farmlands in the first decades of the twentieth century. Fleming remembered her parents as strong people who pushed their children to achieve. Her mother told her daughters, "Whatever you do, be the best." Said Fleming, "That's what my Daddy always told us, too: 'Whatever you be in life, be the best.' My mother said the same thing, 'Be a woman. Don't be no pushover for anybody.' "[17]

Fleming married, and moved with her husband to Chicago and then to Detroit as a young woman. In the north, she began to read the newspapers, and to become informed about national and world events. In early 1961, she moved back to Indianola, bought a house for her parents, and began working at a cotton compress in town. After her mother suffered a stroke, Fleming also helped to care for her. One day in 1964, as she sat with her mother on the porch, they saw "some civil rights folks coming down the street, different races, all of them mixed up together. That was unusual around here." The young people were canvassing the neighborhood in an attempt to get people to come to a mass meeting and join in voter registration efforts. "My mother looked at them, she said, 'You know, I've worked all my life for nothing.' And she said, 'You go to church. When you get sick and down, they don't know you.' She said, 'It's time now for a change to come about, and its time for y'all to take an

active role in it." Fleming went to her first meeting that evening at the Baptist School, a building owned by several black congregations in town. At that meeting, she recalled, she made a speech. She told the agricultural workers

> You've been in the fields all your days. Now you're suffering for fifteen dollars a week. I'm working for the same thing. I made a hundred dollars a week in Chicago, and now you're making fifteen dollars a week. And what can you do with fifteen dollars a week? Nothing.[18]

Reflecting later on the meeting, Fleming remembered the families in the room: "children in bare feet, hungry half the time, but that was the best they could do. And a lot of people who were going to the meeting, I know, didn't even know the changes that were taking place. A lot of them scared, but they went anyway. Lost their jobs. My sister lost her job—Mildred." Fleming became part of a core of local activists who led community organizing efforts in Indianola, and she later helped to organize the first Head Start projects in the area as a part of movement activities. She worked closely with Oscar and Alice Giles, a couple who owned a small store, and with Thelma Mack, Lillian Hampton, Juanita Scott, and her mother Mattie Scott Pace, and with Hershel Pace, Mattie Scott's husband. Also involved was Bernice White, a woman who taught school in Greenville and who was therefore protected from the harassment that the Citizens' Councils visited on local teachers who took part in the movement. Through movement organizing, Fleming also came to know Mae Bertha Carter from Drew, in northern Sunflower County, and the legendary grassroots leader Fannie Lou Hamer of nearby Ruleville. The work of organizing in the Delta was difficult, she said, because many African Americans were afraid of whites. "And they're still afraid. A lot of them are still afraid," she said in 1995.[19]

Sunflower County's black people had good reasons to be afraid of white retaliation. After the climactic Freedom Summer of 1964, local whites retaliated by shooting into houses, fire-bombing the home and store of Oscar and Alice Giles, burning the home of activist Irene Magruder, and firebombing the Baptist school, which had become the headquarters for movement activity. And the Citizens' Councils exerted pressure through local banks and businesses to foreclose loans on the houses, businesses, and security of individual black leaders.[20]

Like Mack and many other activists, Cora Fleming experienced harassment and violence. One night, she was chased by an eighteen-wheel truck that tried to run her car off the road after a meeting in Bolivar County. "That man made me run," she remembered. "I drove that car on empty. The Lord brought me home. I intended to stop in Shaw and get some gas, but that truck was so hot behind, I couldn't stop, so I kept on driving. The car was on empty, about. I drove that car home. Oh, Lord, I don't know how I made it here. I don't know how I made it. That curve, you know, coming from Cleveland. I was driving 95 and 100 on those curves. It [The truck] chased me over to Indianola to Highway 49 out here, 82. Got home."[21]

On another night, police stopped her car and made her "walk the chalk line" to prove that she wasn't drunk. Night riders shot into her house three times. Fleming learned to live in fear of terrorism and reprisals. "You can't sleep at night, try to be on watch for your life at night, for your family," she explained. "When you do this kind of stuff, it affects other people in your family. Because when I was doing this kind of work, my brother and all of them were here. Their family was here. My father lived right there at the time. I was doing the work, but I had to fear for them, too." The fear, she said, "took its toll on me in later years. A lot of personal fear kind of balled up in me. In the long run, it kind of got the best of me."[22]

In the short run, she admitted, the fear and reprisals caused her to hate white folk "with a passion. But I later on learned that everybody wasn't the same, and I learned that you can't get anywhere by hating people anyway. We've got to meet on some common ground somewhere. I can dislike your ways but love you the same."

Mary Tyler Dotson had several small children when her husband was seriously involved in NAACP work in the 1960s. One night, an intruder rattled a door, and refused to answer her questions as to who he was. Dotson took the gun she kept in the house and shot twice through the screen door. She recalled, "Off that porch he went, off the end of the porch, and didn't nobody else come try to fool with me." Although blind, Mary Dotson helped her husband in his political work, calling voters to urge them to participate in local elections, and doing service work in the black community of Indianola. The two received threatening phone calls, including anonymous calls that warned the Dotsons that their house would be burned, as had several other buildings in 1965. During one of these threats, Mrs. Dotson told her caller, "One thing about it, you all got some pretty white women over there and some pretty white houses. This house go down, all them damn houses going down over there." She reflected, "They couldn't scare me. They tried their best to scare me."[23]

Alice Giles's family had prized learning. Her father insisted that his children get an education, and even sent Alice to one year at Alcorn College when she was a teenager. But her mother died in 1941, which cut short her education. Her father needed her at home to work at the farm, cook, and look after her younger siblings and the nephew who lived with the family. In 1942, she married Oscar Giles, whose father owned a forty-acre farm in the country. The couple settled in with Oscar Giles's father, and made a cotton crop. In 1946, the couple moved into Indianola. Oscar Giles wanted to open a little store in the black area. Her husband, Alice Giles recalled in 1995, "was uneducated, but he had very good common sense. . . . He worked hard and was a saving man, and he believed in always striving to try to have something."[24]

Oscar Giles believed that the couple could build a good business from a store because nearby Indianola Colored School had no lunchroom, and offered no lunches or food to the students. The Giles couple made the front room of their house into a store, and she made sandwiches, donuts, and soft drinks to sell to the students. Workers from a nearby plantation also came by during breaks to buy soft drinks,

sausages, and wieners. The workers always wanted credit, she recalled, because they earned only a dollar a day "from sunup to sundown" in the 1940s.

The Giles began attending meetings with the SNCC volunteers and local teenagers in 1964. Alice Giles recalled that her husband "wasn't satisfied, because he was paying taxes and paying polling taxes, and he always wanted to vote, he always wanted to be a part, you know, he wanted his rights. We felt that was our rights as a citizen, and that's the reason" the couple became politically involved—that, "and people being mistreated and not treated fair." The Giles were also angered because their teenaged children could not find summer jobs other than in the cotton fields. Only young white women had the desirable jobs clerking in local stores. The couple became involved in the local movement, and Oscar Giles went to Atlantic City with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's challenge to the segregated Mississippi state Democratic Party in the summer of 1964. This action, among others, angered many local whites, Giles recalled in a 1995 interview. Alice Giles became involved in local organizing of a community-based Head Start program in 1965, after organizers learned that War on Poverty funds would be available to local communities.

The War on Poverty and the Grassroots Level

In 1964 and 1965, President Lyndon Johnson's ambitious War on Poverty programs were launched on a national level. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) promoted the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in initiatives that would serve their communities—like the Community Action Programs (CAPs) and Head Start. The latter was an early and important OEO program which was to provide poor children with two meals a day, medical services, and instruction and socialization that prepared them for the first grade. In 1965, Alice Giles began working with Cora Fleming and other activists in Sunflower County to develop local Head Start centers. Federal poverty administrators worked through the Delta Ministry and other activist leaders to organize the initial program, which served some 6,000 children in eighty-four centers in the state.[25]

Federal funding was awarded to the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), which oversaw and funded local groups such as the Associated Communities of Sunflower County (ACSC) and the Associated Communities of Bolivar County (ACBC). Fleming, Giles, and other Sunflower activists were part of a staff that recruited poor children for the program, and involved the children's parents in their learning. Many Head Start staff also enlisted the parents to become registered voters, and to participate in the political process through the movement.[26]

Since Head Start employed its teachers and teachers' aids for pay between $50 and $60 a week in the mid-1960s—far better wages than the $3 a day earned by agricultural workers or domestics—many white employers opposed the federal program. And in Mississippi, Head Start did serve an overwhelmingly black population of preschoolers, and employed many local activists in teaching and other staff positions. Many Mississippi whites saw Head Start as dangerous and subversive, because

CDGM activists encouraged class-based political activism among poor blacks. Head Start employees pushed voter registration, and taught black history and black pride with methods developed in SNCC's Freedom Schools in the summer of 1964. This instruction was, needless to say, contrary to everything segregationists believed that African Americans should learn.[27]

The local Head Start programs operated under CDGM employed many people who had participated in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), and in the party's challenge to the segregated state Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. In recruiting these activists from poor communities, CDGM administrators believed that they were fulfilling the OEO's initial mandate to provide "maximum feasible participation" of the poor. However, the MFDP challenge to the state's segregationist Democratic Party and to the national party itself had radicalized many grassroots activists, and heightened their awareness of the essential class differences between their interests and the politics of middle-class MFDP members like Aaron Henry. For these activists, Head Start became a vehicle of ongoing community organization, voter registration, and political patronage. In some counties, NAACP members complained that they were excluded from hiring by local Head Start boards.[28] And in Delta Counties, where the mechanization of agriculture had rendered thousands of African American farm laborers superfluous to the local economy, Head Start and other War on Poverty programs became highly desirable sources of funding and employment for blacks and whites. In 1966 alone, Head Start accounted for an estimated 10 percent of all new employment in the state. Control over War on Poverty monies became hotly contested in Mississippi and in the nation at large, as big-city mayors frequently became resentful of the influx of federal funds that supported competing interest groups in their own communities.

In 1965, powerful state senators James O. Eastland and John Stennis launched attacks on CDGM and Head Start, alleging financial mismanagement and incompetence. CDGM, particularly, drew fire because of the MFDP and SNCC-like politics promoted by many on its payroll. Moderate whites and middle-class African Americans like the respected Aaron Henry of Coahoma County feared that the state's segregationist leaders were going to eliminate or successfully block the dispensation of War on Poverty funds to the state's needy communities. They responded to the attacks on CDGM by organizing Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP), which they hoped would replace CDGM as the recipient of OEO funds for Head Start. With the War on Poverty under heavy attack, OEO awarded MAP the majority of funds designated for Mississippi, and MAP became part of the CAPs of the War on Poverty. While CDGM continued to receive some funding for several years afterward, all Head Start agencies in the state were eventually placed under MAP governance, with increasingly "restrictive guidelines" that increased the educational and professional requirements for project employees.[29]

The initial response of many CDGM employees, especially those who had been involved with the grassroots campaigns of the Freedom Democratic Party, was a sense

of rage and hostility toward the middle-class African Americans and whites who sat on the CAP boards throughout the state. These boards were selected by local county boards of supervisors, and included some conservative whites who had no interest in empowering poor African Americans. Middle-class blacks who served on the boards were often accused of doing the bidding of the local white "power structure," and of being latecomers to the struggle for African American freedom and betterment. Resentments flared in the late 1960s and 1970s, and remained as bitter memories among some activists in later years.

The alliance of moderate whites and middle-class blacks that had formed MAP and had wrested control of Head Start from grassroots organizers became the basis for a revived, integrated state Democratic Party—the Loyal Democrats—in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Loyal Democrats replaced the segregated "lily-white" Mississippi Democratic delegation at the national Democratic convention in Chicago in 1968. This event sent many conservative whites into a resurgent Republican Party in the South. The Loyal Democrats welcomed federal monies into the state, and considered the large black voting population of the 1970s and beyond as a necessary and valued constituency. At local levels, biracial coalitions of moderate whites and middle-class blacks became the governing core of many county administrations.

Local Activism, Local Dangers

If direct action demonstrations and initial voter registration drives in African American communities provoked economic reprisals and vigilante violence among segregationist whites, continued movement activism and Head Start organizing drew similar sporadic outbursts of violence in some communities. Sunflower activists Alice Giles, Cora Fleming, and Mary Tyler Dotson recalled the middle years of the 1960s as frightening and dangerous. Activists found that their homes and even extended families became targets for shootings, bombings, and threats.

Alice Giles remembered that the movement years were "frightening, frightening, frightening, frightening." The couple got hate calls and threats, and, in May 1965, men bombed their store. The bombing occurred shortly after the couple had received a large shipment of food from Northern sympathizers to help feed the poor in the surrounding county. At four o'clock on a May morning, two homemade bombs crashed into the Giles' front room, and flames engulfed the store. As neighbors brought hoses to try to put out the fire, Alice Giles tried to call the fire department. But her husband said, "Honey, don't call no fire truck. They're not coming. They're not coming, don't call them." Recalling the morning, Giles said, "I knew they wasn't coming. They was all in it. They was all in it. They knew they wasn't coming. . . . They knew it was going to happen. The insurance even canceled our insurance. They had already canceled it. They canceled our insurance."[30]

Giles believed that the bombing was in retaliation for their involvement in the movement. "They just didn't want you to work in the Freedom Movement," she said.

"We were trying to get freedom. We couldn't use the library. Our kids couldn't use the library. They couldn't get jobs. I just left the courthouse a few minutes ago, and I took a swallow of water out of the fountain. We couldn't drink water there. It said up there 'white only.' Wouldn't you want to try and better yourself?"[31]

After the fire, the Giles rebuilt their store. People in the community gave them some funds to help, and the couple continued their involvement in political activities and in Head Start.[32] Giles believed that the program that she worked with under CDGM helped the children and "the payroll helped the parents," and being involved with the program "made a lot of people more active and wanted to do something in the community." Giles saw Head Start as an important part of community education. Staff members were "teaching people their rights." She said that in the mid-1960s, "It was just a different feeling, a different movement." After MAP became the recipient of OEO funds, Giles and her colleague Cora Fleming stopped working with Head Start. "See, the power structure heads it. They're over it." And neither Giles nor Fleming wanted to work with the "power structure."[33]

L.C. Dorsey's father had insisted that all of his children receive an education. "Independence to him meant education. He said, 'If you get an education, you don't have to stoop,' and we couldn't understand what stooping was. And he was worried that we would become strumpets without an education, and I sure didn't know what a strumpet was, but the way he said it, I knew it wasn't good," said Dorsey. "I found out as an adult he meant you didn't have to be dependent on a man and you didn't have to take what a man did. You could go out and take care of yourself. And he did instill that in us."[34]

Dorsey's father was strict, and she married at age 17—short of her high school degree—in part to get away from his rules. She and her husband Hillary started having children, and she worked in the fields around the demands of her pregnancies. She recalled that in the early 1960s in Sunflower County, Mae Bertha Carter and her husband Matthew, sharecroppers and NAACP activists from nearby Drew, came to her mother's house at night:

> They would go to Cleveland to meetings that Amzie Moore was having with the NAACP to talk about how our plight in the Delta was not going to change until we got the power to vote. That was the whole business. And that we needed to understand that was something that needed to be done. . . . Matthew had a green truck, a hunter green truck. He and Mae Bertha went to all those meetings in Cleveland and they would get the information, and their job was to go back out on the plantations, out there where they lived, to people's houses, and talk to them about the NAACP and sign people up for NAACP memberships and everything. It was so dangerous. They would drive down those turn roads, which was unpaved dirt roads, with their lights out, and they did that because if folks saw them going around that time of night, they would tell the white folks and they would find out what they were doing and probably hurt them or something.[35]

Dorsey had vivid memories of the evenings when Mae Bertha and Matthew came to visit. "I remember being on the porch. There were no air-conditioners, there were no fans, so at night you sat on the porch, where there was a little breeze blowing where you could be cool before you went to bed. I'd be sitting on the porch, and here come this truck down the road, where Mae Bertha and them had been going to a meeting and they were coming to tell people what was going on and let them know what they needed to be doing. This was my first awareness that something could happen that you could do something about."[36]

By 1964, L.C. and her husband had five of their seven children, and the family moved to Shelby in Bolivar County, where Hillary had a job. L.C. worked in the cotton fields until a difficult pregnancy forced her to quit field work. Afterward, she tried to find a job in Shelby, but could not find anything other than employment as a maid—work that would have required her to attend to a white family from breakfast to supper, with no time for her own children and family. Her husband Hillary agreed that she should not go to work as a maid or cook for whites, and the family tried to live on his salary. When the movement and voter registration workers came to Shelby, L.C. began to work with them in the black community. Two events took place at this time that helped to shape the course of her subsequent life. Both events had to do with feelings of powerlessness. In one instance, she saw the consequences of her economic dependence on her husband Hillary. In another moment, she confronted the fact of plantation dominance in her own life, and in the lives of other tenants.

L.C. had already begun to do volunteer work for the movement in 1964, when she realized the price of her total economic dependence upon her husband Hillary. The family, she recalled, had just enough money to buy food to last for a week, and would wait after lunch on Saturdays for Hillary to come home with his paycheck. When her husband did not come home with his check on Saturday—which happened occasionally—L.C. felt that she could do nothing to feed her children. She'd been exposed to movement rhetoric that urged women to support black men, so she felt that she could not go to a neighbor's house and ask for food or for some cash. The couple had no credit at local stores, nor any savings. And neither food stamps nor commodities were available. Dorsey recalled having to

> sit and wait and wait for the sun to go down for this man to come home with some money so you can get food for your children, and wind up until it's night and then going to bed, and still no money, no food, no nothing for your children. And to have your children cry themselves to sleep because they're hungry, and, even more painful, to have your oldest child, Cynthia, try not to let you hear her crying because she's supposed to be a big girl. And all of us are there hungry, with nothing in the house to eat, no meal, no bread, no nothing that you can fix for your folks to eat.[37]

A resolution came out of those nights. "I promised myself that I would never go through that again, and I realized that I had come full circle to what my father didn't

ever want me to come to." Her father had worried about women's dependence in plantation culture. But even though L.C. then lived in a town, with a husband who worked, she had become completely dependent economically—because she was not working. "And that never happened again. I promised that would never happen. If I had to go rob a store, it would never happen again. And it never happened again." In 1965, she returned to work in the cotton fields to supplement her husband's salary.

L.C. Dorsey's second awakening occurred when she began working with the Delta Ministry projects and visited plantation quarters near Cleveland, Mississippi, to recruit plantation workers to register to vote. One day, a plantation owner drove home the inequities of power that existed within the economic and political system.

Dorsey had ventured on to a Bolivar County plantation with another registration worker and had begun talking to the workers about voting and about the registration process. L.C. saw a white man working with some laborers, fixing a tractor. She walked over to him and asked him if he was the owner, and he replied that he was. "I asked him if he had any objection to me talking with these folks about registering to vote. Without ever looking at me, which was customary, he told me, no, he had no objection. He was supposed to be one of the tough people, and I remember thanking him and walking back to go to the quarters and talk to folks, and he called me back. He called me back, and I turned around. He said, 'Now, when you get through registering them to vote, don't bring them back here. Take them to your place.' "

Dorsey's house at the time was "a condemned house in Shelby, that wasn't even fit for me and my folks to be living in." Utterly hurt, she realized that she had to make a decision as to what to tell the plantation workers. She walked back to those she had already talked with, and told them what the owner had said, and then apologized to them "for not being able to take them [to register], because I didn't have any place for them to stay. And it was the hardest, worst decision I'd ever made." Later, Dorsey imagined what the organizers she admired—Owen Brooks, Fannie Lou Hamer, or Annie Devine of Canton—might have done. She believed that these women and men would have taken the workers to register and would have somehow found places for them to stay afterward. She blamed herself for "having left them out there. I mean, I was just depressed, despondent, brokenhearted." But she also realized that

> at that moment when that man called me and said, "oh, don't bring them back here," that the plantation caught up with me again. See, I absolutely think the sum total of my life experiences on the plantation caught up, and I was reduced by his words to that culture of total dependency, which you never really quite get away from.[38]

Movement organizing and employment led L.C. Dorsey into further education and economic independence, but these twin experiences of utter powerlessness—utter dependence upon a man and on the paternalism of the plantation system—affected her evolving political and social consciousness. These experiences helped to

propel L.C. Dorsey into furthering her education through movement-related programs, and led to later work with youth issues in the state, and with the prison reform movement in Mississippi. As a community organizer, social worker, and professor, Dorsey came to view the problems of African Americans and whites in Mississippi as interdependent and rooted in an economic system that deprived the most vulnerable members of both populations.

The View from the 1990s: Losses and Gains

Within the Delta, the continuing dispersion of federal funds began in the 1930s, which increased during the 1960s, and continued through the 1990s. Large farmers and planters received generous agricultural subsidies, the poor received public assistance, welfare, and low-cost housing, and the middle class received the salaries and benefits that came to workers and managers in the expanded state and local governments.[39] In 1997, blacks made up 66.2 percent of the population of Coahoma County, 64.5 percent of Bolivar County, 67.5 percent of Sunflower County, and 60.2 percent of Washington County. And in all four counties, between 41.6 percent (Sunflower) and 31.8 percent (Washington) of all people lived in poverty. One estimate placed the percentage of African Americans among the Delta's poor at 85 percent—poverty was still an overwhelmingly black condition.[40] Throughout the 1990s, the out-migration of young and ambitious African Americans continued to drain the region of talent and energy.[41]

Movement organizing and political activism brought rewards and losses for Sunflower County grassroots leaders. Fleming, Dotson, and Giles were subjected to violent threats and attacks. McKinley Mack left Mississippi for an extended period of time because, he said, he was "mad at everything," and disturbed by the reprisals directed at members of his family. Robert Cableton also left the state after the dissolution of the SNCC in the mid-1960s. He later suffered from mental health problems, alcohol abuse, and depression. Juanita Scott (figure 2.2) remained involved in Head Start as an organizer and administrator through the 1990s. L.C. Dorsey eagerly sought educational opportunities offered through adult education programs sponsored by War on Poverty programs and movement-related work. She eventually earned masters' and doctoral degrees in social work. Materially, these activists were better off than in their childhoods—all had homes, and could enumerate the accomplishments of their educated and achieving children.

The struggle that emerged in Sunflower County in the 1960s was a poor people's movement with a distinct class-based character that led its leaders to emphasize economic issues as the center of their political struggle. Sharecropping families like those of L.C. Dorsey, Juanita Scott, McKinley Mack, and Cora Fleming wanted improvement for their children, and they pushed their sons and daughters to become educated and thus become better able to control the conditions of their lives. These

Figure 2.2 Juanita Scott, 1995

families all stressed aspiration and self-improvement and valued hard work, thrift, and community service. Their children internalized these values, and expressed them in community activism during the civil rights struggle. The values of collective uplift and improvement gave leaders like Scott, Fleming, Giles, Dorsey, and Mack a resilient strength and courage that were necessary to the politics of the movement in its most dangerous phases and places. These same beliefs, when externalized as

prescriptions for community change, led many activists to become disillusioned with the pace and nature of change in the Delta in the years since 1970.

In the 1990s, many of the women and men who had been part of the poor people's movement of the 1960s expressed anger, grief, and despair over social and economic developments within the local and regional African American population. Their emotions were realistic reflections of the still-dangerous condition of their communities. As agricultural work had withered since the 1960s, many rural families had moved to Delta towns, although these offered few opportunities for lucrative employment for young people. Throughout the Delta in the 1990s, crime surfaced with the spread of drugs and gangs even in small towns like Indianola. Greenville, in Washington County, for example, had a population of 45,226 in 1990, and "the second highest per capita crime rate in the South, next to Miami."[42] Older women and men, particularly, felt vulnerable in their neighborhoods, where even the smallest houses featured burglar bars at windows and doors.

Women and men worried about the health of the community. They decried what they saw as the unraveling of the bonds of social control and morality that had disciplined—sometimes harshly—the young in segregated communities. Perceiving disarray in the seeming drift and aimlessness of the surrounding consumer culture, narrators expressed nostalgia for the disciplines of the past: the morality, the hard work, the stark and brutal choices that faced the young in poor and sharecropping families. Many expressed despair, disappointment, and grief about the social changes that desegregation and the partial welfare state had brought to their communities.

Activists' grief and despair, however, stood in marked contrast to the perspectives voiced by a majority of Delta residents polled in a survey in 1996. Researchers noted that high school completion rates of African Americans had increased significantly between 1980 and 1990, from less than 25 percent of adults in 1980 to 40 percent by 1990. Infant mortality rates had also decreased between 1981–1985 and 1990–1994. The nonwhite infant mortality rate had declined from 23.6 to 17.0. The poverty rate for the Delta's black population stood at 54.9 percent in 1990, but had declined relative to the rest of the state in the percentage of female-headed households in poverty—from 44 percent in 1980 to 38 percent in 1990. Most Delta residents—black and white—expressed greater satisfaction with their incomes and communities in 1990 than in 1980, and believed that conditions were improving.[43]

As appalling as these numbers are, they do represent an improvement over statistics that document Mississippi's past. What is clear, however, is that these—and other indicators of health and well-being—still depict a population oppressed by the long-term consequences of discrimination, underdevelopment, and poverty. In 1990, for example, Mississippi shared with Louisiana the dubious distinction of having the lowest percentage share of total household income received by the least well-off 50 percent of the population (less than 18 percent), and the highest number of deaths per 100,000 people—over 950. Mississippi also shared with Louisiana a high correlation between the percentage of total household income received by the least

well-off half of the population, with the highest homicide rate per 100,000 people—Louisiana's homicide rate was 18, and Mississippi's stood at 15.[44] In 2002, Mississippi led the fifty states in the proportion of the population that suffered from obesity, motor vehicle-related deaths, low birth weight babies, and diabetes. All of these conditions share high correlations with extremes in income inequality, and reveal in varying forms the response of individuals and groups to the stressors of poverty, relative deprivation, and hopelessness.[45]

What these grim numbers suggest is that the Delta of the 1990s and beyond is still plagued by the consequences of the long-term oppression and social violence directed at its majority black populations. Given documented correlations between gross income inequality, general social aggression and alienation, it would be difficult to imagine a society with the Delta's structural characteristics that would not suffer from symptoms of disintegration and alienation such as drug use and violent crime.[46]

Former activists voiced despair and grief over the welfare of their communities, expressing at times a sense of rage at what they saw as the root causes of the moral decline—school desegregation and poor parenting. The identification of these two causes is telling: the act of affixing blame on these two problems validates the sacrifices of parents and community leaders from narrators' childhoods and youth, and restates the value of the virtues of hard work, self-improvement, and education. Thus, a number of activists valorized their own difficult journeys to adulthood—journeys that had been made dangerous and frightening by the numerous unnecessary cruelties of racial oppression.

Juanita Scott lived with her widowed mother, Mattie Scott Pace, in Indianola in 1995. She worked as an administrator for Head Start in nearby Cleveland in Bolivar County. Her activism in civil rights and in Head Start had changed her. "It made me determined to continue the fight for the struggle of justice in this United States, I would say. I would say my county, my state—my city, my state, my county, and the United States. And that's justice for all oppressed people. I later learned that we, as blacks, weren't the only people oppressed, and all people need to be liberated from that."[47] But she believed that the black community had lost too much with the integration—or, rather—the desegregation of schools and public facilities:

> To me, integration was one of the worst things that happened to black people, when they went to [the desegregated] school. They lost all of their identity. They lost all their dignity. They just lost it, and now they are fat in the minds, and they don't have no directions. . . . [The all-black schools were] very much important for those kids, very much important. That is why we are losing our generation now. We've got people over there [in the schools] that don't care what they do. And then our young parents don't care what they do. So that's when you lost the togetherness from the church, the home, and the school, and when you lose that communication, you lose that child. You lose your community, and that is what has happened. And that has caused our problem, I feel.[48]

Scott believed that many developments hindered the advancement and well-being of local black communities. The churches, she believed, did not stress the necessity of voting and political activism as they had in the movement years. And although racial lines remained between blacks and whites, African Americans could still be persuaded to vote for white candidates, even when such votes contradicted their interests. The materialism that infected younger generations with desires for clothing, music, and escape was not being sufficiently blunted by strict parental controls. "There's poor parenting now. We have lost a generation. The next one is on the way to ruin. Just think of the people to have govern over us. We are a lost cause."

Scott contrasted the child rearing practices of the contemporary families with the discipline instilled in her siblings by their mother. "Students are not taught discipline. They are not taught to follow authority, and don't have any goals in life, especially the ones which is in the majority. The parents are not training them. But out of my family, we were taught to reach for the stars." In Scott's family she counted educators and teachers, doctors, artists, lawyers, and housewives—all self-sufficient, all hard-working. But the black community as a whole, she felt, was "regressing" instead of improving. "They are not registering to vote, and that is the key to success in any community."[49] She defined progress as "people looking out for themselves, their family, people going to school and educating themselves. They are regressing in that instead of progressing. We have more people dropping out of school now than at the time when we couldn't even go to school. . . . These children today don't have anything to do, so they don't want to even go—they don't want to do anything. They don't have anything to make them want to do nothing."[50]

She was also appalled by the acquiescence of the black poor to public entitlements like welfare, which she saw as another manifestation of the mindless materialism of consumer culture. This materialism, when not tied to a strong work ethic and social discipline, made black communities less safe and healthy places than the neighborhoods of the past. Mattie Scott Pace had told her children, "If you don't work, you're going to steal." Juanita Scott considered the widespread acceptance of public subsidies to be a form of stealing: "I would see all of these people on the corner, I say they're not working. I know they're stealing something. Even they're stealing from the government if they're getting a check. That's stealing, stealing from the government if you're not working."[51]

Although Juanita Scott isolated community-level changes as the causes of local social problems, it is worth noting that the poverty of much of the Delta's population was not significantly affected by school desegregation per se, but has been caused by larger, long-term economic forces and by the continuation of dysfunctional social policies at both national and state levels.[52] As recent studies suggested, levels of high school completion in Delta Counties lagged below those of Mississippi as a whole, and were significantly lower than national rates in the 1990s. Annual high school dropout rates were high during that decade—one estimate placed the dropout rate in the Delta at 25 percent annually—but, as previously indicated, these figures

represented a considerable improvement over schooling rates of the past. In 1950, only 25 percent of African Americans aged 15–19 were even *enrolled* in schools. Comparable figures for 1940 and 1930 were 11 percent and 4 percent, respectively.[53] Scott's attributions may well reflect many leaders' tendency to see in their own extraordinary histories viable models for the surrounding population. Juanita Scott's model was clearly her mother, the incredibly strong-willed and disciplined Mattie Scott, who even as a sharecropper instilled fierce aspirations and hope into her children. As a number of scholars have suggested, it is precisely an absence of hope that fuels the self-destructive behaviors of many impoverished populations who live in societies characterized by extreme income inequality. In places like the Delta, it is still abundantly clear that an enormous chasm of opportunity separates the affluent and middle class of both races from the poor who subsist on the bottom rungs of the economy.[54] Perhaps Scott's attribution of cause reflects her desire to view change in individualistic terms—as the result of aggregate decisions that are wise and future-oriented. In this, she might well follow a very American tendency to view life circumstances as the product of individual choices and actions.

Mary Tyler Dotson lived in a small house in Indianola in 1995. As a widow, she lived on social security checks and remained active in politics—calling her neighbors to remind them to vote in elections. She also worked with Indianola's Food Bank, helping to screen people so that the very neediest received priority for food assistance. In both efforts, she carried on the legacy of her husband Nelson Dotson, who in the late 1960s had announced to his wife that he had become "color blind" in regard to political choices and would only vote for the very best candidate who ran in an election, regardless of race. Mary Dotson loved all of the political work that she and her husband had done over the years, and she felt that much had been accomplished in Indianola in terms of relationships between whites and blacks. But Dotson also felt that her community was less safe than it had been in the past. "The older people are mostly scared of the teenaged children, these boys especially, because they're running around here in gangs. We're scared of folks. We're not scared of the middle age. We just have to be certain of the people we let in our house after dark. I'd say from teenage to 30 years old, you have to watch yourself." In the early 1990s, Dotson became a victim of violent crime. A man broke into her house and beat her severely, apparently intent on stealing whatever cash she had in the house. After he left her for dead, Dotson, injured and confused, stumbled from her house and called her neighbors. She spent several days in a hospital recovering from the attack. Afterward, friends in the black and white communities bought burglar bars for her windows. In a 1995 interview, Mary Dotson stated that Indianola could improve a lot if "they'd get rid of these drugs around here and the gangs. That's the best thing they could ever do, get rid of the drugs, because the drugs has got the town ruined. . . . You have to stay fastened up like you in jail and all that stuff, and they'll break into your house if they can steal your furniture and stuff. That's the best thing I think they could do, get rid of the drugs."[55]

In 1995, Cora Fleming lived in a small house in Indianola, but she didn't "get out too much," she said. "This work in the past kind of left a toll on me. And my nerves. I had a spell of sickness back in 1985, and I haven't recuperated from that completely yet." She had suffered "something like a stroke," she explained, that had left her temporarily unable to walk or talk. "I can't think too well sometimes," she explained. Yet she believed she had gained a great deal through the movement and through her experiences with Head Start. "I'm free to do the things I want to do," she said. "I can be a woman on my own and be independent and not have to bow to anybody I don't want to bow to. It's at my own pace that I bow. If I say 'no,' I mean 'no.' You've got to have some self-worth about yourself, and you can't be weak. If it causes you to be hungry a few days a year, do what you believe in. I'm not going to bow and stoop because you say bow and stoop. You're not going to take my belief from me."

Nevertheless, because she believed that the local CAP was run by the "power structure" of middle-class blacks and rich whites who did not have the interests of the masses of black people at heart, she had quit working for the program that she had helped to organize.[56] In 1995, Fleming expressed dissatisfaction with the continuing dominance of middle-class African Americans and whites in local politics, and maintained a class-based view of social change. The election of African Americans to local office "hasn't done nothing," she said, "they haven't done anything for us. [And] I just don't see that, work all my life just to be under somebody."[57] Although the children that Fleming raised had done "pretty good" in their lives, she worried about many young people in her community. "They've lost the will to try to survive without getting in trouble. A lot of stuff going on now, drugs and stuff, which is not their fault. They put it on us, but it's not us, because we don't have no planes, boats to bring drugs into this area. They intended for it to be the black folks, but its getting the white folks, too. [Young people are] getting drugs. Grown folks are selling it to them."[58] But the young people she knew seemed very different than those in her generation. "These young folks won't listen to anybody. These children have got it made and don't know it. If they only knew what we had to come through, a portion of it, I believe there'd be a different group of people coming into the world. But something's wrong with them." And what was wrong with them, Fleming stated, was the parenting they'd gotten. She recalled that she'd told parents

> back in 1963, when this Green Amendment passed. That's when they tried to stop people from whipping their children and chastise them and discipline them like they should. I told them back then, "They're getting ready to put all of you in jail now. You'd better take a look at what's going on around you, because if you can't whip your child, he's going to be in trouble then." Now, they say everything you do now is child abuse. It's child abuse all right, so they can put them in jail later on. The jails are full right now.[59]

Cora Fleming died in 1996. She was 62 years old.

Alice Giles's husband had died in 1988, and she closed their store in December of that year. Her son and daughter had become educated and had left the Delta for better opportunities in Tennessee cities. Her children, she knew, had been part of a larger exodus of ambitious young people who "leave here and go other places when they finish school, go away to school, they don't come back. I guess they had such a hard time when they grew up here, that they just don't want to come back." Much had changed in Indianola since the 1960s. Whites "treat you better. You don't have no problem with it. They're real nice. 'Mrs. Giles,' and 'Mrs. So-and-so.' You know, they treat you like you're human. It's better." But, she reflected, "You know, it's got to be better, as bad as it was. You know it's got to be better, because it was rough back then. It was rough back then." What hadn't changed locally was that "we're still black, you know what I mean. We know we colored. They won't go to church [with blacks]. I just don't understand people. You know what I mean, we all human and God made us all, and we all human." She wished that "one day, like Reverend Martin Luther King said, that we all would be as one, and we all get together and not see one another as the color of skin, and we all could just walk hand in hand and just see one another as just being human beings. God made us all, and just be one, and that's what I would like to see."[60]

Corrine Bankhead's daughter Lee had returned to Bolivar County in the mid-1960s, and became active in voter registration activities in Cleveland. Bankhead also became employed by Head Start, which raised her wages "from $3 a day to $100 a week." She worked for Head Start for "quite some time." In 1995, Corrine Bankhead lived in her small house in Cleveland, where she was raising two adolescent great grandsons, despite her ill-health and recent sickness. Her daughter Lee had died years before, and her granddaughter and her husband were unable to care for the boys, due to "mental problems," according to Bankhead. One of her sons, a navy chaplain in Maryland, had asked Bankhead to bring the children and live with him and his family, but she had refused, since his house was small. "I'm gaining my strength back now," she explained. "I think we can make the winter." Her two great grandsons were "trying to keep me alive."[61]

Robert Cableton was poor and bitter in 1995. Although he lived in a small brick house in Indianola with some family members, he felt that he'd been blacklisted from jobs in Indianola due to his "radicalism," and his bad back had kept him from working at laboring jobs. "I live in a brick house now, but what is this? I can't eat. Economic slavery has taken on a greater hold, a greater hold than forty years ago. . . . Now our government has taken away the things that we fought for, and all this type of thing, so I think it's a good 95 percent worse. Knocking on the door of 100 percent worse." He saw the employment of hundreds of black workers at the nearby Delta Pride catfish processing plant as a "new plantation" that did nothing but perpetuate the economic dependence of African Americans upon whites. He also expressed despair about the impact of black political leadership in the Delta, in part because it rewarded the community's established professionals, who did not represent

the interests of poor, class-conscious radicals like himself. "When are you able to talk? How rich do you have to be?" he demanded. He was not happy:

> I'm not happy for nobody who's in poverty, because it's a damnable sin. It's a sin that's unforgivable. Poverty is a practiced thing, and it's done to people, many times by your people.[62] Poverty is not ever discussed the way it should be discussed. Poverty is really death, you know. Poverty is death, in essence. And a man who has to live with that kind of pain, from the day I can remember, on a widowed mother, up until now. But I'm just speaking for millions and millions more.[63]

Like several other narrators, McKinley Mack was disappointed with the service of African American elected officials in 1995. He had returned to Indianola in the 1980s, had met and married a younger woman, and the two built a comfortable brick home in the country outside the town. Mack worked for Modern Line, a light industrial plant in Indianola, and his wife worked at a local Wal-Mart. He believed that African Americans and whites in Sunflower County had neither changed sufficiently in their racial attitudes to ensure real progress, nor had their quality of life improved in the way that the young idealists in the movement had hoped. Activists had hoped that aspiring black politicians "would represent us and think about us, the better for all mankind, [but] were [in fact] thinking about their own pockets, just taking care of number one." Although public schools had improved considerably, he also despaired that many young people were not taking sufficient advantage of their opportunities to get an education. Young black people were better protected from white violence than in the segregated past, he said, but "the grown-ups are the ones afraid. It's something. . . . It's white against white, black against black. And what it is, the younger people against the older people, that's black and white." Like Fleming and Scott, he blamed irresponsible parents for the undisciplined young people that led him to build a house in the country. "We could have got a house built uptown, but I guess you can say that we were running away, too. Running away from the gangs and the other things the inner city has to offer. Get to where you can relax." He had a cynical view of the economic and political changes that had taken place since the movement years. "I can own something other than a car. [You can] try to make a better life, not just settle for anything because the man says you've got to settle for it. You can settle for whatever you want. . . . It's at least better than it was."[64]

In 1998, Ida Mae Turner lived in her small house in Clarksdale, happily retired from years of teaching and continuing to profess the religious faith that had started her on a life journey of improvement and education. Although she lived on a small fixed income, her one child, a son, looked in on her regularly, and she felt her needs and wants were provided for by friends and neighbors. She was glad she had seen that she "needed" to return to school as a young widow, and she still exhibited the habitual self-assertion that she had developed as an unprotected young girl. She believed that her sometimes aggressive style had helped her weather the often combative

encounters with irate white parents and with her own supervisors during the unsettling period when schools were finally desegregated. "I think that [self-assertion] kind of helped me go through this world. . . . When they loved me, they loved me, but before you love me, you despise me." Her combative habits had produced occasional arguments with her two husbands, and, she said, "I haven't been an angel, but, as I've often said, God have had something to do with me." In her 80s, she admonished the teenagers and young people who walked by her house to dress properly, and to show respect for her age, and for themselves. Clearly, Turner was happy that the early chaos of her life as an abandoned child had been transformed through religion, education, and work.[65]

After completing her masters' degree at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1973, L.C. Dorsey returned to the Delta, working for a long time with Head Start in Greenville in Washington County. She then completed a doctorate in social work at Howard University and later worked as director of the Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou. In 1997, Dorsey had moved to the faculty of social work at Jackson State University in Jackson. In an interview, she acknowledged that life conditions for many African Americans in the Delta were still dismal. "If you look at it as a region of the state where there's still so much oppression and so much economic injustice, it's hard to imagine that things have changed. But it is so much changed that you really would have to have been there to really appreciate it." Dorsey had seen progress "in terms of people recognizing that they had dignity and human worth, and really standing up and trying to pass that along, pass that information along to their children in a different manner than used to happen when I was a child, and being able to express themselves in a way that said they were proud of who they were and their heritage." Dorsey noted that economic opportunities had improved significantly in the Delta counties; African Americans were employed in businesses, offices, and in professional jobs that "just didn't happen when we were growing up." And most visibly, African Americans had been elected to all levels of government. Dorsey also saw great improvements in the educational opportunities available for young African Americans, and in the housing and other facilities available to even poor families. "I guess one of the things that is significant is what we have been able to witness, that we didn't have when I was growing up in Mississippi, is the opportunity to dream of a different life. I mean, you had a place"—that familiar "place" to which white supremacy and segregation had relegated black people.[66]

Like other narrators, Dorsey regretted the loss of institutions and cohesion that African American communities had developed under segregation. "We used to have a sense of community that transcended distance so that if I had a kid that was in trouble, there was a network in the community that would get that kid out of town overnight, and when the morning came, he would be in Chicago or St. Louis. People always did that. They looked after each other." In 1965, when L.C. would leave for the cotton fields in the morning, she would ask her next-door neighbor, "Would you make sure my kids don't go out in the street and play?" Her neighbor would do so.

If Dorsey's children ran into the street, the neighbor told them, " 'Now, go back into the yard. Don't come out in the street.' So the community had a sense of ownership of all the kids, and they looked after all of them." Dorsey also instructed her children to ask if this neighbor needed anything if they went to the store. When men caught fish, or killed a rabbit, they shared meat with neighbors and other community members. Dorsey mourned the loss of this close community. She recalled moving back to Shelby to run the Delta Health Center after years away, and having her house broken into the third week after she arrived. She contrasted this situation with her memories of living in Jackson in the 1970s, when neither she nor her neighbors in the black community locked their houses.

Making Meanings from Past and Present

Collective trauma and social suffering leave long-term imprints on the lives of survivors. Many individuals who have experienced extremely oppressive and terroristic social systems have lifelong reminders of their experiences that take the form of haunted dreams and nightmares, of bitter memories, of generalized feelings of fear, anxiety, and social distrust. Survivors often report an inability to feel wholly comfortable in their ordinary daily lives.[67] Narrators whose families survived the system of sharecropping related memories of powerlessness, economic exploitation, and extreme vulnerability to many forms of violence and intimidation. Despite relative economic security at mid- and late-life, these women and men continued to exhibit a wariness that flowed from the dangerous past to their not entirely secure contemporary lives.

Narrators described the many privations of segregation and sharecropping as profoundly *embodied* experiences. Hunger, ill-health, fear, and violence were all remembered in terms of the costs that these visitors inflicted on individuals' bodies, minds, and spirits.[68] Their testimony contains anger at the conditions they were forced to survive, and a grief and mourning for the loss of community institutions that made their survival possible. Some individuals expressed sadness and loss due to the demise of all-black schools and businesses that served the segregated communities of the past. Their sense of grief and anger has made a balanced appreciation of the changes of the late twentieth century almost impossible.

The stories of survival, resistance, and loss are testimonies that perform a critical function for the narrators and for the African American communities of the Delta. The act of telling is a performance of memory against multiple erasures. Segregation itself was based on the erasure of the agency of African Americans through violence, exploitation, and dehumanization. Narrators' families wrested survival and achievement from this system at great personal cost. Movement activism brought even greater risks. The act of telling is an affirmation of victory over the forces that sought to annihilate the agency of African Americans under the system of segregation—but

it is also a testimony of protest against the contemporary consumer culture that seems to replace community memory with entertainment.

Several narrators spoke of the years of the mid-1990s as an era of decline for their communities. Some held a nostalgic view of the segregated community of the past, of the cohesion that was enforced by a shared feeling of being threatened by white supremacy and segregation. The embattled black community of the past provided a model of cohesion and social order for several narrators, even though they did not mourn the loss of the violent inducement to cohesion that white supremacy mandated.

Although nostalgia for the segregated all-black schools of the past appears to be experienced by many African Americans in the post-movement years, the anger and the sadness that marks a number of the Mississippi narratives of this project begs for more complex explanations than a simple longing for remembered community. The evidence of real grief and despair in many of these stories suggests that many narrators are in fact experiencing a protracted *mourning* for the past—for the strengths of the recollected community, for their own hopes and aspirations, and for the singleness of purpose that so many families shared about the value and transformative power of education. It is not surprising that survivors of such an injurious social sickness as segregation and white supremacy should mourn their own past and present. For if the past provided valuable models of survival and achievement, it also, clearly, imposed unnecessary suffering upon Mississippi's African Americans. The child at age 8 who was expected to cook for a family of eleven, and who was never able to ride a bus to segregated schools, clearly sacrificed too much as a little girl. Similarly, the young girl who kept a careful accounting of her family's expenses and earnings should not have had to learn about the powerlessness of her parents and of other families in the community. A boy's mother should not have had to feed her family the neckbones and meat scraps originally designated for the planter's dog—and her son should not have had to quit school and stunt his life chances. Parents and families should not have been powerless to protect their children and fellow community members from violence or sexual predation. These lived realities were the embodied histories of the relatively powerless under conditions of severe oppression.

Like other individuals and communities that have survived collective traumas and social suffering, many Delta narrators remained haunted by memories of fear, terror, and deprivation. Such women and men function as survivors in a liminal space between collective trauma and social health. Their memories of powerlessness and poverty mean that narrators could never rest entirely free of the symptoms that accompanied the experience of segregation. They spoke of the palpable sense of fear that they felt, the worry about family members, the sense of responsibility they all felt to somehow overcome the limitations imposed by the calculated indignities and threats of white supremacy.

Even people who had achieved some economic and personal security in their lives seemed to be mourning losses—their own, and those of their communities.

Among some narrators, these feelings seem very close to a sense of despairing grief.[69] This grief is rooted in the continuing social and economic problems of Delta communities, and also in the transcendent hopes that these rural women and men brought to the black freedom movement in Mississippi. That hope, which fused practical politics and prophetic religion, inspired people to act to transform their communities. Given the continuing economic deprivation and poverty of Delta counties, could any of their communities have ever measured up to activists' visionary aims?

The imprint of collective trauma can be seen in Delta leaders' patterns of attribution and causality for the perceived decline of their communities. Although Delta counties of the 1990s shared high crime rates, unemployment, and poverty in a period of national economic boom, a number of narrators blamed poor parenting for their community's ills. Such a pattern of blaming suggests that narrators desperately sought *individual* sources of collective disorder, rather than the continuing economic dependence and underdevelopment of the region. This search to individualize social problems is an attempt to valorize individual actions that produced the movement, and an effort to assure themselves that better opportunities for achievement existed in their communities than were available in the past. Such patterns of attribution might have served a therapeutic function for narrators: in preserving the memory of the movement's efficacy, narrators could believe that their suffering, and their sacrifices, had been justified, and that their struggles had been validated by history.

Some narrators' use of repetition in their stories and narratives, however, suggests that they harbored doubts about whether the Delta was significantly changed by the black freedom movement—or if the changes made were sufficient to significantly improve the lives of all African Americans. The use of repetition appears frequently in the memories of the era of segregation, and the hovering threat of white violence. Cora Fleming described her fear for her immediate family members: "My brother and all of them were here. My family was here. My father lived right there at the time. I was doing the work, but I had to fear for them, too."[70] Alice Giles, describing the bombing of her home and store, recalled, "They [whites] was all in it. They was all in it. They knew they wasn't coming. The insurance even canceled our insurance. They had already canceled it. They canceled our insurance."[71] And even after listing the ways in which her own experiences with whites in Indianola were better than in the past, Giles said, "You know it's got to be better, as bad as it was. You know it's got to be better, because it was rough back then. It was rough back then."[72] And McKinley Mack also seemed to seek a similar resolution as he attempted to convince himself that the 1990s represented a significant improvement over the past: "You can try to make a better life, not just settle for anything because the man says you've got to settle for it. You can settle for whatever you want. . . . It's at least better than it was."

The use of repetition, then, might appear as an effort to affirm the fact of change and the individual betterment of movement leaders, and the improvement of their communities. And the attribution of blame to the spread of drugs, poor parenting,

and lax discipline of children also suggests that the activists' buoyant hopes have been deflated by the changes—and lack of change—in their communities.

Perhaps the attribution of cause reflects a widespread desire to view change in individualistic terms—as the result of aggregate decisions that are wise and future-oriented. In this, Delta activists might well follow a very American tendency to view life circumstances as the product of individual choices and actions. The individualizing of social failures might, in fact, function as a strategy to preserve hope for the future. For if problems could be caused and eliminated by individual decisions and actions, then the solution to the problems within the Delta's African American communities could be found with behavioral changes among individuals and families. And the idea that an individual can change his or her fortune, and that of the community, could be preserved. The agency of actors and communities remained historically important.

But what if the most realistic appraisals of the Delta's history were those of L.C. Dorsey and Robert Cableton? What if much had changed in terms of the possibilities for individual achievement within a wider condition of poverty, poor life chances, and economic stagnation? Where then might that leave one's sense of collective hope, one's vision of history as progress? And how could one then contend with the obvious losses: black schools, businesses, the sense of collective ownership of children and achievement? Perhaps the narrators from sharecropping families spoke as they did because they needed to believe that their lives and movement had changed their communities in far-reaching ways that could not have been imagined in the terrible times before.

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THREE

Achieving in the Rural: Independence and Leadership in Bolivar County

Highway 61 forms the crooked spine of Bolivar County, linking the interior towns of Shaw, Boyle, Cleveland, Renova, Merigold, Mound Bayou, Winstonville, and Shelby. These communities sit safely back from the winding line of the Mississippi River and its levees, a necessity in the flood-prone Delta in the early years of this century. They are tiny by metropolitan standards: only Cleveland, with a little more than 15,000 inhabitants, was large enough to be called a small city in the late 1990s. Boyle, below Cleveland, had only 651 residents, Winstonville even fewer. Mound Bayou, the legendary all-black town founded in 1887, then had a little more than 2,000 inhabitants. Shelby, due north of Mound Bayou, had around 2,800.

Bolivar County was notable for the numbers of landowning African American farmers who worked in several all-black communities such as Mound Bayou, Renova, Winstonville, and Boyle. During decades in which very few black farmers owned the land they worked, Bolivar County's black landowners inculcated in their children a desire for financial independence, education, and collective progress. Accordingly, Delta narrators whose families came from relatively independent black communities in Bolivar County recounted much about their lives in terms of the education they pursued in school, work, and community activism. For these narrators, social learning encompassed formal education, survival skills, and community service activism. Service activism in itself was a form of leadership and coalition-building, often among different classes within African American communities, and sometimes with individuals and organizations in the dominant white culture. Even World War II became an experience of social learning for the Delta women and men who entered military service, or who achieved better pay and status in the war economy. For the war, like migration to Northern and Western cities, brought the outside world to

Mississippi, and provided broader understandings of human rights and politics in places far from home.

Although Bolivar County was developed around the demands of its vast acreage in cotton, in the last sixty years of the twentieth century, its population declined due to the mechanization and consolidation of agriculture and massive out-migration of African Americans. The county's population declined from 71,050 in 1930 to 41,875 in 1997. In Shaw, Mound Bayou, and Shelby, boarded-up storefronts lined main streets. Few businesses seemed to thrive other than quick-stop gas and food stores that served Highway 61, and liquor stores and pawn shops. A few barbecue and fast-food businesses and beauty parlors remained open. Churches and many houses seemed well maintained. But clearly, people who lived in these communities went to town elsewhere.

Land, agricultural labor, and racial oppression shaped the memories and oral histories of Bolivar County's African American activists. Most narrators related life histories that depicted survival, adaptation, and accomplishment in segregated and post-movement Mississippi. Their most frequent narrative—a life story that reveals survival and growth within shifting racial constraints—proved to be extraordinarily able to incorporate the various social and political changes that activists sought and sometimes won over the last fifty years of the twentieth century.

Unlike the sharecroppers whose lives were examined in chapters one and two, the narrators of Bolivar County typically owned a little land, or had some skill that gave them the crucial independence from near-total exploitation that oppressed landless laborers. This measure of independence, however, did not exempt them from the injustices that white supremacy ordained for all African Americans.

It is difficult to overemphasize the self-respect and psychological freedom that landownership gave to African Americans in the Delta. Particularly for those narrators who matured in largely black communities, the possession of land, and prudent and successful farming practices, commanded admiration from African Americans, and even a grudging respect from whites. Property was power in the Mississippi Delta, and a successful farming family that owned the land they worked imparted an optimism and ambition to their children. This optimism and economic security protected such individuals from the worst abuses of segregation. Optimism, self-respect, and family pride also fueled some narrators' sense of disillusionment, loss, and grief at conditions of the Delta in the mid-1990s. Although Bolivar narrators retained a sense of pride and satisfaction in their own achievements, and in the successes of their children, they were not spared the sense of mourning and loss when they confronted the economic stagnation and political apathy in the post-movement Delta.

In telling their stories, Bolivar activists focused on the segregated past and on the enduring limitations that black Mississippians in the Delta faced in the twentieth century. As had Sunflower County activists, Bolivar leaders told stories of lynchings, beatings, gross economic exploitation, and the persistent, hovering presence of random white violence in the times "before" the civil rights era of 1954–1970.

The movement years, particularly the period between 1960 and 1970, were recounted as accelerated periods of political activism, risk-taking, and social learning, as community leaders became active in NAACP and COFO (Council of Federated Organizations) voter registration drives, Head Start projects, and in electoral politics at municipal and county levels. In their stories of movement experiences, narrators conveyed a sense of the hope, excitement, and solidarity that infused many community projects, and a pride in what they helped to accomplish. Stories of the post-movement and more contemporary eras bore the more dispassionate judgments yielded by experience and analysis, as women and men assessed the gains and losses that they, their families, and communities experienced when opportunities opened to the African American population in the Delta. These opportunities included access to political participation and leadership positions, widened employment opportunities in a number of areas, social mobility for well-educated and ambitious young people, and the promise of American consumer abundance offered by the media.

Within life stories of personal progress within changing constraints, several constituent iconic narratives reappeared. The first genre pairs family survival and rural self-sufficiency within a context of general hard times and poverty, which were made even more oppressive by Mississippi's harsh racial climate. A second story concerned the narrator's struggle for education, and stressed the combination of character, hard work, and patronage that helped the narrator to achieve an education and a desirable job. Another story concerned recognition by whites: a sometimes painful struggle to wrest respect and mutuality from white supervisors, landowners, politicians, or organizations. Sometimes, this kind of story did not end well: some whites remained bitterly racist in their conduct, and several narrators continued to distrust the state's white leaders and conservative whites in general.

Two forms of what we might call originating memories emerged from the stories of our Bolivar narrators: these reflected family experiences of self-sufficient abundance, on one hand, and complementary narratives of hardship, deprivation, and insecurity on the other. Behind both of these narratives lurked the shadow knowledge of the possibilities for racial violence and death. Even while aware of this history and possibility, activists linked stories of their personal progress to the improvement of their families, and to the surrounding African American community.

Indeed, "improvement" is the distinguished measure of changes and progress for most Bolivar narrators. Their notions of improvement flowed from the optimistic ideology of uplift that was inculcated by African American churches, schools, and civic organizations since the turn of the twentieth century. For Bolivar narrators, improvement meant economic development and opportunity, winning respect from the white community, and higher achievement in education and professional advancement. These evaluative measures differed in tone and content from those of narrators from dependent sharecropping families, who had less reason to believe that regional economic development or opportunities for professional advancement for the educated would improve their lives much. Schooled in fear and deprivation,

narrators from propertyless poor families were much more guarded in their hopes, more distrustful of whites, more conscious of the wide gaps that separated the Delta's poor from its stable middle and upper classes.

Within the web of individual, family, and community stories, narrators frequently related their continuously fought, frequently frustrated, struggle to exercise the rights and privileges of full American citizenship. This was expressed in many forms and in many arenas: in school systems, in military service, in local politics, in complex forms of social recognition that were subtle, but crucially important parts of the texture of Southern community life. The struggle for full citizenship, and the desire for inclusion in the larger American drama of progress and political participation, compelled Delta narrators to attack the conventions of segregation at a number of levels between the 1950s and 1990s. Narrators from a variety of class backgrounds described their often dangerous efforts to organize boycotts of discriminatory merchants and businesses, to participate in voter-registration campaigns, to run for public office, and to politically mobilize poor communities. Frequently, these efforts were attacked by white officials and vigilantes throughout the Delta. Groups of armed men shot into houses, made death threats, firebombed churches and businesses, and terrorized would-be voters. As in Sunflower County, upper-class whites in Bolivar County frequently denied activists access to credit, necessary services, and medical care. Despite violence and terrorism, black leaders and communities persisted in their quest for political and civil rights because they believed that the rights of citizenship would allow them access to political and economic opportunity. Citizenship meant respect, recognition, and a limited, though vital form of political equality. It also, critically, guaranteed a minimum of social safety.[1]

A wide variety of individuals told their life stories within these iconic narratives. Narrators came to the movement activism of the 1960s with long-established convictions that the system was wrong and unfair, and they were anxious, if without immediate strategies, to change it. For these women and men, the appearance of young civil rights activists from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) amounted to an enabling opportunity to change their lives and communities. Still other individuals were awakened to the idea of change and to the hopefulness of opportunities created by change through activism and, particularly, through the Head Start experience. Many of these women had been fully occupied with trying to survive and raise their families in the years before they became involved in local Head Start projects, and their employment in the preschool system represented a sea change in their consciousness, sense of self, and economic security. Head Start literally broadened their political and geographic horizons, and gave them a greater knowledge and appreciation of the world beyond Bolivar County and Mississippi. Still other narrators come to activism with a consciousness of Mississippi's specialized forms of bigotry and discrimination that they had gained firsthand through education and travel. For these women and men, the movement became a place to build and enhance their skills and capacities in the

service of their communities—and, frequently, to fashion careers for themselves as professional change agents.

This variety of perspectives emerged because the narrators told their stories from particular places in the racial and class systems of the Delta. The distinctions that emerged as critical in their life stories were produced by class and status differences that might appear invisible to readers from outside the region and its racial systems. For example, narrators from the all-black community of Mound Bayou typically came from families that owned some land, or who possessed skills or education that made them independent of white control. These families frequently communicated values of independence, thrift, achievement, and dignity to their children. As adults, these children recalled these family values, and the stories that incorporated them, as the foundation for their own willingness to resist the system of segregation. Their family cultures had given them an oppositional consciousness to the system of segregation. Such narrators frequently stressed the strength and dignity of their parents and grandparents as people who would not allow white people to demean or insult them, and who labored to keep the family free from any kind of debt to white storekeepers or landlords.

Another perspective emerged from individuals whose families had been prosperous enough to educate them. Armed with a knowledge of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, these people had a personal conviction that the system was wrong, because they had read and studied the documents and histories that were omitted from the few months of education that many rural black children in the Delta received. These individuals proved willing to act when opportunities presented themselves in the form of federal judicial decisions, civil rights laws, and other forms of political change and economic opportunity. Most frequently, these literate, politically conscious activists were clustered in the teaching profession, or had been educated as teachers in one of the South's black colleges. Having been excluded from the political process through much of their adult lives, they came to politics with an *unmediated* relationship to the democratic promises established by the founding documents. Their discovery of the actual operations of political and bureaucratic processes—and of the necessary cement of compromise in coalition-building and power-holding—left many bitterly disillusioned with the new world that they had won with such sacrifice.

If independent and achievement-oriented families had inculcated differing, if related, varieties of discontent in their children, families of the propertyless working poor socialized their children in the necessities of cooperation, sacrifice, and hard work for sheer survival, and of the importance of having a relationship to a "good" white family or employer. The women and men who came up in these very poor families were schooled in the economic exploitation and oppression that were produced by economic dependence and subsequent vulnerability. The messages that they received from their families stressed the necessity of sharing, hard work, and close family relationships. The expressed desire to work for or to have a relationship with a "good" white person or family underscored the terrible vulnerability and social

trauma of oppression for the very poor. And the harsh lessons imparted by social trauma became a hallmark of future judgments of bosses, benefactors, and institutions. For these narrators, the Head Start experience delivered salvation through a much larger paycheck and opportunities to become better educated.

Propertied families, educationally minded families, and very poor families had different family cultures that internalized particular values and commitments within their children. As adults, the children found a common meeting ground in the community activism and leadership struggles in the Delta between 1960 and the century's end. If class differences and varying kinds of resources separated these families and their expectations, so also did differing kinds of community and social embeddedness. Property owners ranked high in community involvement and what might be called national consciousness—especially in the all-black town of Mound Bayou. Education-minded but propertyless families seemed to have had less national awareness, but were nevertheless heavily involved in church activities, and carefully monitored their children's schooling. The very poor were so fully consumed by the travails of survival that they did not have the opportunity, time, or community associations that were necessary to develop much of a consciousness of the world beyond Bolivar County. For this reason, we can say that our narrators out of working poor families were awakened to the world beyond mere survival by the movement and by Head Start.

Surviving and Achieving in "The Rural"

Many black farmers had migrated to Bolivar County from the thin and exhausted soils in Mississippi's hill country in the late nineteenth century, lured by the hope of landownership and by the Delta's rich soils. Although a number of African American farmers succeeded in this quest, the prospect of independent landownership dwindled after the early years of the twentieth century, as more and more of the Delta lands were consumed by large cotton plantations (figure 3.1).[2] Most Bolivar County narrators recounted family histories that attested to the relative security that their landowning and renting families achieved. These families had better housing and nutrition than did most sharecropping families. Children were able to complete more years of education than could children of the landless poor. And in 1930, as many as 80 percent of black Southern farmers were landless.[3]

Milburn Crowe (figure 3.2) of Mound Bayou recalled a farming life of self-sufficiency and abundance. Crowe's family was among the founding families of the town, which was established as an all-black settlement in the late 1880s, in the midst of rising racial repression in the South. By the turn of the century, the flourishing town of Mound Bayou was the "core" of a "larger agricultural colony of four thousand blacks."[4] The town's best years may well have been in the first several decades of the twentieth century: then Mound Bayou boasted an oil mill, several cotton gins,

Figure 3.1 Cotton crop

and a bank. The national depression of 1921–1922 was particularly hard on cotton farmers throughout the South, and many of the black farmers in the areas surrounding Mound Bayou fell into debt, tenancy, and sharecropping. Nevertheless, from Renova, north and east of Cleveland, through Winstonville, north of Mound Bayou, many black farmers owned considerable amounts of land.

Figure 3.2 Milburn Crowe, 1996

Mound Bayou also boasted the only hospital open to blacks in the area, the Taborian Hospital, a black-operated and staffed medical center. The hospital instituted one of the first prepaid premium health care policies in the nation, and Taborian Hospital became known as an example of African American ingenuity and independence. Subsequent medical institutions in Mound Bayou—including the Friendship Hospital, built by physician T.R.M. Howard, and the later Delta Health Center, initiated by Tufts University staff and physicians in the 1960s—continued the town's tradition of medical service for African American residents of the Delta.

Milburn Crowe, who was born in Mound Bayou in 1933—"in the midst of the Depression"—had "very pleasant memories of growing up happy, a happy period in my life." Although his family was "poor," he said,

> we barely realized we were poor, because we lived on a farm, and my daddy, Henry H. Crowe, provided very well for his family, his children. He operated his own small family farm, which was about twenty acres of land, but he leased other lands and he owned some other lands that he operated. We raised so much food that we had . . . We had hen houses, a storage house, a smokehouse, garage, a barn, a very large barn, and we raised all sorts of domestic animals like geese, turkeys, chicken, pigs, and hogs, etc. So that even though we were poor, I remember as we grew up, we were almost like a game, sit around the table [and] we would try to name and identify what we were eating or what part of the dinner had to be purchased from

> the store, because the bread, the wheat for the bread, the shortening, all of the meat, the vegetables, almost everything we had raised or provided on the farm. We may have come down to realize that there might have been one little item, perhaps sugar, that had been purchased from the store.[5]

Mound Bayou's founders developed a kind of "race pride" in their community, and in its tradition of independence from white control. The Bolivar town also served as a haven for black Mississippians who ran afoul of whites in other areas: people could "disappear" into Mound Bayou and then be spirited out of the state. As late as 1967, when Kermit Stanton of Shelby was elected to the Bolivar County Board of Supervisors, Mound Bayou served as a refuge. Stanton was threatened by the Klan and by other local whites after his election as the first African American member of a county board of supervisors in Mississippi since Reconstruction.[6] "The night of my election, everybody was afraid but me. We went to Mound Bayou and probably stayed all night. And things was going on in the county at that time at night, but I wasn't involved in it," Stanton recalled.[7] When the Klan later threatened Stanton's life, men from Mound Bayou guarded his house in Shelby for a number of nights.

Although children growing up in Mound Bayou had few contacts with white Mississippians, those like Milburn Crowe "realized that there was tension between white and black. We just didn't have the day-to-day experience with them [whites]. We grew up with a feeling of freedom and happiness, and we didn't experience the segregation. . . . I sensed from my family and the teaching and the explaining about racial prejudice and all, more pity for whites, that they just didn't know any better. They didn't know how to be human."

Olevia Johnson (figure 3.3), another Mound Bayou native, also recalled a childhood marked by rural self-sufficiency and cooperation. Born in 1925 to a farming family, she and her parents and siblings worked on their grandparents' farm, or on sharecrop holdings. She recalled that her parents kept a family garden during the Depression years of the 1930s, and her mother kept two cows, and "would swap butter and milk to [neighbors] for food we didn't have." Her mother also canned okra, tomatoes, beans and peaches, and other vegetables so that the family had food for the winter months. Families also raised cattle and hogs for meat (figures 3.4 and 3.5). "My daddy was called the pickler of the community—you know, just go from house to house, pickling beef for people to make it across the year with," said Johnson. She recalled the process:

> They used to have wooden barrels that they got flour and meat in. He would bore a hole in that barrel at a certain distance, and then he would put salt and sugar and molasses and spices on the meat and just lay it in layers, and let it stay there until it would pickle itself. Then, at a certain time, he would take it out and wash it off, and then you store it on a shelf anywhere and it would keep, and you'd just eat it.[8]

Johnson's parents also smoked meat in their smokehouse, where they burned chinaberries and sometimes oak bark to smoke and cure pork. Johnson recalled that

Figure 3.3 Olevia Johnson, 1996

her parents and their neighbors were poor in the Depression years: children only wore shoes in the wintertime, and mothers made their daughters' dresses out of flour sacks and feed sacks, dyed with blueing. Everyone in her neighborhood experienced the same lean times: "the only way we were able to survive was one would give the other one what he had—you know, sharing. That's what we called it. We were sharing. That was the only way we could make it."

Kermit Stanton, who settled in Shelby, a town north of Mound Bayou, recalled the Depression years as hard times, particularly for poor blacks. Born in 1925 to a farming family, Stanton grew up near Deeson, Mississippi, near the 38,000-acre Delta Pine and Land plantation. Although his parents owned a 160-acre farm, they had nine children. Stanton finished only eight years of schooling, dropping out to

Figure 3.4 Barn, the Delta

Figure 3.5 Tractors

farm after junior high school. He recalled the family's self-sufficiency: "We grew all the vegetables and the meats, the corn. And we had a grist mill. We ground and made our own meal. And we also made meal for the people that lived on the plantation. That's where I used to work every Saturday, at the grist mill." The family raised hogs, chickens, and cows, and the boys and men hunted "squirrels, rabbit, duck, if you could find the shells to hunt them with. Money was scarce, really scarce. You could take a nickel or fifteen cents and buy a meal with it. You know what I mean, it was hard getting the nickel and fifteen cents."[9] In 1943, when Stanton was 18, he registered for the draft, and was called to service in the navy in World War II.

Hard times seemed ubiquitous for rural black people in the Delta during the 1930s, but racism and white supremacy and segregation made survival and betterment particularly difficult. William Lucas, Sr. (figure 3.6), settled in Mound Bayou

Figure 3.6 William Lucas, Sr., 1996

in 1960, having moved up from Renova. During the Depression years, "I was at home with Papa. Papa was a good farmer. He raised plenty corn. We didn't do without fat meat, good hogs and things, because he had corn carried over from the year before. See, in 1930, it stayed dry, I think it broke the record in the state of Mississippi for being dry, everything burned up. Corn burned up that year."[10] When the family had finished picking their cotton crop, Lucas's mother made her children shirts from the sacks. Lucas got several federally funded jobs in the Depression, working for the REA (Rural Electrification Authority), and digging ditches for the WPA (Works Progress Administration): "They didn't give us no cash. They'd give you an order to the store." Even the government's meager benefits were distributed according to the priorities of white supremacy, he said.

> Some poor old widow womens in Renova was saving fifteen dollars. [They were on] welfare. They didn't have all this food stamps and different things then. And there was a lady with the welfare department would come around, turn up the bed and mattress and this and that and the other. And she would holler, say, "You don't need no welfare! My mother need a maid," and sent them on down there to work. And I don't have no way of knowing what the white people was getting, but I know good and well they wasn't getting no fifteen dollars a month to live off. . . . The Depression was really hard on black people—period—but then, you know, when you're in poverty.[11]

Lucas's memory of federal and state provisions for relief were probably wrong in this instance—figures from nearby Leflore County from 1933 indicated that white families received an average of $12.16 in relief benefits, while African American families were only given an average of $5.44.[12] Nevertheless, Lucas was correct in apprehending the vast discrepancies in benefits awarded to white and black families by the federal government and the state of Mississippi.

William Lucas's narrative illustrated two aspects of the originating stories of Delta activists. The foundation of his early life, and his own family's later comfort, was the ability of his father and Lucas himself to provide for their families by skillful and industrious farming. In a context of regional poverty, and widespread African American impoverishment and economic dependence, the ability of men like Lucas and his father to raise varieties of crops and stock on their small holdings was a tribute to resourcefulness, hard work, and dedication.

Annyce Campbell was born in Mound Bayou in 1924. Her parents had separated when she was young, and Campbell's mother died when she was 5. Then her father returned and worked the family's forty-acre farm with his children, and his mother, a retired schoolteacher, helped to raise the children.

During the Depression years, she recalled, the family struggled to survive. Her oldest brother went to work for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in Meridian "to help Daddy with the children." While at the CCC camp, Campbell said, her

oldest brother drowned: the family "never knew" what happened. The father then worked on some WPA projects, and Campbell's grandmother used her knowledge and skills to help the family to survive: she made soap and starch, and the family "grew everything" in a large garden, made their own molasses from ribbon cane, and raised livestock. "We could use [a] hog for everything . . . the hoof of the hog, they say, that was good for pneumonia, for colds, and my grandmother raised horehound" and sassafras for tea.[13] Even though her family had little, Campbell managed to finish eleventh grade at Bolivar County Training School in Mound Bayou.

The themes of resourcefulness, providing, and education were echoed in Lillie Robinson's account of her childhood in Bolivar County. Robinson's family sharecropped sixty acres on the R.D. Detwiler Plantation, where they raised cotton and a "big garden." She recalled that her family "never had any problem" with local whites, and described the plantation owner, Dr. Detwiler, as a "good plantation man":

> Everybody lived on his place had to make some money. The men didn't throw away their money and then when the end of the year came, didn't have any. He would see to you making money. He would see to it every Christmas that the family had plenty of fruit and stuff and money to have toys and things. So he really was a nice person.[14]

Robinson's father, she said, was "a family man," who worked part-time to augment the family's income from sharecropping. Even though the Depression years spelled hard times for many rural Americans, according to Robinson, "my daddy always made it, because he was a hustler, you know. He got out there and provided." His ingenuity and hard work and thrift made him different from many men on plantations. Over the year, many men got periodic cash advances from a planter, which would then be held against their crops at the season's end. At the end of the year, then, "they didn't have any [money], and their wives didn't know anything about it, where they had throwed it away." But Robinson's father was a good manager: "he was the man."

Loran Hawkins, born in 1923 in Glendora, Mississippi, and raised on his father's stepfather's 120-acre farm, recalled the economic and psychological benefits of landownership. "Early part of the Depression, we didn't have any extra clothes or anything, but we didn't experience any white landlord standing over us. We were kind of our own little clan, you might say. But I didn't have any real distasteful experiences [with whites]. We were poor, mind you, real poor, but Daddy liked to fish, and he would catch fish and even sell them to some of his friends and get a little cash to go along."[15] Even though Loran's family was fortunate enough to be free of dependence on a planter and his commissary, he recalled that the plantation and sharecropping system, although oppressive, offered some benefits to rural African Americans:

> There were some positive aspects of the plantation. If there were big families and they had certain moral principles, went to church on Sunday—more went to church

> than we do now, even though we had nothing like the conveniences that we have now. And there were prominent black families, respected families, at their own little plantations. Many of them worked hard and were thrifty, and were able to buy their own land and become somewhat independent. But this is something I don't know whether too many are aware of, but the mere image of living on that plantation, working hard, has been very negative in the thinking of the younger blacks, because we can't associate any pride, many can't, of farmers because of picking the cotton and chopping the cotton for the other man, even though some of their parents were pretty successful. But in this community [Mound Bayou], there are far less independent black farmers than there were when I came here.[16]

As did many Sunflower narrators, Hawkins and Robinson expressed the classic values of uplift internalized by striving African American working-class and farming families. These families stressed the virtues of hard work, independence, thrift, and education—even though the obvious expected reward, social mobility, was greatly constrained during the era of segregation. Nevertheless, education was prized by many Mound Bayou families as a key to mobility and to general social achievement. The importance of education was a theme in many Bolivar activists' lives, because even within shared conditions of poverty, education signified a respected social status and refinement.

Schoolteacher Pauline Holmes (figure 3.7) of Mound Bayou recalled a family past of both rural plenty and subsequent hard times. Born in 1918 in Mound Bayou,

Figure 3.7 Pauline Holmes, 1997

she was raised by her grandparents until she was 12, because her mother was busy with a fast-growing family, and her grandparents—who owned a 280-acre farm—"had plenty of time." Holmes's mother and father, who lived near the grandparents, farmed their own eighty acres, but had thirteen children, ten of whom survived childhood. Pauline's grandparents were among the early settlers of Mound Bayou, and her grandmother was a licensed midwife who delivered white and black babies throughout the county. Although the grandmother, who had been a slave, told Pauline about "white people abusing black people," and the oppressive conditions that existed for African Americans who worked on white peoples' lands, she also communicated pride and self-respect to her granddaughter.

> When I would hear her talk about some of the things that black people had to go through, I left it in my mind that I would never go through them. Just listening to my grandmother, I know, helped to develop a self-esteem that has never left me.[17]

Holmes's account of her grandparents' prosperity and community status communicates a vision of refinement and social class that was unavailable for the sharecropping and tenant farming population. Her grandmother was a "very proud individual," she said, whom she had never seen dirty, like those people who worked in the fields. "She always wore white, long dresses. With the embroidery slips. I admired her." Her grandparents, she recalled, "had everything" on their 280 acres, including a grist mill, a molasses mill, and they raised potatoes, corn, pecans, walnuts, mulberries, and fruit trees. Her memory of the past was elegiac:

> Our house was on a bayou. The bayou was down, and then you were up on a hill, and it was just beautiful. It had one, two, three porches, and my grandmother would go out in the mornings and sit on the porch, and her daughters would make her coffee, and she'd sit on the porch . . . it's just a beautiful picture to me. The people would come by, you know, and, "Hey, Sis Simmons! Well, how are you, Sis Simmons? How are you doing today?" And the road was right there, and they'd sit and talk, and drink coffee.[18]

This idyllic world ended with her grandmother's death. She moved back in with her parents, whom she described as "very poor." They farmed 80 acres with their large brood. Her father, committed to educating his children, insisted that Holmes and her siblings attend school, even when they had to wrap their feet in croaker sacks in place of shoes. Despite nearly losing his land in the Depression, he promised his children that he would send them to the colleges of their choice. Pauline Holmes's childhood experiences instilled in her the pride in home and landownership. "I can brag about the fact that I always wanted my own. I wanted my own," she said. "I was always—I was born with my own. I lived with my own. I didn't want to live in anybody else's." From the earliest years of her marriage to Mound Bayou postmaster Preston Holmes (figure 3.8),

Figure 3.8 Preston Holmes, 1997

Pauline Holmes wanted to have a house of her own, and to keep her father's farm in the family.[19]

The importance of landownership for financial independence from white control, and from the oppressive conditions of sharecropping, tenancy, and indebtedness was emphasized by many narrators. All of those who became community leaders between the 1950s and 1990s came from families that had the resources and the will to avoid the entrapment of dependency, and that nurtured in their children a burning desire to become educated, and to improve their own lives. Such families formed a distinctive class stratum within the African American farming population of the Delta. Contemporary data on landownership, tenancy, and education reveal how small this black landowning, education-oriented minority was in the 1930s and

1940s. One study suggested that only 7.3 percent of African American farm operators owned their own land. In Bolivar County, only 1.8 percent of African American farmers owned the land they worked.[20]

The kind of hardscrabble self-sufficiency described by narrators like Lillie Robinson, Milburn Crowe, Kermit Stanton, and William Lucas, Sr., was common throughout the tenant farming and small-landowner black South. African American farmers and tenants supplemented their diets by hunting and fishing in the woods and swamps of the Delta. With rangy hounds, they hunted possum, raccoon, deer, rabbit, wild hogs, and squirrels. They fished in the rivers and bayous. Some men took additional seasonal jobs in sawmills, or as haulers for logging operations. Many, like Lucas and his neighbor Loran Hawkins, held full-time jobs and farmed. These men, wrote historian Jacqueline Jones, "demonstrated their self-conscious pride in their well-deserved reputations as strivers and scufflers."[21]

Whereas survival for landowning farm families required stringent thrift and hard work, the lives of propertyless working-class African Americans were consumed by even greater sacrifices. Flossie Miller Vence (figure 3.9) and Sarah Williams (figure 3.10), two sisters who grew up in Cleveland, Mississippi in the 1930s, vividly recalled their family's struggle to survive. The largest town in Bolivar County, Cleveland, then had a population of 3,240.

Born in 1928, Flossie Vence remembered that their family never had trouble with white people, "because [of] my grandmother and grandfather and how they

Figure 3.9 Flossie Miller Vence, 1996

Figure 3.10 Sarah Williams, 1996

lived, they never feared white people." Their grandmother, "Big Mama," cooked for white people, "and she never had to go from place to place." Yet Vence's memories of her grandmother's work reveal a difficult life full of hard labor and few rewards, for all of the elusive pride in not having to "go from place to place" to find work. Miller recalled the years in which her grandmother cooked for a woman who owned a boarding house:

> She would have to go in the mornings, I guess walk to work at five [AM], and she would get off after dinner, and then she would prepare supper. She would walk to work in the morning, and she would walk back in the afternoon. And then she would cook dinner, then she'd cook supper. And when she'd leave, she had a little

> pan, you know, a little granite pan, and whatsoever would be left, she would never eat. She never did worry about eating, but she wasn't no eater, but she loved to prepare good food. She would have whatsoever [the white people] had left, you know. It wasn't too much, like biscuits and hash, fried pig foots, steak, chicken, something like that. It was just a little, but she'd wait there till we was going to eat it up.[22]

The sisters' father worked for the city of Cleveland, and made very little money, and their mother worked for the laundry at Delta State College. Williams and Vence, inseparable as girls, often visited their great-aunt and uncle who owned a farm outside Cleveland. The aunt always greeted their arrival by asking her husband to "pull some more watermelon and some more cantaloupe and put them in water so they can be cooling off. And Joe, put another pot on. These children are coming. I know they're hungry. I know they're hungry." Their great-aunt, Vence said, thought "everybody who stayed up in town was hungry." Although Flossie and Sarah lived in town with their parents, they learned to pick and chop cotton at their great-aunt's farm. "We'd go down and help them," Williams recalled. "And they would be so glad to see us coming, because they know they were going to get a bale of cotton." Vence seconded: "She'd say, 'Oh, these children are going to help me get two bales today.' " They were "paid off" on Saturdays at wages of twenty-five cents a day for chopping.

Williams's and Vence's story contained several emblematic themes common to many Delta narratives: of survival recalled in terms of food and providing, of early work, and of a continuing scramble to provide the bare necessities for one's immediate family. When Flossie Vence left school after the eighth grade, she got a job at the laundry at Delta State College so that she could "help out" her parents, and "buy some clothes" for herself and her siblings. Sarah Williams left school after the tenth grade to help care for her mother's new baby. Her mother had earlier had one arm cut off by a machine at the Delta State laundry, where she continued to work. Eventually, Flossie found a job at a cafe in Cleveland, where she became a cook.[23]

Williams's and Vence's testimonies differ from those of narrators Pauline Holmes, Loran Hawkins, and Olevia Johnson on several counts. First, Flossie's and Sarah's fond memories concern the provision of food—the literal providing of food by their grandmother and great-aunt. Simply *having* food was noteworthy. The women did not recall rural abundance: the reader has no sense that their family could can or otherwise store food for lean winters and the cold months of early spring. Rather, the sisters remembered the family having received commodity foods from the federal government in the 1930s: "some kind of [canned] beef, prunes and raisins," and rice, cornmeal, and margarine. The memory of food, getting food, and having food resonated powerfully in their stories of childhood and of their teenage years.

Second, Vence's and Williams's stories of their parents depicted the arduous work and low wages of the Southern working poor: their father made little from his job for the city of Cleveland, and rode the rails for some of the Depression years, looking for work. Their mother did domestic work until she took a job with the

laundry at Delta State. When their mother's arm was severed by a mangle at the Delta State laundry, the college paid her doctor's bill, and gave her a lifetime job—at $7.50 a week.

Neither Flossie nor Sarah was able to finish high school, because their family needed their contributions. After their mother's work was finished at her laundry job, Flossie and Sarah walked to their grandmother's house and "helped her at night" at the boarding house where she cooked, and where "she wasn't making nothing."

Finally, the precarious economic position of the black working poor was revealed in Vence's and Williams's evaluations of and attitudes toward white people in their community. Their attitudes were clearly formed by their relationship to these whites as impoverished employees. For example, they contrasted the experience of their grandmother's work at a boarding house, where "she wasn't making nothing," to her experiences working for a well-to-do white family: "I can say that all of them was good to us. That's the reason I had no problem. We had no problem with white people," said Williams. Countered her sister, "No, because my folks was rural folks, and they didn't take to [mistreatment]." The sisters could list the "good" white families they worked for, and how well these families, in turn, treated them. They also recalled a Mr. Lampers, a "wonderful white person," who had a farm out on Highway 8. Whenever this farmer butchered cows or hogs he would give the blacks what his family didn't eat—"the heads and tails and all that . . . [and] chitterlings." Vence remembered that black people in the community asked her, "Where is Lampers [the farmer]? He was the *best* white man."[24] Clearly, "good" white people were those who, from a position of prosperity or authority, gave good treatment and/or wages to the African Americans who worked for them. The warmth in the sisters' memory of good whites is clearly the gratitude of young women who knew very well how many black people—including their mother—had been mistreated, underpaid, and abused by whites.

Roberta Martin, who grew up in a sharecropping family in Ruleville in Sunflower County, found her life choices and her desire for schooling limited by her family's economic needs and by her own vulnerability as a young girl. She recalled a childhood scheduled by the demands of the cotton crop, and only attended school when the family didn't need her labor. As the oldest of eleven children, she also had to care for her younger siblings: "I was almost like mama, second mama." Although the black high school in Ruleville went through tenth grade, Martin quit after ninth grade to get married. "I really didn't want to get married," she explained. "But I did. Mama talked and worried me to. And then I never could get right. I stayed there [in St. Louis with her husband] just long enough to get pregnant and came back home." Martin had wanted to continue her education, but, she said, "I had an abusive father, and she [her mother] wanted to get me away. Mama had all those children, and I had a stepfather that had tried to [sexually] abuse me from the time I was eight years old. . . . I never would let him do anything. I always told my mother. But he would try. I guess now I realize that he was a sick man. But I think that was why Mama

wanted me to get away from him."[25] When Martin returned home, her status had changed. As a young mother, she attended school for a year at the Delta Training Institute in Doddsville, but was only able to finish her degree in 1968. After her year of school, she worked "different places, hotels, and homes. That's all you could do. That's all there was to do. Ran around, young, in the streets." Race relations, she remembered, were "awful. Black people caught it in Ruleville, right there in that town. You know how people gather up in town on Saturday? They had this old man named Storey, that was supposed to be the law, and he would beat people, men. Least little something, he'd beat them with his whatever you call it, nightstick. And there wasn't anything nobody could do about it."[26] The only jobs available for black people, she remembered, were "in the homes or in the field."

Like Williams and Vence, Roberta Martin described a childhood full of hard work that was common among the propertyless working poor. But her story also communicates the difficult choices available to women in those families: to her mother, dependent upon a husband who tried to sexually abuse her daughter, and to Martin herself, who had to get married in order to "get away from him." The mother's promotion of her daughter's unwanted marriage testifies to her own powerlessness, and also to the powerlessness of young girls in such families. For the sake of the family's survival, Martin's mother needed her stepfather's labor, and she also needed for her daughter to marry in order to remove her from the attention of her stepfather. The stepfather's sexual predation also threatened the status and authority of the mother, who could realistically fear being "replaced" in the family system by her daughter as a wife-surrogate.[27]

Shadow of a Nightmare

Women and men from independent farming families knew the dangers of segregation and white supremacy, as did the children of landless day laborers. A number of family stories related the disappearance of an ancestor or relative—a black man who had run afoul of whites, and had then fled the state, or simply vanished. Earl Lucas (figure 3.11), William Lucas's second son, recalled that his grandfather told him stories about the reasons that his family moved from their original home in Gloucester, Mississippi, to the Delta. Lucas's grandmother's brother, a schoolteacher in the area, had "said something in the [local] store that made some of them [whites] angry. . . . They said he was a sassy black person, didn't know how to talk to white people." According to the family story, whites on horses rode up and killed the uncle and another person. "Then they [the Lucas family] moved up to the Mississippi Delta that night."[28]

Whether lynched or driven away by whites, or drawn to abandon his family from other motives, this missing male figure haunted many family stories and narratives of survival. The vulnerability of black men to violence and incarceration for any

Figure 3.11 Earl Lucas, 1996

perceived offense against whites meant that many families were left desperate and unprotected by the loss of a husband or father. Migration and dreams of greater opportunities also lured men from the small farms and family obligations in "the rural." This appeared to be especially true in the years of the Great Depression, when many American men left their families to search for work. Often, these separations became permanent, and wives and children were left to struggle for themselves.[29]

Annyce Campbell of Mound Bayou related another story of a vanished ancestor, and the family's move from Panther Burn in Sharkey County, Mississippi, to Bolivar County. Campbell stated that her father, his siblings, and his mother were brought to Bolivar County by her grandfather due to "something that took place at Panther Burn. . . . he brought his wife and boys to the Delta. He just vanished and they never knew what happened to him." According to Campbell, the grandfather was to have been hung by whites in Panther Burn, but was "given permission" to take his family to Bolivar County so that "it wouldn't happen in the presence of his wife and his boys. . . . Of course, he never returned." Her grandmother was said to have received two letters from her husband, who had crossed the border into Louisiana. One of the letters "stated that perhaps she would not hear from him anymore." Fortunately for her children, the grandmother was a schoolteacher, and had sufficient funds to buy eighty acres of land.[30]

Sarah Williams and Flossie Vence grew up hearing stories of "hangings" in Bolivar County, and of murders of black people by whites. This knowledge conditioned their

responses to their mother's accident in Delta State's laundry. An older sister, then living in Indianapolis, wanted to sue Delta State for compensation on behalf of their mother. But, she warned her younger sisters, they must leave Mississippi before she began her lawsuit. "So we wondered why did she want us to leave," recalled Miller. "She said, 'Because you all can't stay there [Cleveland] anymore.' She said, 'You can't stay there anymore because they would kill you.' " The girls came to believe—as did their sister—that whites would kill them if "she [the sister] sued and we was still living here." The older sister never initiated a lawsuit, however, because "we wouldn't leave, and she was scared. She didn't want them to kill us. We wouldn't agree, you know, we just didn't know no better. That's the bottom line, ignorant to the facts of life. . . . You talk about making us tremble." The terrible knowledge of the violence of segregation's enforcement conditioned Williams's and Vence's responses to the injustices of their early lives.

Bolivar narrators whose families owned even a little land, or who lived in all-black communities like Mound Bayou, often developed a sense of physical and psychological resilience to the hovering threat of white violence that so haunted the existence of the landless poor. It was noteworthy that Earl Lucas and Annyce Campbell's memories of white violence came to them from a past they had not experienced, rather than a vividly present terror. Sarah Williams, Flossie Vence, and Roberta Martin had no such buffers in their childhoods. Dangers were clear and present, the products of their poverty and economic dependence.

The Struggle for an Education

Sporadic terrorism, everyday violence, and the economic coercions of the sharecropping and tenant-farming system functioned to make most black farmers landless farm laborers and tenants in the first three decades of the twentieth century. White hostility to educated blacks, and the continuing dependence of white landlords on low-wage black workers made even a high school education an individual, family, and community achievement for rural black Mississippians. Poorly funded public schools, a widespread shortage of secondary schools—public or private—and parents' need for their children's labor meant that many rural youngsters received only a few months of school, most of them in the primary grades.

Like many Southern states, Mississippi offered grossly unequal opportunities to its black and white students. Between 1913 and 1950, school expenditures for African Americans fluctuated between 19 and 26 percent of school expenditures dispersed for whites. According to historian Neil R. McMillen, "financially starved black schools served white interests in several ways. By limiting the quality and extent of black education, the white minority could hope to cramp black political aspirations, inhibit black ability to compete economically, and assure an adequate supply of low-wage menial black labor."[31] Taxation and expenditure figures also suggested that

African American taxpayers subsidized the white school system, as they did "in every Southern state." Inadequate public school provision meant that private institutions and black communities shared the burden of educating many black children. Communities often raised matching monies required to build Rosenwald Fund schools, and thus effectively paid a "double tax" in order to educate children. Rosenwald schools were named for Sears Roebuck magnate Julius Rosenwald, whose foundation built schools for African Americans in the rural South in the early twentieth century. By 1932, when the Rosenwald Fund ended its school-building program, its funds had aided the building of 633 schools in Mississippi, and Rosenwald schools "represented 89 percent of the value of all black school property" in the state.[32] Because African American communities invested so much in their schools, parents felt a fierce sense of ownership and involvement with principals, teachers, and the educational process.[33]

These collective sacrifices were a testament to parents' belief in education as the primary mechanism of racial "uplift" and self-improvement. Still, asserts McMillen, "By virtually every objective measure, [African American Mississippians] were the nation's most educationally deprived people."[34] Many Delta narrators attended privately funded or religiously based "colleges" for their high school education. A number of these schools, which were constructed for African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, actually performed the much-needed task of providing primary and secondary education to their pupils. Even Tougaloo College, the best private educational institution for African Americans in the state, devoted much of its sparse resources to its primary and secondary education departments in the first half-century after its founding in 1869. These black colleges often featured a wide range of ages in their classes and student bodies, as teenagers and working adults often took the same secondary-level courses.

Mound Bayou citizens had a deep and early commitment to education; for many years of the twentieth century, the community had the only high school available for African American teenagers in the area. Narrators remember that a number of families from other counties sent their children to high school in Mound Bayou and boarded them there while they attended classes at the Bolivar County Training School. The town had a reputation for "proud black people" who prized their learning and independence. If an African American in another Delta town did not act with the amount of deference expected by local whites, it was frequently assumed that he or she was from Mound Bayou. According to Milburn Crowe, "we were like foreigners, were excused, we were classed in the same sense as a foreigner coming into the South and not knowing how to behave." Mound Bayou citizens' dedication to education was illustrated by their generous support of their local schools throughout the first half of the century. Preston Holmes, born in 1914, was strictly reared by his contractor father and housewife mother. His parents kept him in school as much as was possible during the school year: "Not only did I go to school nine months a year, but whoever taught school in the summer, my father saw to it that I attended that

school." In the evenings, Holmes's mother made sure that their daytime learning was instilled. "There were three of us," said Holmes. "And she'd have spelling bees among the three children and learn the capitals of all the states among the three children, and those are things that we did." When Holmes finished school in Mound Bayou, his parents sent him to Campbell College in Jackson for two years, and then to Rust College, a small institution founded in 1886 in Holly Springs by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Holmes entered Campbell College in 1932, "in the peak of the Depression." His parents sacrificed to send him to school, with his mother sending him $3 a week that she earned from chopping cotton.[35]

A number of other Delta narrators traveled a considerable distance to receive more than a primary-school education. William Lucas, Sr., was sent to Alcorn Agricultural & Mechanical College for his secondary schooling. Pauline Holmes, Olevia Johnson, and other Mound Bayou leaders attended the Mound Bayou Normal and Industrial Institute, founded in 1892 by the American Missionary Association. A number of Coahoma County narrators received much of their education from "Aggie," Coahoma Agricultural High School, which later became Coahoma Junior College. This high school was the only one of the state's forty-nine agricultural high schools open to black students. As with the Mound Bayou Training School, parents often boarded their children at "Aggie" so that they could attend the high school. Yet even with the sacrifice that parents and communities were willing to make in order to educate their children, Mississippi's rates of black high school attendance were low even by rural Southern standards. In 1930–1931, whereas 46 percent of white students aged 15–19 were enrolled in grades nine–twelve, only 4 percent of black teenagers were. The numbers for 1940–1941 were little better: the percentage of white students in high schools had climbed to 56 percent, but that of black students was only 11 percent. By 1950–1951, these numbers had improved: 62 percent of white youth, and 25 percent of African American young people attended high school. Moreover, the largely rural and small-town state was "the only southern state that did not appropriate public funds for school transportation" for its black pupils.[36]

The low numbers of African American high school students are not surprising when one considers the scarcity of opportunities to pursue an education. In 1924, Mississippi had built only three public high schools for blacks, and these were in Vicksburg, Mound Bayou, and Yazoo City. The Mound Bayou facility, which cost $115,000 to build, was constructed with funds contributed by the black donors. Later in that decade, the state built three more high schools for blacks, one of which was Coahoma's high school, "Aggie." In contrast to the six public high schools open to African Americans in 1930, the state had 1,020 public high schools for whites.[37]

In the first half of the twentieth century, education was a privilege, rather than a right, for African Americans in Mississippi. The narrative of "getting an education" was frequently told as a story of struggle, hard work, achievement, and patronage by our narrators. This struggle was frequently an individual, family, and communal effort. Even when "double-taxed" to help support their children's education, African

American parents were very proud of and attached to their local schools. Many poor parents, like Pauline Holmes's father, frequently made great sacrifices to educate their children. And young people themselves were very much aware of their own roles as future community leaders and as examples of the virtues of hard work. In a state and region that were overwhelmingly hostile to black aspirations, self-assertion, and knowledge, an educated African American was a source of considerable pride for his or her family and community. Education was a prize to be worked for, won, and put into practice in sustained community service and leadership. As such, education represented a community's investment in its survival and eventual improvement.

A number of narrators began their schooling in one-room schools, many of them located in plantation churches in rural areas. In the church schools, students' ages varied; a teacher might instruct pupils ranging in age from 6 to 15. Although whites and blacks attended such schools in "the rural" in the 1930s, blacks were far more likely to go to one-teacher schools than whites. Until the middle years of the twentieth century, a majority of black schools were small, one-teacher rural institutions.

Loran Hawkins, a very light-skinned man, was born in 1923 in Glendora, in Tallahatchee County. Hawkins's father inherited a large share of his stepfather's 120 acres of land, and $25,000 in savings when the older man died in 1936. Because Glendora "had no schools beyond the eighth grade," Hawkins's father sent his children to board with an uncle in Mound Bayou over the 1936–1937 school term. "We boarded here until 1940, and my dad bought this forty acres of land in 1940 just to give us an opportunity to go to school here in Mound Bayou, because Mound Bayou at that time was the best school system of the Delta for blacks." Hawkins stayed in school through the tenth grade.[38]

Preston Holmes finished at Campbell College, and moved on to Rust College, where he graduated in 1935. His future wife, Pauline, finished high school in Mound Bayou in 1935. Despite the hardships of the Great Depression, her father had promised his children to send them to a college of their choice. Pauline decided to attend Tuskegee in Alabama, but was then accosted by a teacher in Mound Bayou who reminded her that Tuskegee would cost more than her father, with "all of those children out there," could afford. The man told her, "I can get you some help from Rust College," a small liberal-arts school in Holly Springs. Pauline was awarded a working scholarship—"The first year I went to Rust, I ironed shirts. That's the way I made my money to go." Clothes for college came from another source:

> As God would have it, my daddy had—we called them "rich cousins," and they didn't have any children. She lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She heard that Sam's daughter was going to school. When I got ready to go to school, a trunk came. The trunk was filled with everything. She had a store in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and didn't have any children. It was filled with everything a college child would want. The umbrella, the raincoat, the everything. That trunk was filled.

When Holmes entered Rust, she met a young woman who became her roommate. "She tells, the reason she wanted to room with me, she thought I was rich, because, see, I came in there with all of these clothes. Had nothing, had nothing, but if it hadn't been for that lady, you know, that I would have just gone up there with my meager whatever it is." Holmes and her roommate were the same size, and shared the trunkful of clothes for four years. They remained close friends for the rest of their lives. In addition to her working scholarship, Holmes's father sent her $2.50 a month for other expenses. She majored in home economics, and graduated at the top of her class.[39]

The education that students of Preston and Pauline Holmes's generation received in black public and church schools was laden with many of the moral and political values taught to Southern white children. According to historian Leon Litwak, "self-improvement manuals, biographies of self-made men, and inspiring success stories abounded in the black communities, as in the white." Generations of black and white students absorbed "the moral and patriotic lessons taught in nearly every school and from every pulpit, the virtues of work ethic esteemed by mid-nineteenth-century Americans and propagated in *McGuffey's Readers* and in the Webster blue-back speller." These sources extolled America as "a democracy of economic equality, in which success came ultimately to the hardworking, the sober, the honest, and the educated." Black and white students were taught to be hardworking, punctual, and diligent, who would serve their employers obediently, and to be thrifty, clean, moderate in all habits, and Christian in character.[40] The irony of these messages was not lost on narrators like Kermit Stanton and William Lucas, who early perceived the very unequal treatment that state and local authorities accorded white and black Mississippians. Nevertheless, Holmes, Hawkins, Lucas, and Stanton all absorbed and represented the virtues of hard work, frugality, temperance, and diligence in their personal lives. And at least to some level, these men and their families believed in the democratic promise of American life that was propagated by their patriotic and nationalistic schooling. Such men entered World War II hoping that their service might produce major and lasting changes in the lives of black Southerners.[41]

Narrators of the Holmes' generation also expressed the values that had been created by the necessities of the "parallel world" inhabited by African American Southerners. School stories emerged from their narratives as morality tales in which "getting an education" typically combined family sacrifice and devotion with individual pluck, luck, and perseverance. Also, the lessons learned within the often hard-pressed black communities of the 1930s reappeared in the schooling stories: one was expected to help others, to share resources, and to demonstrate the qualities of diligence, hard work, and frugality. And this generation believed, with a sometimes wistful faith, in the promises of democracy and opportunity that were taught by their schools and families. Indeed, in the aftermath of Preston Holmes's World War II service, he and Pauline decided to gain leadership positions in the statewide organization

of American Legion posts—then rigidly segregated into white and black units. And Loran Hawkins, Kermit Stanton, William Lucas, Sr., and Olevia Johnson joined the NAACP, then led by the legendary Amzie Moore, a postal worker from Cleveland, Mississippi, who in the 1950s and 1960s helped to lead local and regional voting rights campaigns. Hawkins, Stanton, and Preston and Pauline Holmes also became fervent community leaders in Bolivar County—serving as bridges and as exemplary citizens to both the white and black inhabitants of their region.

World War II and Its Aftermath

As in Sunflower County, World War II brought few changes for many African Americans in Bolivar County, at least in terms of relations with white people. Velma Bartley (figure 3.12), born in 1922 to a farming family in Bolivar County, recalled few changes in her life during the war years. She remembered rationing, "because you had to take a little bit and make it go a long way," but didn't recall any alterations in community life.[42] Daisie Conwell, who farmed with her husband in Winstonville, a hamlet above Mound Bayou, chiefly remembered the war years in terms of rationing and cotton prices.[43]

Wesley Liddell, who worked as a mechanic at a car dealership in Drew, Mississippi for most of the war, didn't recall noticing any changes in the Delta as a

Figure 3.12 Velma Bartley, 1996

result of the war. Born in 1907 to a sharecropping family, he remembered that racial relations were "rough" in his youth, when he heard about "lynching and killing and shooting, and this, that, and the other." But, he said, his family avoided the kind of behavior that led to such unequal confrontations. "We never had any trouble with [whites]," he said, "we was always what you call pretty good folks." As a mature man and an automobile mechanic during the war years, Liddell was not called into the service, and "wasn't too close" to the men who served in the military. He didn't notice whether the war had changed the attitudes of the returning black veterans. Liddell moved to Mound Bayou from Drew in 1945 to open his own automobile shop, and, in 1950, added a gas station to the front of his business. "I had a pretty good little business during those times," Liddell recalled. But he indicated that he had not been involved with protest activities in the 1950s, when the Emmett Till murder, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, and the Little Rock School Crisis made national headlines. "I push my own buggy, tend my own business," he said.[44]

Liddell's testimony echoed the claims of several narrators of his generation who were not involved in World War II. These women and men noted that Mississippi didn't seem much changed by the war, and chiefly registered the world-shaping event in terms of cotton prices and rationing. For the men who left the state for military service, however, the war induced a different kind of social learning than they had received in segregated Mississippi. First, many realized that racism permeated the military as it did Southern society. Second, they learned that different conditions and relationships were possible elsewhere. Third, they emerged with an enhanced sense of self that came from their service in a citizens' army. A large number came to see themselves as American citizens, and returned home ready to enact those rights through community leadership and public leadership roles.

The wartime service of Mississippi African Americans was difficult, at times disillusioning, and inspired many to change their own lives and communities in the postwar world. According to Neil McMillen, some 85,000 African Americans from Mississippi served in the segregated armed forces in World War II. These men frequently encountered blatant discrimination from the white officers who were routinely assigned to all-black units. Black troops were given the hardest and most demeaning physical work, and were restricted from many lines of advancement within the services. Since 80 percent of all U.S. troops who were black trained at bases and posts in the Southern states, African American soldiers often encountered the uglier aspects of segregation during trips off base. Southern whites were particularly enraged by the sight of a black serviceman in uniform, and a number of black soldiers were murdered by Southern whites during the war years.[45]

Despite the hardships and discrimination in the military, African American servicemen discovered new capacities in themselves during the war: many gained an enhanced sense of competency, and discovered that they were "able to compete" with whites. As a result, returning veterans hoped most immediately to "better" themselves

through the educational and training programs available through the GI Bill, and were determined to have a "decent job" at the war's end. Accordingly, many Delta veterans pursued education or training when they returned, and became increasingly resentful of the limited opportunities available to educated blacks in the South.[46]

The Mississippi Delta to which veterans returned seemed unchanged from the Depression-era region. White elites still controlled land and capital, and had continued to exploit their African American labor force despite the financial benefits allotted to them by New Deal crop-reduction and agricultural subsidy payments. Indeed, if anything, the Depression and war years had strengthened the hand of the planter class in Southern states. Crop reduction programs meant that they needed fewer sharecroppers and workers, and could thus evict troublesome tenants with impunity. The lingering, if uneasy, alliance between conservative white Democrats and the New Deal meant that tenant unrest and black interests were successfully submerged in the Depression and war years.

Like many of our narrators, William Lucas, Sr., saw few real changes in Mississippi:

> [The war] helped to the extent that a lot of boys went and got a lot of education through [the military] experience, but as far as being better for us when we got back, no. A black boy, after the war was over, couldn't wear the uniform downtown, down in Cleveland. [White folks would] get mad with them. . . . if a Negro had a car, he couldn't park it on the Main Street in Cleveland. He had to park it up in the alley. Now, the onliest way you could park a car on Main Street in Cleveland was if you was driving for a white man.[47]

Lucas's sense of race and history was shaped by his experiences in Bolivar County. When Lucas was young, his father warned him, "You can't say 'Republican' in Cleveland. You might get beat up." Addressing his interviewers, Lucas asked, "You know why? The white folks in Mississippi said, 'Old Abraham Lincoln freed them niggers.' And that's the way they felt about it. Now, when they go to talking about it, they want to say everything, but he got assassinated by one stroke of the pen, and the Emancipation Proclamation freed the Negroes, even though they weren't free, they were partially free. So that's what they killed him about, in my opinion."[48] During the years of World War II, Lucas farmed in Renova and worked full-time at a company that never raised his pay above thirty-five cents an hour. A sister visiting from Gary in 1945 urged him to come home with her for awhile, and to amass some savings from the higher wages in Northern steel mills. Lucas worked through the fall, saved $1,500, and returned to Mississippi to buy a forty-acre farm.

"That's where me and my little children scuffled and got to send them to school. My wife was teaching school and I was doing everything else," he said. "I had chicken, cows, turkeys. I used to be a heck of a turkey-raiser. I raised as high as ninety-nine turkeys, grown turkeys, in one year. Good gracious, we scuffled through like that. There ain't no way for me to explain that to you, how we made it through

them years, because I just say it's a miracle, see." Lucas's story emphasized his successful struggle to provide for and educate his children in postwar Mississippi. From his work on and off the farm, and from his wife's teaching income, the couple sent all four of their children to college.[49]

Kermit Stanton was drafted in 1944, and assigned to the U.S. Navy. He left the service as soon as he had acquired the minimal number of points necessary to leave, and had stayed for only twenty-two months. "My navy experience, I didn't like it. Really," Stanton said. "The whole time I was in the navy, I was stationed on ships, from a minesweeper to repair ship to transport ship. And my duty on that ship was taking care of the captain. I cooked and served the captain, the officers' crew. That was my job, and that was why I didn't like it." Although he remembered some segregation and discrimination on ships, the men used the same facilities and quarters, "on land base, it was different. We were segregated."[50]

Loran Hawkins had completed the first semester of the eleventh grade at the time he was inducted into the army. Because he hade high scores on aptitude tests, he "never had to do menial work," and trained as an air transportation technician to drop supplies by air. At the end of the war, he served for six months with a unit in the Philippines. There, he worked one week as a messenger; the next as CQ or Charge of Quarters. He recalled a particularly galling incident during the Christmas season of 1945. Although Hawkins's regular shift was from seven to twelve at night, he was told on one evening not to report to his station until ten the following evening.

> Now, keep in mind that I'm working out of this quartermaster office, and they told me not to come until ten. So I showed up that night about ten. The biggest Christmas party was breaking up that I could imagine. People I worked with every day, they knew me, I knew them, but they decided even though my color was light, my records showed that I was black. So I was ostracized, or whatever you want to call it, from the party. But the interesting thing—You've heard the term, "Adding insult to injury." I was injured when I walked in the door and they were greeting me, "Merry Christmas" and everything. [Then] the lieutenant comes up to me and tells me he wanted me to clean up the place. Well, I had a lot of pride, and I didn't think about being demoted. I was a sergeant, you know, and this was a lieutenant. I told him, I said, "Well, I didn't do this at home. I didn't have to work like this at home." He says, "Below your dignity?" I said, "Definitely, sir."

After this exchange, said Hawkins, another coworker urged him to follow orders. "But he was at the party, see, and he didn't stay to help me. To make the story short, I cleaned it up just like I felt about it, left most of the debris right there in the middle of the floor." A little later, Hawkins was transferred from his "favorable job" as a messenger with a jeep to guard duty due to his "lack of enthusiasm." But, he said, "I wondered about how I could be enthusiastic cleaning up after a party that I hadn't been invited to. That's an experience I won't forget. That's right."[51]

That gesture of refusing to follow orders seemed to be a defining moment in Hawkins's assertion of his personal dignity. He later likened his own action to Rosa Parks's refusal to move from her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus in 1955, an act that sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956, which became the symbolic beginning of the modern American civil rights movement.

> See, I didn't clean up, and that was before [the Bus Boycott]. That was [1945], but I didn't clean up that place, and I could possibly have lost my rank by disobeying a superior officer, but I didn't think about it at that time. And I don't think that Mrs. Parks thought about what could have transpired following her refusal to move, but something told her just to sit there and be comfortable and ignore them, and somewhere down the line we're going to have to stand.[52]

Preston Holmes entered the army in 1943, after having worked at the U.S. Postal Service in Mound Bayou for several years. "I had some awful experiences in the service," he recalled. Because Holmes scored well on aptitude and intelligence tests, he was asked if he'd like to apply for OCS (Officer Candidate School) while stationed at Ft. Benning, Georgia. He agreed and was then interviewed by a board of officers:

> And they interrogated me for hours, asking me things that I thought were very germane to being an officer, and finally they asked me if I would marry a white woman. . . . And instead of saying what I should have said, now, as I look back, "No, sir, I wouldn't marry a white woman," I said, having grown up in Mound Bayou, I said what I thought. I felt whom I would marry would be a very personal matter, and it should be my prerogative to marry whomever I choose. And when I said that, they said, "That's all, Private Holmes." I knew then, brother, I had said the *wrong thing* in Georgia.[53]

As a college-educated private in the segregated army, Holmes saw enduring racist stereotypes rewarded in the black units. "If you were big and brawny and preferably black and could curse loud enough to hear you down to Greenville, they'd make you a first sergeant overnight. But if you possessed those qualifications that tend to make for leadership or positions comparable to theirs [whites'], they'd make darned sure you'd never advance." Holmes worked as a clerk in the army, under a commanding officer who was an "eighth grade student" but "a hell of a soldier." After serving in Europe, he was stationed at West Coast army posts when the war ended. At the end of his tour, the army offered him a direct commission if he would waive his right of discharge, reenlist for another three years, and go back overseas. The memory of his seasickness on his trips to Europe and back, added to the advice of his friend Amzie Moore—another Bolivar County veteran—convinced Holmes to refuse the offer. The direct NAACP leader and Cleveland postal worker had advised his friend Holmes to "get the hell out of the service."

On his trip home from Camp Shelby, Mississippi, Holmes had several bitter experiences of racism. On the day of his discharge in 1946, Preston Holmes was brought to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, by an army vehicle. Dressed in his uniform with "all these pretty stripes and bars," he went to the bus station ticket counter,

> and the lady said to me, "Nigger, get to the end of the line." Man, you don't know how I felt. She said, "Nigger, get back." And I guess my heart jumped down to my waist, you know? Serving my country. Quit the post office, assistant postmaster to draw $15.10 per month in the service. Are you following me? That's what I was drawing every month, and that's what I was paid until I went overseas.

Holmes had early decided when he entered the army that he would buy a set of "pretty luggage" before he left the military. He purchased the set he wanted, and had packed it for his bus trip from Hattiesburg to the Delta. He changed buses in Jackson, and again in Greenwood, but his luggage did not make the transfer out of Jackson. When he made another bus change in Winona, Mississippi, he decided that he was "determined to get home with that pretty luggage." So Holmes decided to stay in the bus station and wait until his luggage arrived on the next bus. He sat in the station until a man came up to him and warned, "Soldier, I don't want to get in your business, but the white men in this town don't allow colored men in uniform after dark." Preston Holmes then "got the hell out of Winona" by taking a taxi to Mound Bayou. His luggage arrived on a bus the next day. Reflecting on this experience almost fifty years later, Holmes observed, "I'm not bitter, but it hurt me very much then. I think I've kind of outgrown it now, but it's kind of hard, you'd have to think about it occasionally. You'd have to think about it."[54]

Preston Holmes's wife Pauline had her own contradictory experiences of wartime opportunity undermined by continuing white hostility. After she had graduated from Rust College, Pauline Holmes taught home economics in the black schools—earning $48 a month. She had married Preston Holmes after her graduation, when he had worked as an assistant postmaster in Mound Bayou. His army salary was considerably less than the $54 as month he'd made with the post office. When jobs opened with the War Food Administration, Pauline Holmes took a position as a home demonstration agent—teaching rural women to can fruits and vegetables, working with young people in 4-H clubs. Her first job was in Fayette, Mississippi. When Preston Holmes had entered the service, he had sold his car and bought an older car for his wife to drive, because "they [whites] didn't want [black] women to drive nice cars." When Pauline Holmes went to work in Fayette, she figured that "it would be all right for you [a black woman] to drive. But I found out it wasn't when I got to Fayette."

Pauline Holmes's lodgings were at the top of a hill in Fayette. Every morning, she drove to the post office to collect the War Food Administration's mail—"we got a lot

of mail. Instructions and things from Starkville," the state's main office:

> So I'd drive up and get my mail, like I do in Mound Bayou, and those "crackers"—I hate to say it—they would stand and look at me, you know. So I did it for four or five days, and I noticed how they'd stand and look at me, and I went back and told my landlady. She said, "Baby, I've been wanting to tell you. These white folk don't want no black woman driving no car, and I've been wanting to tell you that you ought to walk up there and get your mail." I started walking up there and getting my mail, but it was too late, because they had already done their dirt. They had called Starkville. They had sent them a telegram, and they said, "We don't need no nigger agent in our county."

Upset, Holmes told her white county agent about the experience; Holmes's black supervisor came down from Jackson. The women met with the "head folk," who assured them that the men who were watching Pauline Holmes were "just some old folk who make trouble," and that she should not worry. Assured by her boss from Jackson that the situation would change, Holmes agreed to remain in Fayette. However, later in the same day, Holmes found herself haunted by fears, wondering if she'd be murdered by the whites who didn't want her in Fayette. She imagined her body dumped in a field as an example to other blacks who might disregard the opinions of white people. The next night, she said, "I packed my car and drove to Jackson." She met with her black supervisor at Campbell College, and announced that she would not work in Fayette. She related that refusal to "the self-esteem" that she had learned from her grandmother. She was assigned to work in Hinds County, and stayed there until her husband came home from the army.[55] So Pauline Holmes did and did not share in the national story of expanded opportunities for women and minorities during World War II. To be sure, her job with the War Food Administration paid her more than teaching school, but even this federally funded work was locally constrained by the racism of Mississippi whites—even when the whites in question were poor whites in a county that was 75 percent black.

The Holmes' experiences were shared by a number of African Americans in wartime Mississippi. McMillen details the disappointing experiences that told returning black veterans that the attitudes of many white Mississippians had not changed.[56] When black veterans attempted to vote in elections of 1946, the first statewide elections since the Supreme Court outlawed the "white primary" with *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944, Mississippi whites attacked blacks at voting places, threatened others with violence, and intimidated prospective voters throughout the state. Threats, outright violence, intimidation, and economic coercion would mark white supremacist responses to black political efforts through the 1960s. From the Delta to the coastal counties, Mississippi's white elites remained determined to halt any changes in racial or labor relations.[57]

But if the state's white supremacist elite was determined to block any alterations in the racial arrangements of Mississippi, World War II and the veterans' benefits

utilized by black as well as white ex-servicemen were subtly reshaping American society and expectations in ways that the Delta planters could not have imagined. Within the next twenty years, an emerging cold war anticommunism would infuse the national political culture. The bipolar international conflict, grandly imagined as a contest between "democracy" and "communism," pitted the international rivalry as a struggle for the "hearts and minds" of the world's peoples. As the colonial empires of Europe crumbled and then collapsed in the postwar decades, the legalized segregation of the Southern states emerged as an international embarrassment. Gradually, postwar policies that supported the desegregation—if not integration—of most American institutions became a priority of various parts of the country's governing apparatus: first, in the Supreme Court and among some New Deal liberals, then, in portions of the Congress, and finally, for the presidency itself. The most important changes in the immediate cold war era were the product of pressures from an odd combination of interest groups: an American military and Congress devoted to the continuing importance of national security and defense, black protest groups like the NAACP, prominent white liberals like Eleanor Roosevelt and labor leader Walter Reuther, Republican liberals who were critical of the Southern Democrats' insistence on segregation, and the returning black veterans of World War II, many of whom lived and voted in growing and politically active communities in Northern and western cities.

When President Harry S. Truman ordered the integration of U.S. military forces in 1948, he was able to do so in the name of enhanced national security. In the early years of the cold war, the U.S. State Department was troubled by what it perceived as a large volume of Soviet propaganda that focused on the injustices of segregation and legal discrimination in the United States. Indeed, when the Truman administration filed an *amicus* brief on behalf of the plaintiffs in the school cases that became the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision, it referred to segregation and discrimination as a "source of constant embarrassment to this government."[58]

Within the seemingly contradictory context of national racial progress and continuing region-wide practices of racial oppression, a number of Delta residents began to carve out public lives devoted to community leadership and improvement in the postwar years. Although they mostly worked within the organizations and institutions of local African American communities, some became consciously involved in broader, region-wide efforts to dissolve the structures of law and custom that dictated their subordination. In that process, narrators became engaged in the complex interactions that constituted social learning—the political and social experiences that improved their understanding of the black communities in which they lived, and schooled them in the rules and practices of white people and their institutions. Experiences of social learning frequently disillusioned activists about the capacities of both the white and black communities' abilities to change, but were nevertheless the necessary first steps of real political power.

In the postwar years, Flossie Vence and Sarah Williams still measured their own lives in terms of the type of food they were able to consume, and by the kind of labor

they had to perform to obtain food, clothing, and shelter. They remembered their low wages, and the ways in which their parents and relatives were exploited, but accepted that exploitation as something intrinsic to the nature of things under segregation. In the postwar years, when national and local events like the *Brown* decision of 1954, the rise of the Citizens' Councils and massive resistance campaigns, and the Emmett Till lynching of 1955 alerted at least some Delta residents that major racial changes might occur, Flossie and Sarah were chiefly occupied with hard work. Through the mid-1960s, Sarah Williams did domestic work in a private home and at a country club for $15 a week. Her sister Flossie Vence worked a sixty-hour week as a fryer for a restaurant in Cleveland for $18.[59]

When Delta narrators decided to confront the various oppressive aspects of segregation, they did so at sites and in arenas that reflected their social and occupational status. Pauline and Preston Holmes, for example, made it their mission to rise to leadership positions in the state chapters of the American Legion. In 1965, Flossie Vence joined a strike for higher wages by organized black workers, and walked a picket line along Highway 8 in Cleveland. An underlying issue of all of the confrontations that our narrators describe is dignity. Equally important, however, was economic justice. The last was an issue of fundamental importance for Delta residents like Roberta Martin, Williams, and Vence.

Preston Holmes returned to Mound Bayou as postmaster, and began organizing an American Legion post with other African American veterans in the county. The black veterans had difficulties establishing their post, because, said Holmes, white veterans "did not want blacks in the organization." Within the separate state organizations, Holmes rose to the position of "state commander" of the black units. When he attempted to attend the American Convention in Los Angeles in 1956, white Legion members refused to allow him to travel on the bus that the white state organization had chartered to take the group to Los Angeles. Undaunted, Holmes borrowed $200 from his credit union and flew to the convention. In 1960, Holmes and another black Legionnaire traveled to Miami for the national convention. That year, due to the fact that a Miss Mississippi had been chosen as Miss America, the state delegation had a position of honor in leading the parade. Holmes, his colleague, and other members of the state delegation were on the parade grounds with TV cameras covering the formation. "Ross Barnett [Mississippi's segregationist governor] saw one dark person there. That was me." Because the other black Mississippian present was "very fair," Barnett did not single him out. However, "Ross Barnett told the white commander that if I stayed in the parade—now, he was invited because he was governor—that he wouldn't even participate." The state commander asked Holmes if he'd move from the third line of the parade to the "extreme end," so that the governor wouldn't notice him. Holmes thanked the commander, and he and his black colleague returned to the Fountainbleu and watched the parade on television. "But I didn't tell the guys when I got back home what had happened. . . . we had trouble getting guys in it [the American Legion] anyway, and if they knew a guy who had that

kind of experience, they wouldn't join." Holmes persevered in his participation in the Legion, determined to have his service—and that of other black veterans—recognized and accepted by their white counterparts.

Holmes was also active in the local branch of the NAACP in the 1950s and 1960s, which was led by his activist friend, Amzie Moore of Cleveland. Although an extremely capable man, Moore was not allowed to advance above the rank of janitor in the Cleveland post office. He was also the target of terroristic attacks by segregationist whites because of his voter-registration activities. Holmes was angered by the way that local whites treated Moore: "I swore if the opportunity was mine, I would not treat other folks the way they treated my people. I thought it was bad for them to mistreat Amzie Moore." When a young white woman made the highest score on the civil service examination for a position in the Mound Bayou post office, Holmes hired her—"and I caught hell from my friends." The young woman, who had served in the military, had received a veterans' preference in hiring, and took the job as the only white in the Mound Bayou office. She worked there for thirteen years.

While Preston Holmes continued his quiet efforts to gain respect for black veterans from whites in the state Legion posts, his wife Pauline waged her own campaign to wrest recognition and respect from the white women in the state's American Legion Auxiliaries, which were composed of the wives and mothers of veterans. She served as president of the one black district organization out of eleven state auxiliaries. The state auxiliaries observed the etiquette of segregation in their meetings and events. At state conventions, the white delegates went into the front doors of hotels, the black members in the back. At national meetings of the auxiliaries, the Mississippi delegation refused to allow Pauline to sit with them. Black high school girls could not attend the girls' state events held each year. "I think that I was determined, I was determined that there would be a change," said Pauline Holmes. "I knew that Pauline, herself, could not change it, but she did."[60]

As a result of her galling experiences with the segregated Mississippi Legion Auxiliaries, Pauline Holmes decided to learn everything about the American Legion and its auxiliaries, and to move up through the elected positions in the statewide organization. She was first elected historian of the organization, and proceeded to move up through the officers' ranks. "They were nice to me," she recalled. "I was accepted until I got to be first vice president, because they knew the next year [1975], that would be the year" of her presidency. "I carried myself very well, I ingratiated myself with the men's organizations, the women's organizations, and I did this on purpose. I *learned* white people. I learned them." When an auxiliary member tried to get another candidate to run for the statewide presidency as Pauline's rightful year approached, she told the members, "If anybody knows the organization better than I, it's perfectly all right, and I will support them"—even though she believed that the new white candidate did not possess her long-term knowledge of the group. The day before the election, as a white auxiliary member sought to dissuade one of Pauline's white friends from backing her, a friend warned, "They'd better let Pauline Holmes

alone, because she'll have all the NAACP and everybody else up here." But, recalled Holmes,

> I didn't need any NAACP. I didn't need anything but my knowledge, you know, and I told the secretary that. I said, "No NAACP will be in with me." So when election time came, my folk were there. My local organizations, for once, we stuck together. My folk were there. They spent a lot of money on the hospitality hour. I had hospitality hour just like the white folks had hospitality hour. I had my host and hostess, and all that kind of thing. . . . When it came up, the [white] lady did not run. I automatically was president, and Preston—that was the first year that they came up and presented roses to the person who was president. I had a very good year. We made our goal. Everything went beautifully.

The following year, the national organization chose Holmes to be national chairman of music in the organization—and, she said, "you know that hurt Mississippi." Holmes's one disappointment during her presidential year was that Mound Bayou did not give her a homecoming, as home communities traditionally did for state presidents—"you give a homecoming, and you invite people from all over the state. Now I don't know whether Earl Lucas [the mayor] didn't know that, but the mayor usually—the mayor did not greet me when I came home. What I mean, they had no reception, and all that kind of thing." Holmes had been the first black state auxiliary president in the South—"but our people in Mound Bayou didn't see the value in that."[61]

Pauline Holmes's disappointment with her home community may well reflect widespread class divisions in African American political culture in the mid-1970s, a period affected by the more radical phases of the civil rights movement. In many communities, local leaders and activists were drawn to issues of black nationalism, community control, and to a rediscovery of the strength and beauty of the folk cultures of working-class and poor African Americans. In such an atmosphere, the winning of the state presidency of American Legion Auxiliaries may not have seemed a profound victory to others involved in community politics. But the fact that Mayor Earl Lucas apparently overlooked the protocol for a state president's homecoming might also reflect intra-class and intra-family divisions within Mound Bayou. That community had for decades been split by contests between members of the "founding families"—like Preston and Pauline Holmes—and the newer settlers, like Lucas and Hawkins. These divisions and intra-family struggles continued to undermine a precarious sense of community unity through the 1970s and 1980s, even as Mayor Earl Lucas brought millions of federal dollars to Mound Bayou for community improvements.

But Pauline's and Preston's efforts also reflected their personal identification with American promises of individual freedom, progress, and mobility through meritocracy. In the community of Mound Bayou, which even in the 1970s looked

nostalgically to its golden age at the turn of the century, this kind of fervent individualism—premised on an unmediated relationship with the founding documents—was not rare. Loran Hawkins, a postal worker and NAACP member, displayed a similar devotion to individual recognition and to the performance of dignity throughout his career.

Loran Hawkins's connection of his refusal to compromise his dignity and Mrs. Parks's symbolic act of resistance became representative of a number of interactions with those he considered unfair or discriminatory in the white and black communities of Bolivar County over the next three decades. Immediately following his wartime service, Hawkins returned to the forty-acre farm his father had purchased in Mound Bayou, and worked with his father for several years. In 1953, when the rural letter carrier in Mound Bayou retired, Hawkins and other candidates took the U.S. Postal Services exam—post office employment was then still regarded as a very good job for black men in the segregated South. Although Hawkins passed the exam, "certain persons in the community"—descendants of Mound Bayou's "first families," preferred that a native-born Mound Bayou person win the post-office appointment. Hawkins had to "do a good deal of political maneuvering," but he got the job as a rural letter-carrier, and combined this job with farming for the rest of his working life. Although the conflict with his community's leaders might have embittered Hawkins, he asserted that "I have not let any of that keep me from serving my community and my dedication to the town, because the mere fact that I was able to get the job enabled me to educate all of my children, and they're all doing well." His schoolteacher wife also worked full-time in the county, and then directed a local Head Start center for seventeen years. The couple sent all eight of their children to college.[62]

The Hawkins family's farm in Tallahatchee County had adjoined a plantation, and shared a pasture with the plantation's lands. In the late 1950s, the white owners decided to turn the pasture over to farming, cleared the three acres of the land that belonged to the Hawkins family, "and actually took charge" of it. Loran Hawkins paid a visit to a family member and the family's lawyer, to argue that the land belonged to his family. The lawyer started to discuss the legal aspects of the situation, and Hawkins replied, "I didn't come over here to discuss the legal aspects of it." He believed that the family heir, "once he realized that he had just three acres of our land, he would voluntarily turn it over to us." The lawyer then told the heir that Hawkins had "brought up a moral question." The two sides disagreed on how to proceed. In subsequent weeks, Hawkins hired a surveyor to confirm and draw the original boundaries of the land. Hawkins and his father then visited the planter at the family's plantation commissary, where they shared memories of the owner's grandfather from the days when Hawkins's father had hunted and fished with the older white man. The planter's examination of a map revealed that his family was using the Hawkins' land. The white farmer then gave the Hawkins family the land, on the condition that his family retained a right of way through it. The resolution had come through the

family heir, "without costing us one dime." Hawkins's use of a "personal, persuasive" approach, he felt, was far more effective than confrontation or litigation would have been.

Loran Hawkins's use of persuasion, historic family and community relationships, and an emphasis on the morality of his request was repeated throughout his career as a leader in Mound Bayou, and in larger Bolivar County efforts in the 1970s through the 1990s. In many ways, Hawkins and Preston and Pauline Holmes personify the role of the "racial negotiator" used by many African American community leaders in the 1950s and early 1960s. The racial negotiator applied pressure on white institutions and individuals by the skilled use of persuasion, moral arguments, and by the unquestioned strength of his or her own character and dignity.[63] As a member of the salaried middle class within Mound Bayou, and as a postal employee, Hawkins enjoyed an immunity from the direct economic pressures and racist behavior that many white employers used against their black subordinates. His independence—like that of Preston and Pauline Holmes—meant that Hawkins could *choose* the sites of his interactions with white people, and thus could choose the issues that he would promote or oppose in the changing racial world of the Delta in the late twentieth century.

The black wage-working poor and sharecroppers could not choose their sites of engagement, and felt far more vulnerable to the possibilities of white violence and terrorism than did the relatively autonomous citizens of Mound Bayou. For Roberta Martin, the Emmett Till murder in 1955 suggested terrifying possibilities. "It was terrible. It was awful," said Martin, recalling that the perpetrators of the murder had stolen the fan that weighted Till's body from a gin close to her home in Boyle, a hamlet below Cleveland. Martin had married Willie Lee Martin in 1952, and in 1954, the couple had moved to Boyle. The Till murder reinforced her fears and protectiveness about her own sons, born in 1956 and 1958:

> I never allowed my boys to walk anywhere because I was afraid. They used to have friends. They'd go out and go around to their home, and we always carried them, because I was afraid something would—white people were bad about, if they see you walking, they would throw [things] at you, run out the road after you. They always had been doing those kind of things. And then after they killed that boy, I was afraid for my boys to walk the road.[64]

When Kermit Stanton returned to the Delta after the war, he farmed for a year or so on some land he rented from an elderly aunt. Then, because farming wasn't what he wanted to do, he moved to Shelby in 1948, and studied automobile mechanics under the GI Bill. The Delta, he said, hadn't changed much:

> Mostly it was the same after the war as it was before the war, if you want to know the truth about the whole setup. They didn't recognize you no more after the war than they did before the war. You know, it was still here just as bad.

Although Stanton knew "quite a few" black servicemen who returned to the Delta after the war, most of them stayed home for a short while. "Shelby at the time was controlled by white plantation owners," he said. "They was the mayor and the board and everything else as far as Shelby was concerned." The planters had long discouraged industries from locating in the Delta, due to their historic needs for low-wage black labor, and their hostility to any kind of labor organization. But with cotton agriculture becoming mechanized—in no small part due to the largesse of the New Deal and Department of Agriculture policies—the planters needed fewer hands and families. The returning veterans joined the stream of Delta residents headed North.[65] Stanton, however, stayed and continued working for the automobile dealership where he had trained. He married in 1953.

Working in an auto dealership in Shelby, Stanton often heard the responses of his employers and their white customers to the *Brown* decision. "They was totally against that, you know. I never did say anything. I'd just go back and do my job." Stanton also heard about the organizing of the segregationist White Citizens' Councils in the mid-1950s. With a wife and child to support, Stanton felt that he couldn't leave his job as a mechanic for an uncertain, if politically freer, life elsewhere. Stanton had joined the Bolivar County NAACP branch headed by Amzie Moore, and paid his poll tax in order to vote in the 1950s. "And there wasn't too many people paying the poll tax; they couldn't afford to pay the poll tax."

Bolivar County narrators Loran Hawkins, Kermit Stanton, and Preston Holmes returned home with a determination to enter public life. Although they were not militant "race men" like Clarksdale druggist Aaron Henry, Bolivar NAACP president Amzie Moore, or NAACP field representative Medgar Evers, they nevertheless pursued public leadership roles within the segregated black community, and then in the wider arena of biracial community leadership in the desegregating Delta counties of the 1970s and 1980s. For such men, and for women like Pauline Holmes, public recognition of their service by a biracial constituency was extremely important. Recognition demonstrated their public achievements as citizens and leaders, and was an affirmation of their identities as Americans.[66]

The ambitious community service and leadership that Holmes, Stanton, and Hawkins pursued represented a public enactment of the citizenship rights that they had earned through their sacrifices in military service. In a society that routinely rendered African Americans invisible when they were not targeted out for harassment or violent retribution, public service roles repudiated racist stereotypes of African Americans. Public service and leadership necessitated some form of recognition from the leaders of the white minority in the Delta. This recognition, even when it was formally granted to the office or position held by an African American, signaled at least limited acquiescence to the truth of the black leader's self-presentation as a dignified, competent, worthy individual and citizen. By enacting citizenship in this way, leaders like Stanton and Hawkins forced a kind of mutuality of public respect and reciprocity, even if the private attitudes of white people remained unchanged. For such men,

this recognition amounted to a public affirmation of their sense of dignity and self-worth, an affirmation that was all the more valuable for having been wrested from adversaries.

Over the era of "Massive Resistance" to *Brown* and other federal civil rights laws that lasted from 1954 through the late 1960s in Mississippi, the Citizens' Councils, state and local officials, and a revitalized Ku Klux Klan mounted a campaign of "legal" and extralegal terror against black activists. Additionally, Mississippi created a State Sovereignty Commission, a police and spy network devoted to undermining and hindering any black activism, or dissenting opinion within the state. The Sovereignty Commission had strong ties to both the Citizens' Councils and to the Ku Klux Klan. To broaden the scope of state authority and jurisdiction in the matters of race, the Mississippi legislature—like legislatures in many other Southern states—passed an array of segregation statutes that further constricted freedom of speech, assembly, association, and political action when those rights contradicted official state policy that mandated segregation and white supremacy. This combination of state measures and economic and political coercion drove the state NAACP organization underground, and extralegal violence and terrorism frightened many African Americans into a grim silence on issues such as political rights and voting.

By 1955, tightening state controls over the media, an increasingly rigid siege mentality among white elites, and the corresponding tendency to link any form of racial change or desegregation to "communist" influences and "race-mixing" ideas left the state's few black activists increasingly isolated within their thoroughly frightened communities. Dr. T.R.M. Howard, a businessman, physician, and political leader from Mound Bayou in the Delta, who had earlier organized the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) was driven from the state. Howard had infuriated Bolivar whites by organizing a "Don't Buy Gas Where You Can't Use the Bathroom" campaign in the early 1950s, and by his vocal opposition to the Till lynching. Whites had retaliated by issuing death threats against Howard, financially handicapping his investments, and using government agencies to harass him.[67]

Postal employee and businessman Amzie Moore of Cleveland, president of Bolivar County's NAACP, was as much a target of segregationist pressures as was Howard. In 1954, his banker called in his $6,000 mortgage on his home and service station. Moore was also the target of death threats and other harassment in the 1950s and 1960s, as he pushed the issue of voter registration in Cleveland and in the Delta. Like other black leaders and "race men," Moore was discouraged by the lack of support from the black middle class for civil rights issues that ranged from community organizing to school desegregation and voting. Teachers, ministers, and businessmen who lived in their own small and comfortable world in the segregated state were "not interested in the freedom of the common Negro in Mississippi," wrote Moore in 1955. Schoolteachers, as state employees, were forbidden to participate in civil rights activities. Additionally, black schoolteachers realized that their teaching positions and privileges within the segregated system would, in all likelihood, be threatened if

school integration became a reality. Many knew that their qualifications might not match those of white teachers whose education had been better funded, equipped, and supplied by state institutions. Similarly, black business people whose prosperity depended on a captive market of African American customers were also skeptical about the promised benefits of racial integration. Additionally, some preachers had long reached an accommodation with white elites by downplaying politics and activism of any sort in their churches. Since these professionals benefited from the segregated system, many came slowly and late to the civil rights struggle.

Although Moore despaired of the apathy of the black professionals, his organization in Bolivar County drew a mix of small farmers, postal employees, and small business owners like Olevia Johnson of Mound Bayou and Lillie Robinson of Cleveland into activism. His base of support included workers like Kermit Stanton, Reuben Smith, Sarah Williams, and Flossie Vence; farmers William Lucas and Herman Perry; and a young preacher named Sammie Rash.

Stories and Meanings

Memories of rural plenty and family nurture emerged from interviews with a number of Bolivar County narrators, especially from those of small landowning farmers in Mound Bayou. The language of the stories is elegiac and, at times, nostalgic: it is a portrait of a secure, nurturing, and supportive community devoted to the education and aspirations of its young. The nostalgia of these stories resembles those of many other adult survivors of poverty and hard times, a resolute tribute to an era when "we were poor but we were happy." But the silences and shadows behind these stories are equally compelling. The silences have to do with the widespread danger and hunger that surrounded Mississippi African Americans who did not own property, and who did not reside in the relative security of all-black communities. Also, the stories of the struggle—generally successful—for education and betterment do not mention how relatively rare this was for African Americans who were born in the Delta between the 1920s and the 1940s. A survey of Southern farms between 1910 and 1940 indicated that not more than 20 percent of black farmers owned their own land.[68] Moreover, a 1988 study conducted in nearby Tunica County, Mississippi, revealed that among sixty-one elders aged 55 years or older, the average level of education was only a little more than three years. This survey also reported a high rate of male mortality, and high rates of family disintegration in the plantation district.[69]

This was the background to the warm memories of nurturing, economic independence, and an insistence on dignity and self-worth within families of the narrators. Milburn Crowe's memories of his own family's bounty within the safety and security of Mound Bayou illustrate a kind of happy exceptionalism to a regional portrait of deprivation and terror. Crowe and other narrators expressed pride and gratitude to their fathers as *providers*, as nurturing and strong men who cared well for

their families. Such men—"scufflers and strivers"—set a very high standard for other African American men. Their grown children's tributes may also be a response to their knowledge that many men could not provide as well as did their fathers, and that many children—at least 50 percent in Black Belt regions in the 1930s—were malnourished. How does one valorize the luck and fortunate circumstances of survival in these threatening conditions except by references to the laudatory heroes extolled by the dominant culture in schools, churches, and civic organizations? Again, the values of individualism and uplift would function to make exceptional achievement of providing one's children with sufficient food and with an education in the Depression years of the 1930s to seem more widely available than they were. In this instance and others, we must remember that oral histories are recorded with survivors of historical events and transformations—and the high mortality rates among African Americans in the Delta throughout the twentieth century have muted the stories of the wider condition of poverty and oppression.

Equally important—and puzzling—are statements that claim by some narrators that their families were "good people," who "never had no problem with whites," as though only the not-respectable families were caught up in the more dangerous explosions that marked the system of segregation and oppression. This statement might well point to the yearning for, and socialization into, the values of respectability and uplift, which also seem to have been linked to the possession of some property or a skill by some narrators. These statements of quality and status might also function to delineate the narrators and their families as elites—whether or not the children walked to school with their feet wrapped in "croaker sacks." Pauline Holmes's memories of her grandmother as a woman in spotless white clothing, sipping coffee on her porch that overlooked a bayou, is akin to more widely shared national mythologies of an aristocratic South full of refined white folk. It is interesting that Holmes used these images of whiteness, delicacy, and refinement to frame her own status memories of her grandmother, a member of the "founding families" of Mound Bayou and a respected community midwife. Conversely, the images of "good" and "white" shared by Sarah Williams and Flossie Vence pointed to the fairness or generosity of individual employers, with whom the sisters could maintain "good" relationships. As children of the working poor, who had to leave school early to help support their family, the sisters' memories of power and goodness were conditioned by their poverty and their vulnerability to destitution. Roberta Martin, also the daughter of a poor family, spoke not only of the vulnerability of young African American women to family abuse, but also of the vulnerability of African Americans to violent abuse from a white man who was "the law," and from whom African Americans had no protection.

Behind several of the stories of the Mound Bayou and Bolivar County narrators is the shadow of the missing ancestor or the missing or absent man. Earl Lucas and Annyce Campbell, and several other Delta narrators from other counties, spoke of fathers and grandfathers who were hunted by whites, or who had suddenly

disappeared, or who had deserted their families. Some of these figures had been pursued by a "mob crew" of whites who "rode up on horses" and shot, hung, or otherwise killed an African American man. This potent image of the life-and-death power of white men is resonant in African American folklore with stories of night riders and of the Ku Klux Klan. Sadly, night riders of various sorts, vigilante "mob crews," and organized Klan lynching parties were an all too common occurrence in the history of majority-black counties in Mississippi until the middle of the twentieth century. Whether driven off or killed by whites, or leaving his family by choice, the missing male ancestor, relative, or father, is a common figure in the narratives of the Delta Oral History Project.

Memories of World War II from Mound Bayou narrators who were either military veterans or, like Pauline Holmes, worked in war-related government jobs, revealed the widespread condition of racism and oppression within the American military, and the struggles of several servicemen to retain the sense of dignity and self-worth that had been cultivated by their families and communities. Loran Hawkins, Kermit Stanton, and Preston Holmes recounted instances of discrimination or of treatment that offended each man's sense of innate dignity and self-respect. All insisted on their worth as fair and *moral* individuals within a system that did not recognize African Americans' dignity, value, or morality. For each of these men, World War II and postwar work became sites of social learning and self-definition. Each emerged from these struggles with an enhanced sense of personal worth that was validated by respect and recognition from their own communities and from selected white individuals and organizations.

But the individual achievements extolled by Pauline and Preston Holmes and by Loran Hawkins seemed evocative of another kind of silence—a silence on the matters of collective action and the mass movement that emerged as the civil rights movement in Delta counties in the 1960s and 1970s. Preston and Pauline Holmes sought further status and recognition through their participation and leadership activities in the American Legion, a veterans' organization that has traditionally espoused conservative social values. And even in this struggle, in which Pauline Holmes set out to deliberately "*learn* white people," the distinction is made between Pauline the individual actor and the mass movement, symbolized by the NAACP and its power to put pressure on discriminatory organizations. Similarly, Loran Hawkins's description of his negotiations with the white planter family that was using his family's land indicates the importance of attaining recognition as a *moral* individual of property. This speaks of the personal exceptionalism and class-consciousness that defined his narrative of military service—since he had never done "menial" labor, cleaning up after a party from which his coworkers had excluded him was both an "insult" and a task that was "beneath his dignity." This description, like Pauline Holmes's account of her experiences with the American Legion Auxiliaries, locates the narrator as an elite African American who is very conscious of his class status as higher than, and in some way, more *deserving* of respectful treatment, than were the majority of African Americans.

Finally, the plainspoken statements of William Lucas, Sr., and Kermit Stanton reveal their perceptions of the enduring racism of Southern whites. Lucas's statement that Lincoln was assassinated by the "one stroke of a pen" that signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, revealed his stark perception of the nature of racism. Even though African Americans had not been entirely liberated by this wartime measure, some had been partially freed from slavery, and "that's what they [whites] killed him about, in my opinion." Lucas recalled that an African American man could not park a car in downtown Cleveland, unless he was driving for a white man. And veteran Kermit Stanton remembered that "they [whites] didn't recognize you no more after the war than they did before the war. You know, it was still here just as bad." Wartime service and sacrifice had not freed the African American veterans from the invisibility and subordination to which segregation and white supremacy had consigned Mississippi's black citizens. It would take a mass movement to change that order of things—a movement that would destabilize Mississippi and the nation.

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FOUR

The Wilderness of Social Change: The Movement and Head Start

The 1960s were a fertile, creative, and disruptive decade for many African Americans in Mississippi. For those who became grassroots activists in local civil rights groups, the heady years of voter registration drives, Head Start organizing, and political mobilization produced accelerated experiences of social learning and, frequently, an enhanced sense of self and community identity. The women and men who struggled through the experiences of learning about politics, governance, and community organization realized an enhanced sense of agency that was nevertheless circumscribed by an equally powerful realization of new, unanticipated constraints that seemed to emerge as a consequence of even the most successful political actions. Further, the promise of opportunity itself became a double-edged sword of deliverance, as real and illusory alternatives to the strictly disciplined upbringing and young adulthood in all-black Delta communities lured young people away from both their hometowns and, in many instances, from the values embodied in their parents' and grandparents' lives.

The life stories of grassroots activists in Bolivar County revealed a deeply satisfying sense of personal and communal agency that they recounted as a transformative experience of growth and change. Significantly, this sense of agency was shared throughout communities of activists.[1] Within voter education projects and Head Start programs, ordinary women and men became communities of learners and, in some cases, became skilled political actors and social change agents. Personal and political growth and change, then, fit easily into the notions of an exemplary life established earlier by families, churches, and communities. Political organizing itself became defined as an important service to the community, and collective improvement emerged as an important component of an expansive and democratic vision of

uplift. Activists' stories illuminated the ways in which they translated these values into a practical politics and the limitations that they encountered as they did so. Late-life testimony also evaluated both values and politics from a seasoned, sometimes resigned, acceptance of both the gains and losses that African Americans won through the political struggles that both empowered and disappointed them. Individual voices revealed both the memories and the assessments of political change.

Bolivar County's narrators told stories that echoed some of those recounted among Sunflower County activists from sharecropping and tenant farming backgrounds. But in important ways, a number of the Bolivar narrators—particularly those men who had achieved elected office—expressed a far greater sense of bitterness and disillusionment than did the Sunflower activists. Interestingly, the well-educated, politically skillful elected officials of Bolivar County drew their sense of despair from their thorough understanding of the limits of political power and from an almost reflexive desire to see their own biographies as models for collective social change. Even with their understanding of the structural forces that had created and sustained the poverty of generations of the Delta's African Americans, several black elected officials expressed a personal bitterness that the values that had propelled their own successes were not replicated by the African American middle classes and the poor.

Like Sunflower leaders from sharecropping and poor families, Bolivar's grassroots leaders discovered personal and community transformation in movement activism and in their Head Start employment and educational opportunities. At midlife and late life, they expressed frustration about political apathy within the African American community, and they also took pride in having changed conditions in their communities through activism and Head Start leadership. Leaders like L.C. Dorsey, Velma Bartley, Sammy Rash, Sarah Williams, and Flossie Vence expressed dismay over the problems that plagued their poor communities, but they counted as success stories the young people and adults whom they had helped to become better educated and more self-confident. As women and men who had matured under the threat of violence and terrorism as part of the propertyless working poor, they could also *feel* the critical difference in personal safety in post-movement Mississippi. And they were aware of the difference that this fundamental change produced in the lives around them.

Bolivar's middle-class professionals, however, judged their own leadership roles and political achievements with considerable ambivalence and disillusionment. Several became thoroughly disheartened by what they saw as an enduring racist mentality among whites, and they also lamented a lack of improvement within black communities. These leaders expressed a sense of bitter disappointment about the behavior of whites *and* African Americans. Much of this leadership's anger toward white elites was rooted in their understanding of the structural causes of African American poverty and economic immobility. But these leaders also seemed to expect the black poor to miraculously self-transform their circumstances, and they expected the educated classes to display the same sense of community service, civic entrepreneurship, and

leadership that had marked their own lives. Men like Kermit Stanton, Robert Gray, and Earl Lucas expressed a more hopeless grief about the Delta of the 1990s than did the children of sharecroppers and the working poor. Ultimately, their understanding of politics, economics, and the incremental nature of change led them to expect too much social responsibility from whites, from their African American neighbors, and from their own children.

At midlife, African American political leaders had discovered the toll that long-term collective trauma had taken on the sense of possibilities imagined by the Delta poor. This narrowed sense of possibility was produced by the deliberate and systematic exploitation and underdevelopment of the region's working poor by the region's white elites, and by their successors in the state and federal governments. Their recognition of the costs of long-term collective trauma—which included the ongoing poverty, poor health, high mortality rates, and low educational levels of the region's poor—was made even more complicated and bitter by the leaders' desire for more self-generated improvements among the African American middle classes and poor people. From the middle class they wanted economic initiative and community service. From the poor they wanted to see ambition, hopefulness, and a desire for improvement. For men like Kermit Stanton and Robert Gray, a structural analysis of the black Delta led inevitably to a focus on individual efforts that could produce collective social transformation. The roots of this wish were in their own biographies—in the churches that had preached both uplift and redemption, in the education that had stressed community service and improvement, and the movement that had embodied all of these qualities with enormous optimism and hope.

The Movement

Sammie Rash (figure 4.1) was born in 1942 as the fifth child of a sharecropping family in Sunflower County. His family moved to Renova, in Bolivar County, in 1949, where Rash attended local schools around the demands of the cotton crop. He first became conscious of civil rights activism around 1956 when he met Amzie Moore through gospel singing. Rash was singing in his own quartet, which often appeared on gospel programs with Moore's group, the Four Gate Harmonizers. Said Rash,

> I just loved their singing so well until I joined their group, and they accepted me—Amzie Moore, Joe Willy Hill, Gene Brooks, Harmond Crawford, and Ester Crawford. They were beautiful men. High moral standards, and I just loved them. I guess I'm part of them, and they're part of me. I took on their character. Amzie was working at the post office at that time, and he was a race-proud man. He taught us a lot.[2]

Rash joined the NAACP Youth Council in Bolivar County, which focused on the political education of young African Americans in a region and time when overt

Figure 4.1 Rev. Sammie Rash, 1996

political activism was dangerous. In his years in the group, Rash saw many talented Youth Council members leave for the North "because they didn't like the situation. They were going up North, a lot of our good people, out of fear." His father was one of those who left the state. "I'm the product of a broken home. So when they talk about single parents, it's nothing new, not with us. [But] people in those days, they would keep some order, some discipline. They took care of business in those days." Rash's mother approved of his involvement with Moore and the Youth Council, but warned him to be careful.

Rash was 20 when he finished high school in 1963, the year he first registered to vote, and the year he started pastoring the United Methodist Church in Cleveland. The plantation work of his early years had left him "behind" for his age because of the few months of schooling that he had received each year as a child. He recalled that registering to vote was often a difficult and humiliating experience for blacks both before and during the voting rights campaigns of the 1960s. "They [the registrars] had this poll tax thing," explained Rash, "and you had to interpret a portion of the constitution and all of that, and it was just a situation where blacks was afraid to even try to register to vote because of the fact of the lack of education, and then the harassment that went with it." The poll tax was still in effect when Rash first went to register and to take the test that would qualify him as a voter. After he and Reuben Smith, an older activist, passed their tests, "we started carrying people over [to the courthouse] in large numbers and everything, and they [the registrars] started finding

other ways to stop them." Police stopped and harassed Rash and his friends in the 1960s "because they were aware of what we were trying to do. You got this all the time, because they were aware of what was happening. They would do things to try to stop you."[3]

Rash's story illustrates two common features of the black voting and community organizing experience in Mississippi of the early 1960s. The state had erected an array of impediments to black voting, which included a poll tax and a test that required the applicant to "interpret" a portion of the state constitution to the satisfaction of the registrar. Both requirements functioned to keep the numbers of black voters very low, particularly in majority-black Delta counties. Rash's story also underscores the importance of the 1963 Freedom Vote and the 1964 Freedom Summer organizing drives in mobilizing local black communities to register voters, and to focus increased federal and national attention on the lack of democracy and basic civil rights in Mississippi.

The civil rights movement had come to Mississippi in dramatic bursts and starts—frequently generated by outside organizations and events, which then spurred increased political activism at local levels. Both developments were met with official resistance and white violence and repression. In the early 1960s, a nonviolent campaign waged by black college students, joined by a few white counterparts, changed the way in which political activism was to be defined by local communities in Mississippi and other Southern states. The nonviolent, direct action protests and community organizing drives initiated by students and young people built on older traditional organizing practices in Mississippi communities—practices initiated in the black churches and self-help organizations. This movement came to serve as the model for subsequent protest movements initiated by students and other dissident Americans throughout the 1960s and 1970s.[4]

The black student movement began in February 1960, when four freshmen at North Carolina A&T University in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat down at a dime store lunch counter and refused to move until they were served—an act of protest aimed at both legal and customary segregation. This first "sit-in" ignited the sit-in movement in towns and cities throughout the South. In April 1960, students from various campuses and communities met to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the legendary and daring local organizing cadres of the civil rights movement. The group had been heavily influenced by the nonviolent direct action practices pioneered by pacifist religious organizations and by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The group waged direct action campaigns in a number of Southern cities, protesting the exclusion of African Americans from public accommodations, employment, and voting. In March 1961, nine students from Jackson's Tougaloo College held a quiet sit-in at the Jackson Public Library, from which African Americans had long been excluded. Police arrested the students, and subsequent groups of demonstrators in Jackson. However, young people in communities throughout Mississippi were inspired by the actions, and looked for opportunities to change conditions in their own communities.

In 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a northern-based integrated pacifistic organization, initiated the "Freedom Rides" on Trailways and Greyhound buses, which were to carry integrated groups of CORE passengers from Washington, DC to New Orleans in order to test compliance with a recent Supreme Court ruling that mandated equal accommodations for interstate transportation. The first groups of riders were stopped by violent attacks by whites in Anniston, and in Birmingham, Alabama. Other groups of riders from Nashville and New Orleans continued the rides into Mississippi, where they were arrested, charged, and given sentences at the notorious Parchman, Farm, the State Penitentiary in Sunflower County. After the Riders were jailed, the national CORE leadership initiated a campaign to "fill the jails" in Mississippi with freedom riders from other communities. Many of the young riders who came to Mississippi in 1961 became ongoing SNCC and CORE staff members who organized communities throughout Mississippi between 1962 and 1965. Local people in many rural communities continued to call young activists from SNCC and CORE "Freedom Riders" throughout the 1960s.

One of the most important of these "outside agitators" was Robert Parris Moses, a New York-born SNCC worker who made an investigatory trip to Mississippi in 1961. Moses met Aaron Henry in Clarksdale, and Amzie Moore in Cleveland. By this time impatient with the NAACP's bureaucracy, Moore saw the students in SNCC and CORE as valuable assistance for communities like Cleveland. He emphasized the importance of gaining the vote and political power for African Americans in the Delta, and urged Moses to initiate a massive voter registration campaign in its heavily black counties.[5]

Moore and Moses were unable to initiate such an effort in 1961, but, by 1963, conditions seemed right to both the SNCC and CORE cadres, and to the grassroots people in local communities who would be the organizers and foot soldiers of the movement in the Delta. In 1962, the major civil rights organizations working in Mississippi—local branches of the NAACP, CORE, SNCC, and local protest organizations—united to form the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a statewide group that targeted voter registration and community organizing to help develop local leadership as the movement's goals in Mississippi. Predictably, early SNCC and CORE efforts in the state had been met with violence and repression, with only slight gains in the numbers of registered voters.

Unable to make much of a difference at the official polling and registration offices, COFO decided to initiate a "Freedom Vote" in which African Americans organized in local communities would cast their ballots in a mock election that would show Washington and the Kennedy administration that Mississippi blacks would vote, if they were not prohibited by state laws and by violence from doing so. A number of students were recruited from Stanford and Yale universities to assist COFO staff and local leaders in canvassing voters and getting people to the polls. Aaron Henry of Clarksdale ran for state governor in this election, with Tougaloo chaplain Ed King running as lieutenant governor. Although 83,000 black Mississippians voted

in this election, county-level totals revealed that "the vote in all of the counties where SNCC and CORE had ongoing projects was under 16,000"—a testimony to the danger of voting in places like Sunflower and Leflore counties. COFO had been aided by the presence of the white students in some of the counties, and their presence was covered by a national news media that was normally uninterested in the vicissitudes of black voting in Mississippi. Although bitter about the favoritism shown by the media to the visiting whites, it was obvious to SNCC and CORE staff that Mississippi's African Americans would "not get the vote unless the equivalent of an army" was sent to the state. Regular police and vigilante violence against black Mississippians continued unabated—neither the Kennedy administration nor its FBI contingent in the state displayed any willingness to protect either organizers or local people who attempted to vote.[6]

On the basis of this experience, SNCC and CORE decided—after much argument and controversy—to mount the "Freedom Summer" project for 1964, which would recruit more than six hundred white students from Northern and western universities to assist COFO staff in registering black voters, organizing and teaching in Freedom Schools, and working with local community leaders to mobilize black voters for a statewide vote for representatives of their own new political party—the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). This new party would then send a group of elected delegates and representatives to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964 to challenge the legitimacy and seating of the segregated Mississippi state Democratic Party's delegation. Freedom Summer, then, would do many things: it would focus the attention of the national media on the abuses of justice and the denial of basic American freedoms to black people in Mississippi, it would organize communities and educate local people in the political process, and give them experience in running their own political party, and it would bring 600 young, privileged Northern white students to local communities to canvass voters, teach in Freedom Schools, and provide assistance in a number of areas.[7]

The Reverend Sammie Rash pastored his church and worked with Amzie Moore and other local activists in the 1960s. He recalled "SNCC and all these different organizations was coming in to help us out," and to assist local leaders like Moore and Fannie Lou Hamer, the legendary leader from adjoining Sunflower County. "There was a lot of excitement in the Delta. Dr. Martin Luther King came in here about the early 1960s, and we were just excited. We had hope. Even though we were getting some whippings on one side, there was some joy on the other side. So it was just a new day. It was a new day. . . . It was exciting times, and we could see the light at the end of the tunnel. The whites was angry, and they was doing things to us. We didn't mind the whippings or the beatings because there was something that was within us."[8]

Rash acknowledged that the black church, which became the organizing base for much movement activity in largely rural counties, was often led by timid and accommodationist ministers, who dissuaded their congregations from undertaking dangerous political activities. "We had some serious problems out of them rascals. Some of

them were so used to taking stuff under the table," said Rash. And in the 1990s, Rash himself voiced second thoughts about the wisdom of some of the movement's goals—like school integration, which led to the eventual loss of the all-black, community-influenced local schools. Nevertheless, he saw the process of movement activism as a defining moment in his own development. Rash enjoyed working with his mentor Amzie Moore; he remembered the NAACP leader as an "outstanding personality," and

> All of the bitter that came with working for the Civil Rights Movement, it seemed to turn to joy. You didn't mind the opposition that came with the stand that you was taking against the system or the power structure, even though you knew it would be rough. There was a possibility of death in the process, but you were committed, and you knew that it was the right thing to do at that particular time. . . . The sacrifices—there can be no redemption without the shedding of blood—and you have to understand that. And sometimes you may not agree with the leadership all the time, but then you look at the cause and what you're doing it for, the best interests of the people. So you had your good times and your bad times, even among us, ourselves. . . . as far as the sacrifice and what you have to do, you still have to do that. And the religious aspects of it, I guess that's the thing that kind of gave us faith and courage.[9]

Although the "Freedom Vote" of 1963 and the massive registration effort of Freedom Summer did not appreciably increase the numbers of black voters registered at local courthouses in Mississippi, the experience of organizing communities and of "hauling" voters to registrars' offices and to polling places remained a significant part of the political experience of local grassroots activists. This "hauling of voters" would continue through the late 1960s, as changes implemented by the Voting Rights Act of 1965—which sent federal registrars into counties that had demonstrated a pattern of discrimination in voter registration practices—began to have a profound impact on the numbers of black voters in the state by 1967 and 1968.

SNCC itself left Mississippi in 1965, the year the Delta Ministry moved into the state, bringing organizational assistance, funding, and political acumen to assist local communities. The ministry was a social action program of the National Council of Churches, which responded to the nation's racial crisis of the 1960s by organizing and funding a ministry with the expressed purpose of working with the African American poor in the Mississippi Delta, and serving local communities in a way that was fundamentally similar to the aims of SNCC—a commitment to "let the people decide" their needs. The ministry saw itself as having three primary functions: providing "direct relief" to impoverished communities, serving as a "ministry of reconciliation" between the white and black communities in the Delta, and to help "initiate a process of 'community development,' " which would assist local communities in developing indigenous leaders, and realizing community goals through economic betterment.[10]

Head Start and the Organizing Process

Many SNCC and MFDP activists were galled by the disappointing results of the Atlantic City Democratic Party convention of 1964. The MFDP had come to the convention hoping to replace the segregationist white state Democratic Party's delegates, but were only offered two at-large seats by the Johnson administration's operatives. The national Democrats also promised to change the rules for state delegations for the 1968 convention. Many SNCC organizers and their Mississippi constituents were deeply disillusioned by what they saw as the cynical manipulation of the MFDP by the national party. In the following year, many SNCC organizers left the state, and the organization, like CORE, began to focus more on issues like black power, community control, and separatism.

Into the vacuum left by SNCC stepped the Delta Ministry. From initial projects started in Mississippi in 1964, the Delta Ministry's staff began working with African American grassroots community organizations throughout 1965, and started to develop programs to serve these communities. A number of community workers and leaders had spoken of an interest in providing child care for the children of Mississippi. Delta Ministry representatives met with the federal officials who were then developing the plans for a Head Start program—a federally funded service that would provide early childhood education, medical treatment and assessment, and nutrition to poor children. Such a program would provide a literal "Head Start" to children from deprived families. Delta Ministry staff and community activists saw this program as a special boon for poor African American communities and families, because it would employ local people as community outreach workers, teachers and teacher's aids, drivers, cooks, and janitors. Since Head Start also mandated parent involvement, it would help to bring poor parents into larger community organizing efforts that included voter registration drives. And the early Head Start promised to facilitate the independence of local organizers and their communities—because paychecks would come from the federal government, rather than from local planters and governmental officials.[11] At the local level, the movement became a source of volunteers, then paid staff workers, in Head Start projects, and Head Start, in turn, became a source of ongoing political organization in African American communities.

Like many other African American political leaders in the post-1965 era in Mississippi, Kermit Stanton had benefited from the organizing potential that local activists early saw in the Head Start projects in the state. Aware of the War on Poverty legislation passed by Lyndon Johnson's administration, activists in COFO, the MFDP, and the Delta Ministry began to organize childcare programs staffed by grassroots activists in Mississippi counties in 1965 in anticipation of funding through the federal government. Pilot programs were established under the umbrella leadership and administration of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), which operated most of Mississippi's centers until federal regulations, abetted by state pressures, forced most programs under the sponsorship of the state Mississippi

Action for Progress (MAP) agency through local Community Action Project (CAP) boards. The CAP governance effectively substituted a more "respectable" group of authorities—recruited from the white and middle-class black communities—from the poorer, more radical activists who had been active in the voter registration projects of COFO and MFDP.

Sammie Rash's church in Cleveland served as one of the centers for Head Start, and then political organizing, in Bolivar County. Rash remembered working with local activists Reuben Smith, Amzie Moore, and several professional grant-writers to create Bolivar County's first Head Start grant. Leaders then conducted training sessions, and organized child care centers run by local volunteers—mostly, women who had been active in voter registration projects. Although the organizers were poor women with families to feed, they worked hard to establish the volunteer centers and to raise food, supplies, and clothing for their often destitute students. In the initial grant allocated to the CDGM in Mississippi in 1965, OEO officials awarded $1.5 million dollars "to serve 6,000 children through eighty-four centers in twenty-four counties." Mississippi's fledgling operation "was the largest Head Start program to be funded that summer."[12]

"Head Start is one of the best things that could have happened in this Mississippi Delta," Sammy Rash said in 1996. The preschool program assisted poor families in a number of ways, by educating both the parents and children. The women who worked for the centers especially benefited: "They were able to come out of the masters' kitchens, and be gainfully employed and take pride in making money and making a decent living for their families, and to raise their own children. They could take a part." Women and men who worked for Head Start became economically and politically independent; "if they was not working for the master, then the master couldn't put pressure on them if they became voters." Through the recruitment and organizing of voters by Head Start parent-education and community representatives, the base of black voters expanded in every community in the Delta. "The first black supervisor we got in this county was Kermit Stanton, and it was because of the organization of the Head Start program." The economic independence that Head Start workers gained freed them "politically, economically, spiritually, socially," and with this new freedom, they were able to become politically active citizens.

For many of these grassroots women activists, the education of voter registration and movement organizing flowed seamlessly into an accelerated and expansive process of social learning and personal development that they experienced through the opportunities brought by Head Start. In the process, activists learned about their own communities in more thorough and sometimes disheartening ways. Women who had long considered themselves to be poor found the poverty and deprivation of many of their rural neighbors shocking. The abysmal conditions in which many of the impoverished rural people lived would become a national scandal and the subject of congressional hearings on hunger and starvation in the late 1960s. Local Head Start workers learned about these conditions through their work with their young

charges. But they were also able to acquire further education through the introduction of new federal guidelines and mandates, and became more nationally and sometimes internationally aware and informed in the process. They became, in fact, new people in their communities, and achieved a new, and more respected, status as leaders and teachers as a result of the education they had acquired through the movement, community organization, and Head Start.

In the first year of organizing for the eventual funding of local Head Start programs, activists established volunteer preschool programs throughout Mississippi counties. Hopeful and optimistic that federal funding would arrive, they held classes in local churches, homes, and in any other spaces that would allow them to bring their students. Shaw's first program was held in a small African American church, and the volunteers grew food for their center at a community garden plot. Volunteers also hauled the children—as they had also hauled voters—from the two-room shacks that still were common housing for plantation sharecroppers.

The early Head Start volunteers and later staff members encountered numerous challenges in working with their young charges, many of whom lived in conditions of extreme deprivation and poverty. Numerous children from impoverished rural families had never received medical care, had no experience in drinking milk after nursing, and lacked many basic socialization skills. Robert Gray, who was instrumental in organizing the first Head Start programs in Shelby, recalled, "these little children that we were getting out of these backgrounds, they were full of sores, and you spent half your time dealing with just social issues." Many children from isolated rural households cried incessantly, having never before been away from their mothers, let alone in an environment like a Head Start center. Gray felt that the medical treatment that the children received was Head Start's major contribution to their lives: "Those little children had these pot stomachs and all of this. They were malnourished. They didn't have good drinking water, no medical attention." Gray also saw the imprint of the plantation on the children's aspirations and hopes: "you'd interview the children, you'd ask them what they wanted to be, and 95 percent of them would tell you they wanted to be a tractor driver or cook, because that was all they'd ever been exposed to, was tractor driving or cooking—the top-paying jobs on the plantations."[13]

Velma Bartley was born in a small farming community on the "river side of Bolivar County" in 1922. She finished seventh grade in a small school in Mound City, but couldn't go farther because she would have had to go to Mound Bayou for education beyond grammar school. She recalled that she accepted segregation as "just natural," when she was growing up. "That was all we'd been in. We grew up in this segregation, and what we didn't even know was segregation. It was just the way, that's all," she paused. "Well, white folks accepted it as the way."[14] Her parents were farmers who rented land near where they lived. Bartley married young, had a child, and then separated from her husband. Her parents kept her child while she traveled. She stayed with an older sister in St. Louis for awhile, and didn't like that experience, as

her sister tried to limit her excursions into local clubs where she listened to blues and jazz. She traveled to other cities, but returned home to Cleveland, where her parents lived, in her late 20s. She married a returning World War II veteran after the war, and the two moved to Shaw, some eleven miles south of Cleveland. While her husband had been in the army, his mother and aunt had saved all of his allotment checks, and with that money, and benefits from the GI Bill, he and Velma opened and operated several small businesses. They operated a grocery store, and she ran a club, where she sold then-illegal liquor. She recalled that she did not know the community well during her early working years in Shaw. She then didn't "have exposure to anything about the people, really, because I never did too much getting around among the people at that time because I had my businesses and I had to work most of the time." In this work, Bartley knew community residents primarily as customers, rather than as fellow activists, organizers, and parents.

Bartley got involved with voter registration projects in the 1960s, "when black folks around here first started getting registered. I had to go through that literacy test and the constitution and all that stuff." She worked with Amzie Moore and the NAACP, and was an early organizer of the Head Start project that served the Shaw area. She remembered the young people from SNCC and COFO who came into the county in 1964. "Our biggest voter registration was going on while they were here. They were the ones that were really pushing it, because at the time, a black man working for a white man didn't dare talk about going to register. But see, what we did, I know many a time I put my cosmetic bag over my shoulder, going out selling women's cosmetics. I was organizing all at the same time." Bartley also attracted men to voter information meetings by offering them some good whiskey at her club. She recruited male plantation workers by picking them up on rainy days, when they could not work in the fields. Other times, she said,

> I'd take my husband's old blue pickup truck he had. I'd go out there [to the rural areas] and get them by the loads and take them into Cleveland to get them registered, whether they could read and write or not. Because one of the guys there [the registrars], they said, "Why do you all keep bringing these people in here? What good to you think its going to do to them to get registered. They can't even read, can't even sign their own name." I said, "That's what we're here for."[15]

Like other early activists, Bartley was targeted for repression by local authorities. The police, who had been buying her illegal liquor, and whom she had been paying for protection, closed her club. "I was took to jail, took me and my liquor to jail." In another instance, the owner of a local lumber yard attempted to call in a note that Bartley's husband was paying on for building materials. Bartley reminded the merchant that she had a signed contract with him.

She believed that the COFO workers who came to Bolivar County in the mid-1960s offered valuable services to local activists. "When these guys come in helping

us, I said, 'Well, now is the time.' So I got around with the womenfolks, parents and all, and done a little organizing on my own. And then when they would come down, we would meet with them and they would give us instructions and a lot of times advise us on the best way to go about it. Like I said, if you never had any experience or anything, you don't know how to go about doing it. So they would help us. They would give us ideas." Local whites told the activists, "You all are just doing what them folks is telling you to do," to which Bartley responded, "Well, we're glad somebody come in here and told us something."

Locally, Bartley worked with Amzie Moore on voter registration, community organizing, and later on Boliver's first Head Start programs. She appreciated the fact that "he was pushy—just like us," and admired Moore for his resistance to threats and pressures from the local "Klans," as she called the night riders and terrorists who sporadically attacked movement activists. But she also grew impatient with his conception of what the local movement could and should do:

> Amzie was serious, he was really serious about what he was trying to do. And he did good at the time when he was doing it, but let me tell you what happened. After we'd become motivated and start knowing what to do and start doing things, then Amzie was too slow for us. Amzie, he would say, "Well, we're going to get into that, but first we do this and first we do that," and that wasn't getting us nowhere. We was hyped up now. We was ready to go. And he slowed us down a lot.[16]

Velma Bartley became an early and enthusiastic organizer for Head Start. "President Johnson started that War on Poverty, and, naturally, we knew that was us. At first, our local leaders jumped on it and said, 'Hey, what do we have to do to get a piece of this pie? What is this all about?' " Advised that they needed to create a non-profit organization, local activists worked with agency officials to write effective grants. Bartley, Amzie Moore, and others developed the program for the Associated Communities of Bolivar County (ACBC) in Moore's living room. Additionally, pilot training programs helped educate grassroots people in skills beyond the third-grade levels that many had reached in plantation schools. In an interview in 1996, Bartley explained how her early hopes for Head Start were realized:

> What I was hoping would happen—what did happen—was something that the black community could profit from. It would help our children. We had black children going into first grade didn't hardly know their names and couldn't count to ten and all that, you know, and we said, "well, this sounds good." We was reading it, you know, and we said, "Well, this looks good. This is real good." They'd send people down here and meet with us to talk about this Head Start program to us in whatever church we could get into or somewhere big enough.
>
> I feel like Head Start did just what I felt like it would do in the first place, and that was bring a lot of people out of poverty, so to speak, and would help a lot of

> children. A lot of children now just graduating would not be graduating if it had not been for Head Start. Now, I know that to be a fact.[17]

Velma Bartley also listed medical care and basic socialization as major contributions to poor children's lives. Doctors examined one small boy who had hearing difficulties and found a roach in his ear. Many rural children had never eaten a balanced diet, and had to be introduced to foods like oatmeal, greens, and fruits. Bartley recalled one case that surprised her.

> We had children that didn't know how to go to a table and sit down and eat. One in particular is a poor white family down there in Washington County, and those kids would not go and sit down at a table and eat. Now, when other children were playing, they would sort of ease up and play with those boys outside. But when they'd get inside and when they would go to eat, they would not go to the table. Had never eat at a table. I said, "I'd better check it out."

During a home visit, Bartley discovered that at mealtimes, the children would "sit in a ring on the floor with their fists together, and their mama brings their food in a top or pan or something and put it on the floor in front of them and they eat it." After her home visit, she worked with the Head Start teachers and with the children.

> When the other children would go to the table, they wouldn't go to the table. I'd get me a plate and I'd sit down on the floor with them, and we would talk. I asked them, "Come on, we're going to sit at the table. Let's go to the table. Come on, let's beat them to the table. Let's take those chairs."
>
> Children are challenging. They would jump up, "All Right." I said. "They won't get these chairs."
>
> In about a month, I had them eating at the table. But they would not eat. They didn't know what a fork was.
>
> Now, anytime anybody tells you Head Start hadn't done nothing for nobody, you tell them that's a mistake.[18]

Sarah Williams and Flossie Vence also worked with Amzie Moore in the 1960s, and, like Bartley, were part of the volunteer effort to inaugurate a Head Start program in Bolivar County. The sisters remembered the risks that Moore took in the 1960s. When whites made death threats, Moore walked the streets of Cleveland with two armed men, prepared for an attack that did not come. Sometimes, the NAACP leader stayed at Flossie Vence's house, where the men would "sit on the floor, scared to put the light on. I'd say, 'Lord have mercy. You're going to get us killed.' " Each time a car passed on the street outside the house, "we'd hit the floor. We'd hit the floor."

In furnishing the first Head Start centers, the sisters solicited money, food, and services from the local black community. Although the volunteers used churches for the first classrooms, "we didn't have no food," said Vence.

> We'd go into this car, and we'd go around to different ones, you know, and ask them to give us money, donation to buy food to feed the kids. And you know, everybody, everybody give us something, and they fixed that bread pudding. That's right. Pinto beans, spaghetti, and we had a meal for the children. And we had clothes for them, because Owen [Brooks, of the Delta Ministry] would prepare the clothes and the medicine for their cold. Children would have colds, Owen had the medicine.
>
> And we kept them children. I mean, people just donated. Kept them [centers] open, feeding the children, giving them clothes. Some children come to school, didn't even have shoes to put on.[19]

Even though the sisters knew that they were poor, they recognized that their young students were even more deprived than were most of the Head Start volunteer teachers and staff. "They had sores on their head, on their feet, didn't have clothes to put on. A lot of people didn't even send their children. They didn't want to send them because they didn't have nothing to put on them." The sisters grew attached to their students, and took care of some who came from poor and negligent families. Vence recalled,

> At night, when we'd done gone to bed, some of those children would be knocking on the door, saying, "Miz Flossie, Miz Flossie." They don't know where their mama is or something, and they'd be barefooted sometimes, they wouldn't have nothing on. "We want to stay all night with you." And we had just three rooms. So I would let them stay in the little half bed there, sleep in there. And they got so they'd do that almost every night, and they wouldn't have no clothes on. One was a little girl, and we'd have to get clothes for her. And then somebody else would bring some clothes. We'd go around and ask for clothes.
>
> When they'd get to school at Head Start, some of them would be smelling like peepee, and we would carry them in the room and heat some water and give them a bath and grease them down, put them on clean clothes. Most times, the next day we had to do the same thing.[20]

Vence, who cooked for a restaurant in Cleveland, also cooked for the volunteer centers while the local group waited for federal funding. Families and individuals contributed food, clothing, and other necessities to the new center. According to Vence, these community people "didn't have nothing, but they shared." And the sisters saw "beautiful" changes in many of the children. "They learned to read, write. They were brilliant children, and they went to school."

Vence, Williams, and Bartley emphasize three important aspects of the community organizing and Head Start experience for local activists. First, narrators and their communities recognized the importance of the Head Start program as a way to educate poor children, improve parenting practices, employ local people, and benefit the black community. All of these goals were highly consistent with local community

values of education, economic independence, and personal and collective improvement. Second, organizers drew on traditional practices developed by rural and small-town African American communities that enabled individuals and families to survive hard times. Women who had been socialized by families and churches that emphasized sharing, sacrifice, and cooperation drew on those communal values when they asked families, neighbors, and strangers for the food, clothing, money, and supplies that enabled the local centers to survive in the period before funding. Finally, women like Vence and Williams exhibited long-standing community values when they took in their young students and housed and fed them when the children were cold and hungry, and could not find their parents. Traditionally, some families in any local community took in children who had been abandoned, orphaned, or otherwise left alone by family difficulties. Miller and Williams were performing a role long honored and recognized in African American communities—that of the women who raise their own children and many who were not their own.

Velma Bartley, Flossie Vence, and Sarah Williams also learned firsthand about the shocking levels of destitution in their county. The near-total mechanization of cotton production in the 1960s led many planters to simply turn sharecroppers off their lands. These impoverished people, like the landless day laborers, were left without work, housing, and incomes. As a result of this widespread loss of income among rural African Americans, many people were too poor to buy food stamps when they were first sold by the Department of Agriculture.

The results of this job and income loss and continuing planter control of state and federal funds were documented in a position paper written by Delta Ministry director Owen Brooks, MFDP chair Reverend Clifton Whitley, and Mississippi Welfare Rights Organization president Geraldine Smith in 1969. They compared a national poverty rate of 21.4 percent of families having incomes of less than $3,000 with Mississippi's staggering numbers: some 51.6 percent of Mississippi's families received less than $3,000 in 1969, and "half of the families in the central Mississippi delta [which included Bolivar, Sunflower, Washington, Sharkey, Humphreys, and Issaquena counties] (had) disposable incomes of less than $2,500."

The long-term effects of poverty and malnutrition were apparent to doctors and congressional investigators who initiated federal hearings into starvation, health, and poverty in the Delta in the late 1960s, when the collapse of the sharecropping and tenancy system meant that many adults and children received very little, if any, health care during routine and even acute bouts of sickness and disease. In 1967 Senate hearings, one doctor testified that "81 percent of 501 Washington County [children] tested were anemic." The investigators also found "obvious evidence of severe malnutrition" in every county they visited.[21]

Impoverished children and their parents—who were often employed as teachers' aids in Head Start centers—benefited a great deal from the program. Children often received their first medical care and dental and eye examinations in Head Start programs. They were also fed breakfast, lunches, and snacks, and were introduced to

varieties of nutritious foods. As one teacher's aid reported, "If it wasn't for this program, [our kids] would probably not get anything to eat."[22] Yet because of the empowering effects of Head Start and other War on Poverty programs on the very poor, the federal programs very quickly became sites of political struggle within Mississippi. These struggles, which pitted the state's segregationist white elites against Mississippi's black minority and the federal government, gradually changed to a contest that set white moderates allied with the black middle and professional classes against the agencies and organizations led by the black poor and their few white allies.

Roberta Martin, who became an outreach worker with an Associated Communities of Bolivar County Head Start project in the mid-1960s, actively recruited new voters as she recruited toddlers during home visits: "that was a good way to do it without anybody else knowing that we were really doing voter registration." Although definitely not a part of federal guidelines, voter registration was an important part of Head Start's work in the years under CDGM authority. Outreach workers also tried to help some of the very poor to get on welfare and food stamp rolls. This was sometimes difficult, particularly if the applicant had any income at all from whatever seasonal labor was left in the Delta. Martin recalled a particularly troubling instance of an elderly man who "worked for old rich folk out from Cleveland." His grandchildren were enrolled in Head Start:

> The old man, grandparent, lived out there, and the old man was trying to [get food stamps]. And I went and talked. The old man told me they kept telling him that he was making too much. The poor man was making too much to get food stamps, and he was working in the summer driving a tractor and picking cotton and stuff in the fall.
>
> I went to the welfare office, and the people told me the same thing. They showed me what Mr. Smith [the white employer] was telling them. He was turning in more than he was paying that man. He was keeping him from getting any help. I went out there. I was lucky something didn't happen to me, the way they [whites] were then, because I went out to his house, and it was noontime. He was in the house, and I knocked and he came out the back door. I told him what I wanted, that this man was trying to get food stamps and that I had gone to the office and they had showed me what [Smith] said he was paying him, and the man said he wasn't paying him that much money. He told me he couldn't show me nothing. He didn't have nothing to show that he was paying the man what he said. He was just turning in that amount at the welfare office. He told me, "I get him out of jail so much, he don't have nothing."
>
> But later, he changed it, and [the old man] was able to get help. But they [whites] hated [black] people that was getting any kind of little help.[Because] it kept them from having to work for nothing, and it kept them from depending on [whites]. They didn't want you to feel independent.[23]

Martin worked for Head Start from 1966 to 1970, but left for full-time, year-round work at the Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou, to help meet her children's college costs. While at the Delta Health Center, she attended school to earn an LPN degree. After she received her degree, she moved on to work at the local hospital. With each change of employment, Martin earned a higher salary. By 1974, she made $100 a week as an LPN—far more than the $15 per week that African American women typically made as maids, cooks, or agricultural workers through the mid-1960s.

Whereas Martin realized substantial benefits in her life due to her work with Head Start, many other narrators described the Head Start and movement experience as transformative—a series of experiences that changed their understanding of the world, and their own level of comfort and security. Additionally, the higher wages they received from their Head Start paychecks allowed them to better educate their children, and to see their sons and daughters achieve a higher economic status.

Flossie Vence and Sarah Williams recounted many positive changes in their own lives due to the movement and Head Start. For Vence, her work as a cook for the centers meant better wages, and a release from the drudgery at her restaurant job. Recalling the change, she laughed: "I see heaven." Added her sister Sarah, "After Head Start came into existence, that's when we could really see the light. . . . There was some good things, beautiful things happened in this town." Employment opened for African Americans in downtown stores and banks; opportunities for home ownership and better housing came with federal intervention. Vence and Williams were themselves able to buy a new house in a Cleveland neighborhood—something that they could not have imagined in their pre-movement years. These improvements were a source of excitement, joy, and thanksgiving, especially their regular Head Start paychecks:

Williams: Oh, my Lord! It was just like Christmas and Santa Claus.

Vence: That's right.

Williams: Every two weeks.

Vence: Every two weeks.

Williams: Because we was making fifty dollars, and that was like making a hundred dollars at that time.

Vence: A hundred dollars. And we couldn't get to the bank. [Laughter] We couldn't even get to cash it, we was so excited and thanking the Lord and praising Him. Like my grandmother said, "You know, God said that the head will come up from the bottom, and the bottom rail will go to the top." She said it'd be. She sure did. And it was. It was. And when we got into this house, they [the whites] fought against it. They sure did. They fought, but Mr. [Amzie] Moore was somebody that didn't give up, did he?

Brooks: No, he didn't.

Vence: He didn't give up, and he could just tell them what he wanted, not behind their back, to their face, and if they could have got rid of him, you know, they would have, but everybody [the whites] was afraid, wasn't they, Owen?

Brooks: They'd have had something on their hands.

Williams: I think didn't nobody bring us out but the Lord, and when he did bring us out, I mean He brought us out victorious, and I thank God for everything. After we got these houses, here they come in with all kinds of projects.[24]

For Vence and Williams, the livelihood that they gained through Head Start allowed them to achieve financial security, to buy a new home, to educate Flossie's children, and later, to assist Flossie's daughter in developing a restaurant in California. Their new status and independence, however, they attributed to the providence of God, and to the leadership of strong men like Amzie Moore and Owen Brooks, whom God had also ordained and blessed. Although both women had displayed considerable courage and ingenuity during the movement years—Flossie walking out of her restaurant job in 1965 and joining a picket line on Highway 8 in Cleveland, both sisters sheltering Amzie Moore on nights when whites had threatened to kill him, and scouring their community for food, clothing, and materials to keep their fledgling Head Start centers operating—the sisters attributed their own agency to outside sources. They credited God for delivering them to Head Start, higher wages, and home ownership, and also credited Him for bringing Amzie Moore and Owen Brooks to their defense and assistance. In their narratives we see the strength and psychological legacy of their religious faith in a providential God and in His deliverance of His children out of bondage, and their personal experiences of economic vulnerability and dependence. The last experience led them to interpret their own lives and fortunes in terms of relationships with different *kinds* of male authorities—with praise reserved for the "good white men" who treated their workers fairly, and for strong black men who helped deliver God's blessings like good work, better wages, and a new house. Due to the dependency and deprivation that haunted their lives, the two sisters imagined agency as a capacity that existed *outside* the self—or outside of themselves, anyway.

In summing up their lives, the sisters found much to be grateful for—including the opportunity to learn more through the Head Start experience. "We're just so grateful that the Lord has really blessed us, left us with a portion of health and strength, to think about the things where we did come from," said Sarah Williams. She credited the movement for their development: "It brought us up to where we are today. It was just because of the things we went through back there was the cause of us being where we are today." Williams also felt "blessed" by the opportunity to "learn so many things in Head Start." Her long involvement with the program led to her acquisition of a GED, and further course work at Coahoma Junior College, the University of Texas, Delta State University, and Valley State University in nearby Itta Bena. Williams also traveled beyond Mississippi—to New York, New Orleans, and Washington, DC. The movement and Head Start broadened and widened her world. But even while describing her own education and learning experiences, Williams maintained a providential attribution for her good fortune.

Velma Bartley related a less religiously focused description of her own growth through the movement and the Head Start experience. "It started me thinking, for one thing. As I said, when you are born and bred in an environment, you've got to leave that environment to know anything else. So long as I was there, I was satisfied with that, because that was the thing, that was the way it was." But the movement and community organizing generated changes in her thinking. In the following statement, Bartley described how the movement-induced awareness and social learning led her to want to *do* more to change her own life, the lives of her children, and the condition of her community. Bartley's narrative, then, stressed the increased sense of agency that many narrators came to feel through the process of community organizing and social learning:

> Once I got out of that environment [segregation] and found out that there was a better way and blacks could do better for themselves and started myself to wanting some of the things I saw other people have. And this brings on talking about job discrimination, how they [whites] could get jobs and we couldn't, and we're working in the same building with them and they're doing more and getting more pay than we do, and all of this, this is what motivated me is to want to *do*.
>
> And then my motivation was those two boys. I did not want them to have to grow up in a segregated community, segregated in a sense like we *had to*. So that really motivated me to go and do something about it.[25]

In this statement, Bartley revealed her own sense of the process of growth and change: she moved from accepting the reality of segregation—"that was the way it was"—to questioning the nature of political and social reality, which led to a desire to act to change those conditions she considered unfair and unjust. But where Williams and Vence ascribed personal agency and change to divine intervention, Bartley focused on the secular nature of political and social change in terms of the local gains made through politics and, most particularly, through Head Start. The program brought many changes to Bartley's community: it broke down the barriers to job qualifications, so that poor African Americans could become employed as teachers' aids and community service workers. "And we went to school. We learned more about how to deal with children. I mean, they sent the teachers to school. And it was just great, and we are seeing the benefits of it still." Bartley, as a community service worker and board member, took courses at Delta State, Valley State, and Jackson State universities. Most importantly, however, was the impact of the program on the children of the community, many of whom were better prepared when parents were offered a choice to send their children to previously all-white public schools. Many of the former Head Start students went on to college. Bartley was especially heartened by the nature of community involvement that had brought about these changes:

> what's so good about that [the young peoples' education] and I think what's historical about that, what you call uneducated people, you know, take credit for this

> Head Start, take credit for these children that's gone on, and we were, say, qualified, unqualified, disqualified. These were uneducated people, so they had to do it out of their hearts, the interest of their nature, you know what I mean.[26]

Thus, even though Bartley recognized that Head Start and the War on Poverty were externally produced opportunities, she credited the local organizers and activists—women and men like herself—for affecting the change in their community, and in the children they helped to educate. In her view, the important changes were produced by the agency of the "qualified, unqualified, disqualified" people like herself, "uneducated people," who, through movement activism and self-improvement, helped to create new opportunities for the children of the community.

L.C. Dorsey, a former voting-rights and Head Start activist in Bolivar County, later worked with Community Action Programs in Shelby, and then throughout the county, after earning a degree in social work. Dorsey believed that the War on Poverty projects that employed local organizers compounded and further enhanced the process of personal growth and development, particularly among women activists. The movement and political organizing had brought a new sense of self-respect to many women. Additionally,

> Head Start gave women who had never done anything but chop cotton, clean white folks' houses, took care of white folks' children and their own families, an opportunity to have status and position in the community. They became wage earners. They became people who had money, and they invested that money back in the community through purchasing things for their home and for their children, and they became people who were looked up to and had status in their churches and in the community themselves. They were new people who were subjecting themselves to continuous training through what they called in-service programs where they were learning new information which they readily shared with other people in the community. I mean, it's really a beautiful thing to behold. . . . They would bring home papers and flyers from the school and it would be shared with everybody in the community. Even the ones who couldn't read and write well would have had it explained to them at school so all of a sudden they were resource people for the community.[27]

Dorsey also saw tremendous improvements in the lives of the children served by Head Start. Medical care, dental care, instruction in hygiene, experiences in eating different foods, in effect, "taught the family" when the children took the messages and instructions and experiences home to their parents. Since Head Start also involved parents in the process of child care and education, parents also learned about better nutrition, parenting, and education. Thus, the injection of federal money into the movement networks of organizers and local activists gave these working class and poor black Mississippians a new leverage in their communities and in the larger political culture. The awakening of many local activists to the possibilities of

self-development and community improvement through Head Start proved destabilizing to the older relationships between poor and middle-class African Americans, and poor African Americans and white elites in their counties, and in the state itself. These class antagonisms and the resulting political conflicts led to a reassertion of white and middle-class black controls over the antipoverty programs throughout the state. In the process, the volatile force of a class-based politics of the poor was diluted, as program management was transferred from CDGM to MAP agencies led by white moderates and middle-class African Americans.

The Social Learning of Politics

The story of local struggles over the authority of Head Start projects was part of a larger series of contests over the control of federal funds that entered Mississippi in the mid-1960s through the 1980s. Typically, these conflicts pitted three groups against each other in an uneven battle for political and economic control. Each group had self-sustaining interests in controlling the federal input—interests that were readily and easily translated into political and economic power at local and state levels. The grassroots insurgents, who were the primary employees of Head Start centers under the administration of the CDGM included many of the formerly voiceless women and men who had become "new people" through the sense of efficacy and agency that they had gained through political organizing, community leadership, and Head Start employment and its attendant educational opportunities. Women like Velma Bartley, Flossie Vence, and Sarah Williams were among the thousands of working-class and poor women who found a new sense of self through community organizing and Head Start employment.

A second group of players were the tiny segments of the black middle and professional classes in any community—the schoolteachers, doctors, lawyers, and businesspeople. These people had been partially protected by the segregated system, had enjoyed a privileged position of authority in black communities, and had often served as mediators between the poorer African Americans and local white elites. The black middle classes, however, were constantly aware of the tenuous nature of their privilege and of their very survival in a system that frequently penalized African Americans who acquired too much money, land, or visible self-respect. The gains in authority, income, and sense of agency by the "bottom rail" women and men—the "unqualified, disqualified, qualified," in Velma Bartley's words—threatened the authority of the black middle classes, and seemed to threaten the stability of their communities, as white extremists responded to black agency with terror and repression. An additional irritant in this volatile situation was the fact that Head Start teachers' aids and teachers had salaries that sometimes exceeded those of teachers in the state's public schools. Federal funding for CDGM programs was responsible for "an estimated 10 percent of all new jobs generated in Mississippi in 1966."[28] Better-educated African American women

like Olevia Johnson, Annyce Campbell, and Pauline Holmes were simultaneously aware of the great needs served by federal health and education programs, and also of their destabilizing potential at the local level. A number of these women took positions in federally funded projects over the 1960s—in several instances, because of the better salaries that agencies like Head Start offered.

Whereas the black middle class had its own reasons for attempting to control and receive the benefits from Head Start and other federally funded operations, Mississippi's white political leaders also had reasons to try to capture and control the federal dollars that flowed into Head Start and community development programs. Such money represented political power in a poor state, which had long relied on patronage to deliver votes. As in many other American communities, War on Poverty and CAP monies represented a destabilizing, divisive force in formerly predictable political arrangements. State officials correctly recognized the relationship between an empowered and economically independent black poor and the increase in black voter registration and participation in the wake of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the arrival of federal registrars to investigate and prosecute counties with histories of voting "irregularities." The placement of Head Start under the state-approved auspices of MAP, like the entrance of black middle-class leaders in the Loyal Democrat coalition that replaced the lily-white segregationist state Democratic Party in 1968, signaled two important developments in Mississippi politics. The coalition of black middle-class leaders and white moderates muted the power of poor and working-class blacks at local levels, and effectively substituted an integrated state Democratic Party for both the segregationist Democrats and the grassroots-led MFDP. This biracial Democratic Party was comfortable with the influx of federal funds that the War on Poverty brought into Mississippi, and saw in federal dollars a valuable means of improving the lives of their constituents. Activists interpreted these developments in light of the changes they witnessed at local levels.

Sarah Williams remained employed by Head Start as a community service worker for twenty-five years. She stayed through the transition from the ACBC to the CAP agency, and allowed that, "I've had a lot of opportunity and met a lot of people in community action, but it was nothing like ACBC." The CDGM agency, she said, "seemed to have more togetherness. We seemed like family. After it got to be the CAP program, it got so huge until you wasn't as one."[29]

Velma Bartley recalled the conflicts between the local ACBC activists and the CAP incorporation. "There was some friction, because we felt like we should maintain it [the Head Start program]. We was the one got it. We was the one that suffered. We was the one that sacrificed for it. So we felt like we should maintain it," she said. But after the federal "money started coming in the county, they [the CAP] organized. Naturally, they were a respected organization, because they were officials and all of this." As the program became "bigger and broader, they [the county CAP leaders] did not want to involve the poor. But see, then they couldn't do that. We fought that about two years, until we got that Affirmative Action, equal rights, and all of that,

started coming in." Despite her initial dissatisfaction with the new leadership, Bartley saw the value of the program, and worked for Head Start for twenty-three years. She found the whole political process of the decade "quite a lesson to be learned. And as I say, thank God we come through it. We ain't got no stripes to show."[30] In the last sentence, Bartley made a pointed reference to slavery and to segregation: the "stripes" were the marks that commonly came from a severe flogging or "whipping"—common enough under slavery, and on plantations, when a worker displeased a white boss.

Kermit Stanton of Shelby became actively involved in the civil rights movement around 1964. The World War II veteran and NAACP member had long been angry about the injustices and inequality of white supremacy in the years that he had lived and worked in Bolivar County. He recalled that "there was some people come through here—Freedom Riders—and they needed a place to meet and to try to organize people." Stanton, who was a master of the local black Masonic lodge, opened the lodge building to the young people. He quickly felt the pressure of white Shelby's disapproval. "They tried to make things just as hard as they could for me." At the Ford dealership where he worked, Stanton was senior mechanic: "they wanted to take that privilege away from me and give it to the white boy. And that's what I didn't like, and that's why I quit."[31]

Stanton received pressures from whites and blacks for his work with the "Freedom Riders" from COFO. But he remembered the young organizers warmly:

> These young people were very nice people, you know. They was dedicated to trying to help people in Mississippi, and they lived under a lot of conditions that ordinary people wouldn't live under in order to do some of the things they were trying to do. A lot of people resent the way they carried themselves and the way they lived and things like that, [but] the conditions was just they couldn't afford anything better.

The young organizers' salaries from COFO were a bare $10 a week. "They couldn't do much with $10 a week. But certain people in all areas tried to cooperate and work with them as much as they could. I had to do it under pressure from both sides, from my people and from the white people." Stanton continued to work with the young people from COFO, and became increasingly involved with the local black political issues in Shelby, where community people began to have regular meetings to discuss specific local problems and possible solutions.

One issue that drew black parents together was the schooling of their children. Stanton, a parent of schoolchildren himself, recalled the collusion of black principals, some older teachers, and accommodationist preachers that helped to perpetuate the blatantly unequal treatment that African American students received in the segregated system:

> The black preachers and some of the older teachers, principals, they were totally controlled by the white man, and they would do anything that he wanted them to

> do. As far as controlling the black kids at that time, when the cotton got ready to pick, they would turn school out, and it would remain out until they [the planters] got their cotton picked. We wound up going to school four months a year or something like that, you know. It was really bad, because they [the whites] didn't want blacks to be educated, number one. And that was another thing they did to hinder education. They called it the split session, but it wasn't no split session.

In 1967, African American parents organized a school sit-out to protest the conditions at the all-black Broad Street School, and the accommodationist policies of black principal John T. Williams. As a result of this boycott, the principal was forced to leave his position, and Stanton emerged as a community spokesman.[32] A number of black leaders then asked Kermit Stanton to run for a position on the County Board of Supervisors, the site of real political power in local governance. He ran in 1967, and, for the first time, felt that his life was in danger:

> That's when the Ku Klux Klan got involved. After I was elected, before I had taken office, which had to be somewhere in November, December, after the election, the Ku Klux Klan sent me a package through the mail with a doll in it and a stick sticking in the chest of the doll, and right beneath it said, "You." What I conclude from that, they were trying to get me to run away, you know. Scare me up.

Stanton had people from Mound Bayou come to watch his house, and contacted the FBI and local law enforcement officials. "I contacted the sheriff's department and told [them] if anything happened that I was going to kill as many as I could. And that would be the way it would happen." He turned the doll over to the FBI, but never heard from them. During the time, a night rider fired a shot through a window in his house in Shelby. Stanton did not remember being frightened at the time: "I don't guess I had sense enough to be fearful. I was too angry or something, I don't know. . . . I wanted to turn violent. I felt just that bad, you know. And [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] was preaching nonviolence, and I wanted to get violent as hell."

As the first African American elected to a county board of supervisors since the Reconstruction (1866–1876), Stanton experienced opposition from whites on the board and in the larger business community. In order to serve on the Board of Supervisors, Stanton had to be bonded. Only one white businessman in Shelby would bond him— "an elderly gentleman" who had owned an insurance company. Stanton remembered the man as "a decent person, always treated me fine. You find one or two people like that once in awhile." After the man bonded Stanton, he gave his company all of his insurance business, and any business that he could direct from the Board of Supervisors.

Stanton's first term on the board started in 1968, and he recalled a frosty reception from his fellow supervisors, almost all of whom were planters. "My first board meeting, all of the members of the board, except one, segregated themselves from me.

They were sitting around the table, and I was on the end. But anyway, when lunchtime came, they couldn't eat lunch with me. They refused to have lunch with me. And Jim Ed Bobo, who was elected over at Gunnison, the supervisor, he had his cook at his home to prepare my lunch for me, and I left the board meeting and went to his house and ate lunch because the other board members didn't want to have lunch with me." The white board members' racist behavior persisted for a year, but then, said Stanton, "they started coming around, one by one. I stayed [on the board] for twenty years, and you know, if you stay that long . . ."[33]

Stanton began his twenty-year service on the Bolivar County Board of Supervisors under Mississippi's old "beat" system, which preceded the unit system established by congressional redistricting in 1971. "I was in control of my beat. In my first term of office, I had a lot of learning to do according to the laws of Mississippi and everything else, you know—how I operate my beat. And I learned that, and I operated in that fashion. I was always above board according to the auditor's department. As far as I reported in the county, I always reported ahead of all the other districts. I ran my district better than everybody else." When redistricting was accomplished in 1971, Stanton's district, which included Mound Bayou, became 84 percent African American.

Over his years in politics, Stanton saw subtle, but real, changes in the attitudes of individual whites. "The people I deal with, they came to realize, to treat me as I demand to be treated. They're not treating everybody like they treat me. You understand what I'm talking about. A lot of it is still going on, because [black] people accept it." In his first two elections, Stanton didn't receive any votes from whites, but gradually developed a white constituency within his district. "They found out that I was the best thing as far as they've ever had. I was better than the white supervisors because I tried to serve everybody"—according to the old color-blind ideal of the NAACP. He took high hopes into his political life: when elected supervisor, "I said, well, twenty years from now, things [will] be so much better in every standard as far as education and everything else."[34] Kermit Stanton's social learning, which incorporated a wider knowledge of the African American communities of Bolivar County, and the whites with whom he worked on the County Board of Supervisors, enabled him to evaluate the major social changes that occurred between the 1960s and the 1990s from both a community- and state-wide perspective. The thirty years after his election would give him a double-edged view of the unexpected benefits and costs of social change.

Stories and Meanings

The stories of the movement era and the Head Start experience in Bolivar County contain elements of religious redemption and secular social movement learning experiences. The Head Start program in Bolivar County, which employed many local

activist women as teachers' aids and community service workers, emerges in hindsight as a critically important investment in human capital: it enabled poor African American women to improve themselves educationally and economically, to educate their children, and to achieve a new status in their communities. The movement and Head Start literally transformed lives. But tellingly, it also educated activist women about the depths of destitution that followed the collapse of the tenant farming and sharecropping system. If the Delta at the end of the twentieth century was burdened by economic stagnation, out-migration, and staggering rates of poverty, the movement years of the 1960s were marked by even greater misery and destitution—the product of generations of deliberate underdevelopment of the region's black labor force by local and state white elites.[35]

Sammy Rash, a young preacher in the movement years, attested to the revival-like religious faith that accompanied political activism. "We had hope," he said. "Even though we were getting some whippings on one side, there was some joy on the other side. So it was just a new day." When luminaries like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Sunflower activist Fannie Lou Hamer visited Cleveland, "It was exciting times, and we could see the light at the end of the tunnel." The linkage of "hope" with "new day" and "light" at the end of a dark road recall the prophetic promises made to the Biblical Israelites. "We didn't mind the whippings or the beatings because there was something that was within us." The "whippings"and "beatings" describe the brutality of segregationists, but also evoke the punishments of slavery, and the near-slave system of physical violence that was practiced by some planters and law enforcement officials in plantation districts. "All that was bitter that came with working for the civil rights movement, it seemed to turn to joy." The darkness, turning to the light, but not without trials and tribulations. "The sacrifices–there can be no redemption without the shedding of blood—and you have to understand that." Sammy Rash understood his gospels, and the sacrifices made by Jesus and the apostles for humankind. African Americans would be redeemed, but not without the blood shed by martyrs. Nevertheless, "the religious aspects . . . that's the thing that gave us faith and courage." Rash's story contained evocations of both the Exodus narrative and the New Testament, and described a movement from bondage to freedom and a literal awakening.

Rash also made telling assertions about the importance of Head Start to the success of the movement and its activists. The early childhood program was "one of the best things that could have happened in this Mississippi Delta." The women who worked for Head Start "were able to come out of the master's kitchen. . . . They could take a part" in the movement, and in their own development. Again, the evocation of slavery and bondage is telling: with their federal paychecks, activist women were freed "politically, economically, socially."

Flossie Vence and Sarah Williams also fused religious and political language in their appreciation of Head Start: "that's when we really could see the light." And Vence herself referred to a biblical prophesy, which she saw expressed in her Head

Start paycheck. "You know, I said that the head would come up from the bottom, and the bottom rail will go to the top. And it was." Moreover, the sisters believed, "the Lord . . . brought us out victorious." And Williams felt that she had been "blessed" to "learn so many things in Head Start."

If Rash, Vence, and Williams saw a working of divine deliverance in the movement years, Velma Bartley stressed both secular and redemptive processes of learning. Bartley recalled an accelerating sense of knowledge and ambition among grassroots activists, to the extent that some felt slowed down by the caution of NAACP president Amzie Moore. Most important, Bartley felt, was the change that Head Start helped to produce in poor children who were: "going into first grade [who] didn't hardly know their names and couldn't count to ten and all that." Her own experience with white children who did not know how to sit at a table or use a fork underscored the deprivation experienced by the black poor in plantation districts. For Bartley, the movement experience and Head Start "motivated me to want to *do*"—to act to better her community and to open opportunities for its children, including her own two boys. Further, Bartley felt that it was important to understand that it was the "uneducated people" that could take credit for creating Head Start in Bolivar County, people who were the "qualified, unqualified, disqualified . . . uneducated people" who did their work "out of their hearts, the interest of their nature." Bartley's testimony reveals a process of growth and awakening agency among working-class African American activists—people sacrificed to better educate their children, and other poor children, and who struggled to open opportunities in their community. Moreover, the process was "quite a lesson to be learned. . . . thank God we come through it. We ain't got no stripes to show." The phrase "coming through" evokes the passages of salvation ("coming through" a religious conversion), and of deliverance from slavery—"We ain't got no stripes to show." The passage links activism and agency, learning, and religious deliverance—with language that speaks to a past of slavery and oppression, of a violent social order that left many, like Jesus, with the "stripes" of whippings and undeserved suffering.

Roberta Martin felt embittered by what she saw as the enduring and debilitating racism of white elites. Her account of trying to get a "grandparent" onto welfare rolls, despite his part-time work for a planter, is a bitter description of the realities of power, privilege, and abuse that fused in the system of white supremacy. When Martin confronted the planter with the testimony of the welfare officials about the old worker's wages, "I knocked, and he came out the back door." This coming out of the back door of a house to speak with an African American was part of the etiquette of inequality in the segregated South. The custom was based on the assumption that African Americans were always servants, always dependent on the largesse or whim of powerful whites. Remarked Martin, "they [whites] hated black people that was getting any kind of little help. . . . it kept them from having to work for nothing, and it kept them from depending on [whites]. They didn't want you to feel independent."

The narratives of grassroots activists reveal a sense of empowerment, self-discovery, and agency that was collective and individual in nature. Even the most secular stories

were infused with a kind of religious fervor and hope. The transformation of the activists who worked for Head Start seemed almost religious in nature: according to L.C. Dorsey, such women became "new people," those born again into opportunity, learning, and economic self-sufficiency. Such hope was shared throughout the movement community. Kermit Stanton, active in school protests in Shelby, predicted, "Well, twenty years from now, things [will] be so much better in every standard as far as education and everything else." This was an ultimately transformative belief—the individual, the family, and the whole community would be utterly changed, utterly saved by the power of a movement that brought the promise of redemption and improvement, and that would make Mississippi a promised land.

One wonders, however, if any political transformation could produce the results longed for by the ultimately redemptive hopes of grassroots activists. Could political change produce widespread economic improvements for the poorly educated African American laboring classes, when the gross economic inequality that had characterized the region's history as an agricultural empire remained largely intact? The movement achieved great political victories in the 1960s and 1970s: it dismantled segregation, and achieved significant political power for black voters in Mississippi. But could these political changes help to generate alternative employment for displaced agricultural workers, and other working-class women and men? Could political victories be translated into sustained economic gains for all African Americans in the Delta? The Delta's history in the years since the 1960s indicates that much has changed: public transfer payments in the forms of welfare, social security, and other entitlements have replaced plantation labor as the chief source of income for many poor Deltans. But this change is not the one sought by movement activists in their most hopeful years.

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FIVE

The Limits of Political Power

In the mid-1990s, a number of Bolivar County activists voiced a mixture of grief, rage, and disappointment about their own experiences and the conditions of African Americans in their communities. The women and men who led an array of community struggles described with pride their successes in earning a living, becoming politically active, educating their children, and serving their communities and churches. But many also voiced a resonant despair about what they saw as the lack of significant advances in the quality of education, life, and health in the Delta. They pointed to the continuing power and economic inequalities within the Delta—a charge borne out by census numbers that revealed great disparities in educational achievement, employment, and life chances between the county's whites and blacks. In 1990, when about 64 percent of Mississippi adults had completed high school, 72 percent of Bolivar's whites were high school graduates, but only 42 percent of African Americans were graduates. Between 1990 and 1994, when Mississippi had an infant mortality rate of 12, with a nonwhite infant mortality rate of 15, in the Delta's core counties (which included Bolivar), whites had an infant mortality rate of 7, and blacks, a rate of 17. Bolivar County had an unemployment rate of 9.5 percent in 1994, with the white rate at less than 3 percent, and the African American rate higher than 16 percent. The Delta as a whole had a white unemployment rate of less than 4 percent, but a black rate of more than 16 percent. Clearly, African American communities in the Mississippi Delta continued to be blighted by a lack of educational opportunities and incentives, by poor health care and life chances for infants and children, and by Depression-level unemployment rates for adult African Americans. Teen pregnancy rates were more than twice as high among young black women as among whites, and 58 percent of Bolivar County's African Americans lived below the poverty level.[1]

Civil rights organizations had concentrated on community organizing and voter registration drives in the 1960s. Leaders and activists had been extraordinarily

hopeful that political power would transform their communities, and expand opportunities for all black people in the Delta. In the 1970s, organizations like the Delta Ministry had focused on economic development and improvement, and had sought government and foundation grants to improve the infrastructures in Delta communities, and to improve African Americans' access to low-cost housing, health care, and assistance for starting small businesses. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, activist black mayors had used federal grants to improve housing, schools, and facilities in towns like Shelby and Mound Bayou, but few major labor-intensive employers chose to locate in Delta counties, whose black labor force still suffered from the long-term effects of economic underdevelopment and exploitation.[2]

Expressions of grief and mourning among Bolivar leaders mirror those voiced by a number of Sunflower activists. The significant differences in Bolivar County flow from the quality and nature of its successes. For example, mayors of communities that had received millions of dollars in federal grants in the 1970s through the 1990s appeared to be more depressed and hopeless than did the children of sharecroppers and wage laborers. Whereas grassroots leaders and African American elites deplored the seeming lack of agency and improvement among the poor, middle-class leaders voiced a despair that flowed from the contradictions of their perspective.

Educated leaders understood why the lives of millions of Delta residents remained impoverished, but they nevertheless *wanted* the lower classes to practice the restraint, frugality, and initiative that had characterized the ideology of uplift. These women and men also expressed anger and disappointment with the black middle class, with African American elected officials, and with the ambitious young people who continued to leave the region and state. To hold contradictory points of view is not an unusual human attribute; oral historians have noted this tendency in numerous studies.[3] What is important, however, is that the contradictory patterns of attribution voiced by many Delta narrators left the speakers with few opportunities for hope. The mentalities that produce their despair had become an intellectual prison at midlife. Their own successes and the very real gains made by their communities underscored the relative and absolute deprivation of the Delta's poor, a deprivation that leaders, schools, and government programs seemed unable to change. What middle-class, educated leaders clearly saw was the historic legacy of deliberate, long-term underdevelopment and oppression that had been imposed upon generations of African Americans through the workings of collective trauma and terrorism. And, as students of collective trauma have come to understand, the damage inflicted on traumatized populations can persist among generations seemingly free from the originating terrors.[4]

William Lucas's son Earl participated in a number of the organizations that sought to bring economic and political opportunity to Delta blacks from the 1960s through the 1990s. He had grown up in all-black Renova and then Mound Bayou, and recalled that "we didn't have any fear of white people, none of us." At Mound Bayou Consolidated High School, Lucas and his siblings learned black history in the

ninth grade, and studied two foreign languages before they graduated. He attended college at Dillard University in New Orleans, and ran afoul of Dillard's administration several times—the first when he and other Dillard students refused to move from their seats on a city bus in order to comply with segregation laws that dictated the order of seating for white and black passengers. After another Dillard student on the bus commandeered the vehicle to drive to a basketball game at nearby Xavier University, police arrested all of the students. Lucas said, "I was supposed to be at Dillard to get an education. My Daddy said if I didn't, I could come back home and start farming again, so that was a pretty good incentive. So I stayed on down there and got my lessons."[5] He graduated in 1957, and returned to Bolivar County to teach math and science to fifth- and sixth-grade students in Alligator, Mississippi. After a year in Alligator, he was transferred to another small, all-black school for a year, and then moved on to the Broad Street School in Shelby. He taught in School District 3 " 'till they run me off." Lucas was fired when he and fellow teacher Robert Gray attempted to organize the faculty at Broad Street School to press for pay equal to that of the white teachers in the county.

While preparing to go to St. Louis to look for work, Lucas met with a priest who asked him to head a new organization that the Catholic Church in Mississippi was sponsoring—Systematic Training and Redevelopment (STAR), an adult education and manpower program that sought to improve employment skills of the poor, and to provide job placement for the program's graduates. A highly controversial program, STAR was funded by federal grants through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) from 1965 until its operations were closed in 1975. By 1971, the organization had programs in seventy-one of Mississippi's eighty-two counties, and had helped to find jobs for more than 5,000 people. But STAR did more than place minimum-wage and deprived workers—it helped to initiate suits against discriminatory businesses in the state.

Lucas had converted to Catholicism after he had graduated from Dillard University, having been influenced by the progressive attitudes of priests and nuns in Mound Bayou. At STAR he worked with Father Joseph Brunini, the archbishop of the state of Mississippi and a racial progressive. As a first step in local operations, Lucas set up a General Education Degree program as a night-school course, and organized a Manpower program to help train workers to improve their flexibility for assembly-line jobs. The graduates applied for jobs in Cleveland's Baxter Laboratories and were turned down. In a subsequent meeting of administrators and staff, Archbishop Brunini surprised Lucas.

> I couldn't figure out how the white folk coped with him. He's white. He blistered us at that meeting. He said, "Let me explain something. We're going to take an example, Lucas." He said, "How many students you got?" I said, "Fifty." He said, "How many of them got jobs?" I said, "Ten." He said, "Why the others doesn't have jobs?" I said, "They wouldn't hire them." He said, "No. Did they pass the GED?" "Yes."

> "They qualify for the job?" "Yes." "Then why wouldn't they hire them?" I said, "They just wouldn't hire them."

Lucas remembered that Brunini told the group, "No, you got to do better than that. Let me tell you something. I want you all to do a check and balance system. If them folks don't have no job, I expect you to tell me why and something done about it." Said Lucas, "I looked at him like—So he had all the directors there, and when he got through with us—he never did say, 'File a suit,' but that's what he meant." Not long afterward, Brunini directed lawyers from the Justice Department to visit Lucas in STAR's Mound Bayou office. The lawyers then filed a suit against Baxter Laboratories, with 500 plaintiffs. One of the Baxter employees was Earl's father, William Lucas, Sr.

While the suit against Baxter was in process, Brunini called another directors' meeting, asking what STAR was doing in other areas. "He wanted to know how many blacks was employed in banks, how many blacks worked for the welfare department, how many blacks worked in employment security. He wanted us to get people to apply for those positions. So we filed suit against employment security, the banks, welfare department, wherever we had people applying for those jobs." And for other businesses as well: a ceramic tile company in Cleveland, a lamp company in Shelby.

These activities made STAR highly unpopular with many whites. Whites burned Catholic churches in three Mississippi communities, a white STAR employee was severely beaten by three men one evening after an interracial meeting, and Lucas was shot at and threatened on several occasions. By 1971, the program had pumped $72 million into the state's economy, and had resulted in significant hiring gains. Moreover, said Lucas, "Most of the black elected officials that was elected right after it, grew out of STAR." By the early 1970s, those officials included Lucas, as mayor of Mound Bayou, Flonzie Goodlow in Canton, and John Cameron in Natchez. Additionally, STAR enabled people like L.C. Dorsey to earn a GED, improve community organizing skills, and to eventually earn college and graduate degrees.

Lucas was elected mayor of Mound Bayou in 1969, but stayed employed with STAR until 1973. As mayor, Lucas brought millions of dollars in federal grants and OEO funds into the struggling town. "Mound Bayou, in 1969, didn't have a water system. It had a partial water system. They had a tank, but no water had never been in the tank. They didn't have a sewer system, never had it. In all, 95 percent of the houses at that time were substandard. No streets. No police force, no fire department, nothing."

"I jumped into federal programs first, taking advantage of federal programs, because, at the time, I didn't have any competition down here in the South. You had to sign the civil rights compliance, and most cities wouldn't sign it. Two cities signed it when I started it for them [Mound Bayou]. That was Tupelo, Mississippi and somewhere else over there. Tupelo and Mound Bayou were the ones that were getting most of the federal dollars then." Lucas charged that his administration was blocked on

some proposals by the collusion of the white elites of Bolivar County with selected people in black leadership circles—school superintendents and state employees. Nevertheless, Lucas was able to bring a $4.9 million grant to Mound Bayou to build a city hall and other municipal buildings, and to construct a water and sewer system, and storm drains. At the same time, Lucas's administration "was averaging $350,000 a year to do housing, redevelopment—build new houses for people. . . . We created a housing authority."[6]

Lucas's activism, his outspokenness, and his success with federal agencies also provoked substantial white opposition within Mississippi. "Well, [Senators James O.] Eastland, and [John] Stennis came out against me, and I called them a damn liar in the newspaper. That's why the lawsuit came about against us. They were going to punish us for getting all the money. See, Benny Thompson was the mayor of Bolton. All the money I didn't get, he got it, and the state didn't have but ten million. I got 4.9, he got 4.9, and the rest of it was left for the state of Mississippi, and they went after him and they went after me."[7]

Indeed, the $4.9 million dollar federal grant from the Economic Development Administration was audited in 1982, after some officials questioned the use of the 1977 grant. A number of Mississippi legislators had protested the award of the grant, and Ron Hudson, director of the South Delta Planning and Development Agency—the body organized by the state to oversee the spending of federal funds in the six-county area—estimated that Mound Bayou received "roughly $50 million in grants and loans over the past fifteen years." Mayor Earl Lucas said the figure was more like $10 million since he had been elected mayor in 1969.[8] "The Department of Commerce finally came in and finished auditing us, they said we was ninety-eight cents out of line," said Lucas.[9]

During Earl Lucas's years in office, federal money and other sources brought a number of improvements to Mound Bayou. The town continued to struggle with long-term problems of unemployment, low family incomes, and the generally poor opportunities for advancement that plagued other Delta communities. An undated welcome brochure from either 1969 or 1970 trumpeted the town's economic achievements over the previous decade: the construction of a "brickcrete" factory;[10] in 1969, the opening of two Head Start centers, which together employed forty people; the initiation and operation of the STAR adult education program (then funded by the OEO); and the retention of the black-controlled public schools in the town, which served a student population of nearly 1,000 youngsters. The brochure also cited the improvements in health and outpatient care made possible by the Tufts University-sponsored Delta Health Center, funded partially by OEO, as well. Additionally, a North Bolivar County Farmers Cooperative had been organized to produce food for many of the landless and impoverished black Deltans who still lived in two-room shacks in "the rural," or who had more recently moved into towns and villages such as Mound Bayou. The city government had also organized a Mound Bayou Development Corporation to promote local economic growth. A hand-drawn

page of illustrations showed the buoyant dreams of the town's leaders: they wanted to see a new hospital built, and to have woodworking, food processing, and a "soya" plant added to the town's proposed industrial park. The leaders also envisioned a central shopping center that would sell groceries, clothing, furniture, and drugs. Even with the additions of the Delta Health Center and federal funds, Mound Bayou remained "in severe need of development," as the 1970s began. The leaders saw local underdevelopment as a product of long-standing state and regional treatment of all-black communities. Mound Bayou was, after all, "a part of the former plantation region of the state, and an area traditionally abused by the white dominated State Government and denied the benefits of such planning and growth as has been realized by the State."[11] Further,

> In recent years, the economic plight of Negroes has become even more severe as a result of changes in the technology of cotton cultivation, the major agricultural industry in this state. Between 1963 and 1968 nearly 40,000 agricultural jobs were lost to Negroes. The bulk of this displacement has affected the town of Mound Bayou where many such families are now residing. *Between 1963 and 1969, the Town has grown from 1,356 to 3,550*. . . . Unemployment in the Town is accentuated by the in-migration from the countryside. There are 561 houses in the corporate limits of this Town and survey shows [*sic*] that there is a need for an additional 360 houses.[12]

The complex history and impact of the Delta Health Center illustrated the enduring patterns of unequal, racially based federal support and maintenance within the Delta. The Delta Health Center was established in 1965 as a pioneering experiment in social medicine by Tufts University medical school faculty and health care practitioners. The center built upon the precedents set by the long-established Taborian Hospital and the Friendship Clinic in Mound Bayou, and secured OEO funds to operate its mission of providing quality outpatient health care to a widely scattered rural constituency. Tufts University ran the facility until 1971, when the health center and hospital directorships were merged—at OEO insistence—into an umbrella corporation headed by activist Owen Brooks of the Delta Ministry.[13] Brooks, the National Council of Churches, and civil rights organizations fought the state governors and legislatures a number of times during the 1970s so that Mississippi authorities would not reject OEO and other federal monies that kept the health center operating.

From the beginning, the severity of economic and health problems that existed among the Delta's poor African Americans confounded the idealistic medical staff—many of whom were recruited from East Coast medical schools and hospitals. One doctor, in an undated essay, described the kind of arena in which his staff practiced a broadly based program of social medicine. They operated, he wrote, in a "500-square mile area with 12,000 rural Negroes, with 75% unemployment, with an average

family income of $900 per year, with an infant mortality rate of 60 per 1000, with hunger, with incredible housing, all in the social, political, and racial context of Mississippi." The center, with its staff of forty-four medical and professional workers, served fourteen communities in its far-flung area. Their agenda was staggering: "to create a health program where virtually none existed." The staff dealt with pediatrics, geriatrics, sanitation (building safe outhouses, digging wells), had nurses visit homebound patients in remote areas, and had trained nutritionists working with local communities to introduce more balanced eating habits into communities. Delta Health Center staff also helped to organize the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative, Inc. The farm co-op obtained money from OEO to rent unused agricultural land so that the "800 poorest and hungriest families in Northern Bolivar County" could grow vegetable and fruit crops for their own consumption, as well as some to sell. The families grew sweet potatoes, butter beans, snap beans, green beans, black-eyed peas, and collard greens, which helped to feed themselves and others in the area. The Health Center also initiated a work-study program for black high school students, and successfully recruited a number of these students to start on careers as medical professionals. (One such student was William Lucas's son, "Willie B," who later established a successful medical practice in Greenville.) The center staff felt justifiably proud of recruiting young people into medical careers through a blend of on-the-job training in internships, tutoring, and mentorships—especially since they were drawing the students from "a population with a mean educational level of 4.3 years of schooling!"[14]

Throughout the 1970s, the Delta Health Center administrators struggled for funding. Cuts in War on Poverty funding, and the dismantling of OEO under the Nixon administration imperiled funds. And since the center served an impoverished constituency—more than 70 percent of its caseload was indigent—funding from patient fees was very low. Like Head Start centers, the Delta Health Center performed vital and important services for the poor of the region, but administrators and local activists agreed that the amount of resources and services provided by these agencies was woefully inadequate to correct the generations-old problems of poverty, dependency, and racism. All of these conditions were exacerbated by the final agricultural transformations of the 1960s, which left many black farm workers without work and incomes. In the early 1990s, historian James Cobb lauded the electoral progress that black voters had made in the Delta since the 1960s, but grimly concluded that "the region's story was still one of dislocation, disparity, and dependence." Federal "transfer payments were the chief source of income in all Delta counties in the 1980s," he concluded. "On average, more than 55 percent of the families in each [Delta] county received less than $10,000 dollars in income in 1979." At the same time, 2.83 percent of Delta families received federal funds of more than $50,000 a year—the "congressionally imposed limit" of annual agricultural subsidy payments to farmers.[15]

Despite Earl Lucas's success in bringing federal grants and improvements to Mound Bayou, his long tenure as mayor was marred by the traditional family and

community divisions within the town and with charges of nepotism and election irregularities. In July 1982, the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* claimed that "every election in Mound Bayou since 1973" had been clouded by "malfunctioning voting machines, voided ballots, and court challenges. But Earl Lucas always emerges as mayor." In the 1982 election, Olevia Johnson, owner of the J&L Grocery in Mound Bayou, had run against Lucas. She charged that "It's impossible for anyone except that mayor (Lucas) to win an election in Mound Bayou. He can't be beaten. He's made sure of that." The *Press-Scimitar* noted that in the nine years since Lucas's election, three regular elections and two municipal elections had been contested by the mayor's opponents.

Further, the newspaper noted that a number of Mound Bayou's residents complained that Lucas had given many of the best-paying municipal jobs—a number of them funded by federal money—to his relatives and friends. In 1982, Lucas's brother, Dr. Willie Lucas, served as director of the Mound Bayou Hospital and Medical Clinic—"the town's biggest employer of some 200 staff." His wife, Mary Lee, headed the hospital's nursing staff, with William Lucas, Jr., another brother, working as the director of personnel for the institution. The mayor's sister-in-law, Jackie Johnson, was employed as director of social services. And, until recently, Lucas' brother-in-law, Arthur Holmes, presided as principal of the Mound Bayou Elementary School. Arthur's wife, Katherine, a sister of Earl Lucas, taught at the school, as did the wife of alderman Harold Ward. Nurse Annyce Campbell, evidently a Lucas partisan, was a member of the town's Board of Aldermen, and was president of the Mound Bayou Development Corporation. "Her daughter, Wanda Stringer, was employed as City Clerk," and had been appointed to the Mound Bayou Election Commission.[16]

Clearly, Lucas's administration resembled other patronage regimes in American politics, with the distinction that political divisions and rivalries within Mound Bayou—which were directly expressed through the venue of jobs and salaries—were drawn along the lines of family interests and claims. As part of the newly arrived, rather than one of the "first families" who dated their settlement years to the 1880s, Earl and William Lucas's political gains were opposed by those older families who felt their opportunities diminished by the economic powers of the mayor.

Lucas's story of his mayoral years in Mound Bayou was a narrative of harassment suits and backroom deals between white elites in Bolivar County and their black allies in Mound Bayou, and of federal and state pressures from Mississippi's senators and legislators. Lucas felt that his administration improved housing, city services, water supply, and other facilities. Moreover, his success with grant writing and program development gave him an intimate knowledge of the internal workings of the state's politics and bureaucracies—and a thorough education in the lengths to which whites would go to preserve their hold on power and resources. This knowledge embittered Lucas:

> Most of us could go to a mental institution and get some treatment, because we been out here in this society this long. Every day—this is what really bothered me when

> I was mayor—every month that I was mayor, for twenty-four years, I found out something new that white folks was doing to black folks or mistreating black folks in this country. Every day for twenty-four years. Every month for twenty-four years. And when I came down here [to work as a grant writer for the Delta Foundation in Greenville], and started working, I started finding the same thing out again, and that bothers me.[17]

Even though African Americans in Mississippi had elected many black politicians to the state legislature since the late 1960s, Lucas believed that many of these political leaders lacked an adequate understanding of the totality of institutional controls that traditional white financial and agricultural elites still exerted in the state. Further, many lacked the will and vision to make positive changes for their constituencies. "They ain't about nothin' " Lucas claimed in 1996. "And I understand *that* from the Black Caucus in Washington down to the Black Caucus in Mississippi. They ain't about nothin.' They ain't about making no changes to help nobody. OK? You got a few black congressmen that up there [Washington, DC] now that's dedicated to trying to do something in their districts, and that's about *it*."[18]

Lucas left electoral politics after a heart attack in the early 1990s, and then began working as a grant writer for the Delta Foundation, an African American organization founded in 1969. Since that time, the foundation had devoted its resources to procuring outside grant monies—from private foundations and governmental agencies—to promote and develop "Black-owned businesses, job training, public service improvement, and regional development planning."[19] The Delta Foundation secured federal grants and foundation monies for business start-ups, and in its first twenty-six years, helped to create 6,000 jobs in Delta Counties. Though admirable, this job creation did not significantly alter the unemployment and underemployment of African Americans that continued to plague the region as the twentieth century ended.[20]

Earl Lucas's disillusionment, disappointment, and anger with the enduring economic noose of elite control were in part a product of his generational location and the hopefulness of his early years in movement-related activism and employment. Leaders of Lucas's generation included women and men like Dr. L.C. Dorsey and Mayor Robert Gray of Shelby. As young people, they had experienced the buoyant optimism of the civil rights organizing years in Mississippi in the 1960s, and had seen real progress result as the consequence of federal legislation and intervention into voting rights, education, and War on Poverty monies that funded Head Start, community action initiatives, and health care. Better educated than the older activists in their communities, and optimistic about erasing the legacies of paternalism and dependence among African Americans in the Delta, several became embittered by their inevitable discovery of the persisting power of entrenched economic and political structures that continued to serve as the social foundation of white dominance and black subordination.[21] Such social and economic stagnation in the midst of real political gains and a profound improvement in economic and social mobility for the

"talented tenth" of the Delta left men like Earl Lucas and his friend Robert Gray frustrated, angry, and disappointed.

Lucas, Gray, and several other narrators hence created a somber counter-narrative to the generally triumphant master narrative of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. The dominant narrative celebrates the movement's very real victories—the destruction of legal segregation, the emerging power of the black vote, and the widening of opportunity for young people to become better educated and to receive better jobs. This master narrative also celebrates the real heroism of the ordinary African Americans who made the movement possible.[22] The counter-narrative that has emerged from interviews with Delta activists is, in fact, a commemorative narrative of sacrifice, transcendence, personal development, and, finally, grief and mourning. Activists as different as Earl Lucas, Robert Gray, Juanita Scott, and Kermit Stanton mourned the losses of their communities in the 1990s, and asserted that African Americans had sacrificed too many of their sustaining cultural values to the processes of racial desegregation and the Delta's tardy and incomplete modernization. Grief and mourning, in turn, produced despair about the future of black communities, and the generations that had emerged from the new world of post-movement Mississippi.

Robert Gray was born in 1941 into a landowning and small business family in an all-black community in Tennessee. A basketball star in high school, he was recruited by several Southern black colleges in the late 1950s, and chose a two-year college in Natchez. In 1964, Gray finished his degree at Valley State College in Itta Bena, and was hired to coach basketball and teach health and science at the Broad Street School in Shelby. Gray had been impressed by the large numbers of African Americans in Mississippi's population in the 1960s, and by the number of black farmers who owned their own land. In 1996, he observed,

> that's what attracted me to Mississippi, because the numbers [of African Americans] were there, and a lot of blacks still had a lot of this family land, and I thought they were doing quite well, and that made me want to stay in Mississippi. In Mississippi, you're talking about at least 50 percent [of the population being African American] at that time . . . [23]

Even in the early- and mid-1960s, however, Gray saw some ominous signs that his optimistic vision of strong and prosperous African American communities might not come true. First, it was evident in the1960s that significant numbers of black farmers were beginning to lose their lands. Second, Gray and other black teachers and community members could not miss the drain of youth and talent that accompanied the still-massive out-migration of ambitious young people from the Delta. Over his college graduation weekend in 1964, he saw masses of his classmates head for the bus terminals to move North with their degrees and hope:

> On graduation night, they had to put more buses on to haul these black people out of here. A lot of these people never did come back home. When they walked across

> that stage, got their diploma, they had their suitcases in the car, and they went to the bus station. . . . Went north. And on that Sunday evening, you would see twenty-five or thirty Greyhound buses. Same thing was happening all the way up and down the line. When they graduated, *they were gone*.[24]

The young and ambitious left for jobs and opportunities elsewhere; the very poor people who had been day laborers or sharecroppers had nowhere to go but into the small towns and villages of the Delta, where they became recipients of War on Poverty programs and federal assistance—if they were lucky. Nevertheless, despite the continuing crises in agricultural displacement and the hemorrhage of talent to the North, West, and to other Southern cities, the 1960s were years of great optimism and hope for people like Robert Gray, who saw in the civil rights movement and in community organizing tools for revitalizing the majority-black community of Shelby. As a young coach and teacher at the Broad Street School, Gray began to open the gym to students on the weekends. As he got to know the young people and their families, he found ways to encourage the children to stay in school, and to apply themselves in their schoolwork. As news of War on Poverty initiatives spread in movement circles, Gray became interested in establishing a Head Start program in Shelby. With local leaders, he helped to organize Shelby's initial program through the black PTAs, and became a local director of the program in Shelby.

By 1967, local conflicts over nepotism in hiring at the Broad Street School and teachers' desires for a system of teacher tenure and job security provoked boycotts, meetings, and political agitation in Shelby. On the basis of Kermit Stanton's activism against the policies of Shelby's school administrators, community leaders urged him to run for a position on the County Board of Supervisors. Robert Gray was Stanton's campaign manager. Stanton was elected, but Gray, who had requested an occupational deferment to avoid serving in the Vietnam War, was called for a draft examination in Jackson. At that point, Gray left to work on a masters' degree in Texas. In the following year, he said, "Kermit and Eddie [Lucas, the new principal of Broad Street High School], came out there [to Houston] and got me to come back and run for city council."[25]

A celebratory press release from the Delta Ministry explained that although the black community had achieved a representative on the powerful County Board of Supervisors in Kermit Stanton, African Americans

> . . . still longed to have their voices heard at all levels of the government. Spurred on by the young people, who were much more openly anxious for change and much more willing to endure the harassment, the people of Shelby boycotted the stores and schools of their community in an effort to gain representation of their ideas on the policy-making boards of the city and the schools. Finally in the fall of 1968, some whites began to see that they needed to include black people in these decision-making processes if they were going to salvage their town. . . . One Alderman resigned and a special election was called for October 29, 1968.[26]

Gray was elected to the city council seat, but found several aspects of his victory distressing. The Delta Ministry's press release had predicted that the election "could be an important beginning of a relationship between white and black communities." As black voters developed a stronger presence in community politics, "they will begin to take a greater responsibility for the creative development of the total community." Further, "as whites begin to deal with black people as partners in the power of government, they will be weaned from their own patterns of discrimination or paternalism, broadening their own concept of their responsibility to the community."[27]

Gray saw white self-interest driving the elites' response to his candidacy, and enduring black subordination to those elites propelling at least some of the black voters. "You had what they called well-thinking aristocrats who pushed this thing, supported it. They made their cooks and everybody get out there. . . . everywhere I'd go, I was hearing people say, 'I'm going to vote for you because Mrs. So-and-so said vote for you.' And that just upset me. We was having all these meetings trying to convince people to register and vote and support the black candidate, but the main reason they would tell me they were going to vote for me was because Mrs. So-and-so said 'vote.' " Elite whites, stated Gray, "said 'Go do it,' because they didn't want the boycott to come back on." Other whites expressed a different perspective:

> That next morning after the election, I walked up into the post office, there was a group of little old white women sitting in there, and they were talking. They didn't know me from Adam's house cat. One of them said, "Lord, what is this world coming to? You know they just put a nigger on the town board!"[28]

When it came to accepting the realities of the growing black political power in Bolivar County of the late 1960s, Shelby's whites divided along economic and political lines. The racial radicals who belonged to the John Birch Society urged local whites to oppose any sign of black economic or political participation. The white elites took a different stance, which Gray later saw as equally destructive to the self-interests and self-confidence of African American voters. In 1996, he described the "blue-blood element" among local whites as paternalistic rulers:

> They do things under the [table]. And that's what's been hard for some of these blacks that come off these plantations to be able to understand. You know, he's always presented himself as a gentleman to them, and yet still, he's cutting their throats behind their back. That's very prevalent here in Bolivar County. I'll oftentimes say that Bolivar County is probably the most racist county in Mississippi.

According to Gray, this kind of local paternalism persisted into the 1990s. "And they have a way of doing it, that you've really got to look at it to see through it. And that's why we don't have any more progress from a black perspective, even with all the numbers we have. It ain't something that just happened. I mean, this is something

that is practiced on a day-to-day basis." He pointed to the politics in nearby Cleveland as an example. "Half of the black population of Cleveland are right outside of the city limits. Nobody ever makes a move to get it incorporated. If they did that, they could control the city, but the powers-that-be, those kind of guys, they're entrenched. And they've got their black friends."[29] Gray here echoed a charge that other African Americans had leveled at the city government in Indianola—that large black subdivisions were not incorporated within municipal boundaries. This exclusion had the effect of constricting the numbers of local blacks who can vote in municipal elections.[30]

Gray's first years on the city council were difficult—some council members continued to refer to African Americans as "niggers" and "nigras," even when Gray was present. He stayed on the city council until 1976, when he was elected as Shelby's mayor. Since Gray's election, a number of Shelby's whites migrated to nearby Cleveland. Others, whose life investments remained in Shelby and its environs had stayed—in part, because Gray's success in bringing in government grants and funds had also helped to enrich local contractors and businesses. In 1996, he claimed that his administration had "brought in some 15 to 20 million dollars over the years." Community Development Block Grants and other funds had constructed community facilities, public works, and public housing—as they had in Mound Bayou in the same era.

Although Gray was proud of his effectiveness in securing better housing and facilities for his constituency, he had been unable to lure industries into the town that could have improved the wage rates and employment opportunities of Shelby's citizens. He blamed the "powers that be" that ran Shelby's banks and businesses for his inability to secure local financing for any development. Additionally, the town's African American leaders had not "been able to motivate our people from a business standpoint to want to start little businesses of their own." Rather, he said, Shelby's African Americans

> [are] still out there thinking and looking for the job, because they're trained to think like that, and waiting for some white man to ride in on a white horse with a big white hat and save the community. That ain't going to happen. That ain't going to happen. If you don't want to save your community yourself, then it ain't going to be saved. The mayor can't save it. The people have got to save it. . . . And I've had white people come up to me and say, "If people want jobs, let them move to where the jobs are." They want these communities real quiet.[31]

According to Gray and others, the continuing dominance of state politics by white conservatives, and the enduring "plantation mentality" of many African Americans had proved to be a deadly combination as local blacks had begun to exercise political clout. Although Bolivar County had boasted a number of black elected officials since the late 1960s and early 1970s, those officials found their power to

affect change to be extremely limited. A lack of local capital and investment meant that majority-black communities were dependent upon federal or state funds for improvements in local housing, education, public facilities, and employment opportunities. The tiny black middle class of the segregation era had been replaced by a bureaucratic and public-service middle class in the post-movement era, but the numbers of skilled professionals who could be employed by state, county, and federal jobs remained limited.[32] Further, the lack of widespread improvement in employment opportunities and wage rates meant that working-class and poor African Americans could not see significant, on-the-ground changes made by their votes, or by their officials. Said Gray, "All the blame is falling down on our [black elected officials'] shoulders. Which is destroying the confidence that your own people have in you."[33]

Gray and some other leaders also blamed the newly arrived gambling establishments for putting further strains on poor communities. In the early 1990s, many Mississippi towns sought to lure offshore gambling casinos to their areas, as part of continuing efforts to expand employment and raise wages. It is debatable as to whether gaming has improved the economic prospects of many Delta blacks, since the casinos employed a great many workers from outside Mississippi. In 1995, Tunica and Coahoma counties, which had river boat gambling facilities in the 1990s, had poverty rates of 37 percent, while Washington County, with offshore gambling in the urban area of Greenville, had 32 percent of its population in poverty.[34] Gray and other Delta residents claimed that the gaming industry has proved to be just another blight on the region—and held it responsible for increases in bankruptcies, crime, and poverty, as working-class whites and blacks became addicted to the hopes of winning big at the machines or tables. Again, it is difficult to causally link the Delta's high crime rates in the 1990s to gambling, but, in 2003, the police chief in Greenville asserted that the national drop in violent crime—down by 50 percent from its high in 1973—had not occurred in Greenville, which still suffered high rates of violence and property crime.[35]

The Loss of Generations

In the narratives of mourning and decline that frequently emerged from interviews with Delta activists, one particularly important loss seemed to symbolize and exacerbate the others—the emergence of violent crime among young males in black communities, and the large numbers of young women who had babies out of wedlock. Although black-on-black crime and unmarried motherhood had long been part of poor black rural communities, activists saw the more recent manifestations of these problems as a staggering loss to their communities and to their own hopes for the future. Contemporary researchers have noted that, although data comparing the 1990s with earlier decades is not always equivalent in quality or thoroughness, numbers from the 1910 census and the 1940 census indicate that a significantly smaller

number of never-married mothers lived with their young children in the first decades of the century than in the 1990s.[36] Indeed, one recent study that "roughly one-third of births to black women were out of wedlock" during the Depression era, as compared with less than 6 percent of first-time births to white women. According to anthropologist Katherine Newman, in the "late '60s and early 70s, well more than half of all first births to black women, as compared to 18 percent of births to white women, were out of wedlock."[37] These percentages have grown since the 1970s: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that 32.6 percent of all births occurred among unmarried mothers in 1995. A little more than 25 percent occurred among unmarried white women, whereas more than 70 percent of births in the African American population occurred among unmarried women.[38] In 1997, the state of Mississippi had 45.4 percent of live births occurring among unmarried mothers, which included 19.6 percent of births to white women, and 74.5 percent of births among African American women. The poor majority-black Delta counties had higher proportions of African Americans born to unmarried mothers than did more prosperous counties. Bolivar County, for example, had 83.4 percent of African American births taking place among unmarried women. In Sunflower County, 85.7 percent of African American babies were born to unmarried women.[39]

Mayor Robert Gray of Shelby and a number of other leaders claimed that African American communities were worse off in the mid-1990s than they were in the 1950s and 1960s. Increased economic opportunities for the bright and educated, stagnating prospects for the local poor and working-class African Americans, and an apparent breakdown in family structures and internal community controls had eaten away at whatever cohesion and solidarity existed in the majority-black region. In Bolivar County, the white teen pregnancy rate was 40 per 1,000 women in the 1988–1994 period, while the black rate was 79 per 1,000. In 1990, 58 percent of Bolivar's black population lived in poverty, with 64 percent of all female-headed families living below the poverty level.[40] Like other leaders, Gray blamed the breakdown of social discipline that had discouraged out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and emphasized education and hard work to be the result of the desegregation of education and other institutions:

> There's been a breakdown in family structure, and a lot of it is because of integration. We [African Americans] had a way of disciplining our children that worked, and white people had their way that our people can't relate to. But we had to take on their way because of integration, rather than the way that we were doing it, which was successful. You know, Mama was gone, Mama next door looked after her children. Now, that don't take place in the white community. . . . The only thing that Johnny, who is black, relates to is a spanking from time to time. White people can discipline their children, "I'm not going to carry you to London this summer. I'm not going to carry you to Egypt. I'm not going to carry you to the coast for Easter break." That's the discipline in the white community, but we had to take on that,

> because, you know, it never has been a true integration. When you talk about integrate, you meet.[41]

With integration, or, rather, with desegregation—since most Delta public schools became overwhelmingly African American in their student populations—black communities lost the community-embedded all-black schools, staffed by African American teachers and principals. These schools, leaders like Gray believed, served a critically important function in African American communities, because they were a link in the effective community network of family, schools, and churches. All-black schools were thoroughly integrated into the life of communities they served, and their teachers and principals, like the leaders of churches, performed a necessary disciplinary and exemplary function for all members of the community. They effectively enforced community norms and values.[42] Even when churches and schools used coercive methods to enforce these standards of behavior, these methods were sanctioned and affirmed by parents who were anxious for their children to survive the terrors of segregation, and to succeed and prosper in an oppressive society.

With desegregation and the end of legal segregation, Gray said, "We lost all our businesses. We lost the schools, the control of schools. So while it might appear from the surface that we made progress, when you add up all of the intangibles into the situation, we've retrogressed." Although bright and well-motivated young people had done well in the years following the movement-based victories, he felt that the masses of poor and working-class black folk had not been touched by the political or social changes that had enabled the educated and ambitious to thrive. "We got people that are coming out of these schools, that can't read, they can't write, and they can't express themselves in any way. You've got teachers that are teaching that can't do it." He believed that "ninety percent of the teachers I see hate to go to work in the morning, [and] you've got to love what you're doing to do a good job."[43]

Although Gray himself had bought a business, and hoped to build it into a stable and profitable concern that could expand employment locally, he pinned his main hopes for the region's future on the willingness of bright, well-educated young people to return to their communities to help rebuild the social and economic infrastructure that enabled black Southerners to survive the traumas of segregation. But many young people, he said, continued to leave and never return. "And all that investment is gone. And its people like that don't come back, and then there is no hope." Indeed, the Delta as a whole lost 3.6 percent of its population between 1980 and 1990, including 5.9 percent of its African American population. Bolivar County lost 8.9 percent of its population in the same decade, with white losses of 10.7 percent, and black losses of 7.5 percent.[44] Between 1990 and 1998, the county lost another 3.7 percent of its population, which left African Americans as 64 percent of the county's total population in 1997.[45]

Gray blamed this dismal situation on the essentially unchanging nature of the economic disparities and opportunities within Delta towns. Local financial elites

who had long been unwilling to encourage black economic advancement, and who had been historically reluctant to diversify the region's one-crop agricultural base, found their own communities suffering in the 1990s, as rows of boarded-up storefronts seemed to multiply in tiny Delta towns. "That oppression [of African Americans and their communities] has returned home, and it's eating us up. Them, too." Gray characterized the condition of the Delta as one of "oppressive retrogression"—as African American and white communities slid further away from any real sustained prosperity or broadly based opportunity.[46]

Like Robert Gray, Kermit Stanton blamed many of the problems of Delta communities on entrenched patterns of dependency and subordination, which had only been exacerbated by improvements in the economic levels at which many of the African American poor subsisted. "We have the same thing now that we had thirty, forty years ago," he said in 1996. Educational standards were low, and "it seems as though you have to force education on young black people, because they have the opportunity, and they won't accept it. They start dropping out of school, using crack, selling crack cocaine. It seems like they're getting more ignorant every day than they were thirty years ago." Although many narrators stated that the availability of street drugs had hit poor communities hard, Stanton saw drug use linked to long-term dependencies on welfare, public housing, and government subsidies for the poor. "Seems like the federal government has a mechanism out here to control black people. . . . The welfare system is the worst system you ever saw. And until the government changes the system, I don't think its going to get any better. It's going to get worse."

According to Stanton, rampant consumerism had undermined the ethics of hard work and frugality that marked his generations and their ancestors. Even young people with good incomes did not save any money, he said, and those at the bottom of the economic system seemed even less capable and willing to plan, to save, and to improve themselves. African Americans in the Delta, he said, were

> further in debt than they were thirty years ago. They're living better, and everything, but they don't own anything. . . . The values are all screwed up. You can go up there [to Highway 61, Shelby's main road] and find fifteen on the street, and you ask them do they want to work, and no, they won't work. They're going to wait till they get that check from unemployment. They're not going to work. They won't work. I don't know what the trouble is. I think that the federal government did this on purpose to people.[47]

Kermit Stanton was angered by the enduring "plantation mentality" and dependency that he saw in many people but he was glad to have served his terms on the County Board of Supervisors, and to have eventually won elections with a biracial constituency. A man known as fair and honest by his constituents, Stanton was glad to have "helped a lot of people" through his political office. Further, his terms on

the Board of Supervisors had significantly increased his income, which had been $400 a month in 1967. "I managed to pay for my home, raise my kids, and help a lot of people and retire with a pretty good retirement. And that's about the only gain I see I accomplished, you know, really."

In 1996, Stanton was clearly disappointed by the social changes that had flown like demons from Pandora's box in the wake of the feverish optimism of the movement years. He was sad that so many African Americans still seemed to be unready for the personal and social responsibilities he believed to be necessary for a productive life. Stanton, in fact, mourned the apparent loss of the collective values expressed in the ideology of uplift: the values of hard work, frugality, and self-improvement and independence. He was affronted, especially, by what he saw as a lack of social internalization of these values. "We fought for it [freedom], and got it, but we had so many people that wasn't ready, and they're not getting ready. That's what's so bad about it. It seems like the people that wasn't ready in 1965 ought to be ready now, but they're still not. They're just worse off now that they was in 1965." What he wished for was something he lacked the power to do: "I'd redesign the whole system of the United States."[48]

When Kermit Stanton talked about the negative changes he saw in younger generations of African Americans in the Delta, he repeatedly used phrases like "hard work" and "sacrifices," and pointed to the necessity of restraint in financial management, habits, and pleasures. It seemed as though he believed that the increased prosperity and security of even the African American poor were deleterious to their characters. As though the hard times and multiple disciplines of his youth and adulthood had been a necessary education for family and social responsibility. Stanton and others seemed to suggest that the twin dangers of terroristic oppression and widespread poverty of the past had created a hardiness, strength, and vitality within African American communities that had been dissipated by the tantalizing fantasies of consumption.

In the late 1990s, Dr. L.C. Dorsey commented on the loss of community that she felt in Delta towns and small cities. Like many other Mississippi leaders, she recalled a time when no one in Shelby locked their doors. As late as 1975, she often left her house in Jackson open. And she remembered the poor black community of the Delta as a place of communal responsibility, mutual assistance, and respect. This was a common theme expressed by Mississippi activists: that the besieged black communities of the segregation era had systems of internal social controls and communal assistance that had disappeared in recent decades. This memory of communal solidarity was shared by many activists, who nevertheless also described political, financial, and familial divisions within the same communities that were supposedly marked by solidarity. These conflicting memories might have served dual psychological function for some narrators. Memories of community unity validated individual participation in collective actions of the movement, because these memories symbolized a fusion of individual, communal, and national aspirations that *had* yielded

important political change. At the same time, opposing memories of class, status, and social divisions within African American communities validated the difficulties activists encountered in the post-movement years, when divergent opportunities widened the chasm between the African American middle classes and the poor.[49]

Dorsey also described changes in the poor children who had been served by Head Start centers in the 1960s and 1970s, and those of the 1990s. Activists almost universally described the economically disadvantaged children of the earlier decades as more eager to learn, and more manageable, than the children of the last decade—a change that they attributed to negligent, overindulgent, or even abusive parenting practices. Head Start activists maintained that the behavior and attitudes of the children they saw in the 1960s and 1970s reflected community-wide norms of child rearing and behavior. The attitudes and actions of children of the last decade seemed to reflect better financial resources among poor families, but less parenting and adult attention to the children's development. Dorsey recalled the changes that Head Start worked in the poor children of the 1960s:

> It's hard to imagine and to visualize what actually happened to the kids. I mean, little kids who had been playing in the dirt and had mosquitoes eating them up—kids who had infectious diseases, kids who had problems with their teeth—I mean, to see all of these kids who for the first time saw a doctor, or for the first time saw a dentist, who for the first time was eating the proper foods and eating them on a daily basis, who was learning things every day, who went home with toothbrushes and toothpaste and, in effect, taught the family that "My teacher said we should brush our teeth every day."

Whereas the early decades of Head Start brought fervent parental involvement into their children's education and socialization, Dorsey observed that in more recent years, significant numbers of parents had not shown either interest or involvement with their children's education. Dorsey also noticed a difference in the kinds of deprivations that had handicapped or damaged children. The early cohorts of children often faced tremendous economic deprivation—they came from shacks without running water or indoor plumbing, and were fed a monotonous diet of cornmeal, pork, beans, and fatback when those were available. But, said Dorsey,

> the little dirty greasy kids that came to school when we first started Head Start were kids who came from homes where they knew they were loved. The majority of them knew they were loved. You didn't have as much [anti]-social behavior and acting out as you have in programs now. You didn't have kids who've been raised on bottles and who hadn't been held, because even the women who were working in the fields would come home and breast feed their babies in many cases, or they would breast feed them at night so you had some bonding and stuff going on with children. *That* is missing in a lot of kids that come to school now. . . . That's the big difference—that you see kids who are neglected, who are abused, who are socially deprived, who

> have not experienced nurturing, and you see their behavior coming into the [Head Start] program.

What had happened to parents, families, and children over the last thirty years of the twentieth century? Dorsey, like many other narrators, mentioned multiple social changes. First, she pointed to the breakdown of the socially cohesive segregated African American community, which had instilled a sense of collective responsibility and restraint. This local community bound families, churches, and schools together with agreed-upon norms and behavioral expectations. Second, she saw a deleterious consequence of rising prosperity within many communities, which had introduced more electronic entertainments into family systems—so that even country families no longer talked and shared stories in the evenings, but sat entranced by movies on VCR, programs on cable TV, or computer games and amusements. So the historic bond of intergenerational talk had atrophied in the wake of progress. Finally, she saw a change in the motivations and intentions of Head Start teachers and parents, which reflected these larger community changes. Dorsey reflected on the neglected children that she had seen in many Head Start centers during the 1990s:

> These kids are probably more damaged—and I hate to use that word, but I can't think of anything else—and they create a lot more attention, utilize a lot more resources for the program, and wind up with damages so severe, [and are] still not being able to be rescued from their circumstances. They leave school and go to a virtual battleground, where whatever's happening in school is not reinforced. . . . With the Head Start children I taught thirty years ago, the parents' involvement especially made sure that the parents knew what we were doing, so that [the learning] was reinforced when the kid got home.

Dorsey did not expect negligent or abusive parents to be involved with the Head Start process, and she acknowledged that many other parents had to work so many hours that their involvement was minimal. But these changes in parental concern and involvement, which had sometimes generated undesirable changes in their children's behavior and capabilities, were mirrored by other changes in the program itself. "The movement that drove the Head Start program was part of a social-change thing, and that is no longer there, either. [Head Start] is just another good job to try to get and try to hang onto, and to try to do as little as you can while you're there, in some cases. I want to emphasize 'some cases' because I still think that people do a wonderful job and do the best job they can, but it's just a different program than when we were there."[50]

Like midlife leaders L.C. Dorsey and Robert Gray, Reverend Sammie Rash of Cleveland was worried about the prospects for community leadership from the younger generations of black Deltans that he knew. He noted that Amzie Moore, J.D. Storey, and Fannie Lou Hamer had long since died, and wondered about his

successors when leaders like Owen Brooks and himself passed. "You have to have committed and dedicated people," but many young people, he said, were being "contaminated" by drugs, the lures of instant gratification, and money. "Our young, bright minds, black males—you know, this is the thing that hurts me, that I cry about every day and I talk to my boys about, you know. 'You've got to understand what they're *doing* to you. You've got to check out your mind, keep your mind straight. You've got to stay focused, let the partying go. Get out the door, stay focused, see what's happening, see what they're *doing to you*.' " The "they" to which Rash referred was impersonal—a system that lured young African Americans into drugs, pleasures, and crime, and then into prisons—and his solution was education and an individual and collective remembering of black history and experience:

> We're in the middle of Black History Month, and each Sunday I've allowed the education department of my church just to have fifteen or twenty minutes of talking about this—where we are now, what's happening to us now, what our situation is, and they've done a marvelous job. . . . it's kind of like the Jews in the Holocaust—you can't forget, not with hate or anything, but you can't forget.[51]

These twinned themes of a desperate need for young leadership in the black communities, and the dangers of young people's absorption into contemporary pleasures and consumerism were echoed by other Delta leaders. Narrators divided, however, over the root causes of the drug culture, the lures of consumerism, and the seeming present-mindedness of the young. Some, like Rash and Dorsey, attributed the rupture between older and younger African Americans in the Delta to enduring racism and deprivation produced by the political and social system of Mississippi, and of America itself. Yet narrators also pointed to a falling away from traditional values within vital institutions within the black community—and contended that many schoolteachers and churches did not uphold the stringent moral and behavioral standards that had enabled African Americans to "come through" the trials of slavery, segregation, and deprivation.

Like Rash, Olevia Johnson wanted to make it plain to young people that "that man [the drug dealer] is *using* you." She would "train [young people] not to be used by other people, but have a mind of their own, and control themselves. . . . And [to] look at that person that's bringing you [drugs]—and I think that if we get some of these drugs out from among our children and teach them responsibility, that they are responsible for themselves, that we would have a better America, better young people." She also believed that if preachers would "preach Proverbs a little bit more, you know, it tells about how to train the family, and what they should be doing." She believed that if this family training in black churches were increased,

> It would help. Because at home, sometimes we don't know anything about the morals of life, and the things that we are supposed to be doing right and wrong. We

> just go out there and do what we want to do, but it's not like that. So I think we need more training, more family training, as well as religious training.[52]

Whereas most Bolivar County narrators described the continuing problems of their towns and communities as structural and economic in origin, some older Deltans expressed keen disappointment in the patterns of behavior among the young people of their communities, and among the middle-class, educated young adults who had become employed in local white-dominated institutions. According to some of these elders, a prevailing fault of younger generations had been their unwillingness or inability to reproduce the habits of hard work, frugality, Christian morality, and reverence that had framed their own childhoods and "coming up" years. But they also blamed these younger generations for their seeming amnesia about the Delta's history of segregation and activism and their seeming neglect of the sacrifices and ideals and values of their elders. Clearly, many older activists were most pained about what they saw as the loss of the communally shared values that had sustained their own struggles within the segregated system, and against it.

Recalling her care and raising of many of the most deprived Head Start children, Flossie Vence expressed disappointment at the lack of political consciousness and of responsibility that many of her grown charges exhibited. "You know what hurts me most today?" she asked. "They don't even want to register to vote. I can name some of them. We'd go knock on the door, and they would tell us they don't want to vote."[53]

Nurse Roberta Martin saw few changes in the basic racism of white Mississippians, contending that many whites would willingly "go back to the way it was" in the pre-movement years, if given a choice. But she also faulted black and white political apathy for the defeat of progressive state political leaders, and for the elections of Kirk Fordice, a racial conservative, to the state governor's office, in the 1990s. "The fact that he [Fordice] got back into office, the fact that we've got all these Republicans in the legislature. That's pitiful. That means that so many black people, black people, are walking around not thinking. Black people, not only black people. The little people, I'll call it. You know, poor people. . . . Some poor white people, they don't care what happens, as long as black people don't get ahead."[54]

Brick mason Reuben Smith, who had been blackballed from construction work in Cleveland due to his activism, wanted the young people of his community to "quit wearing their head backwards, and try to put something *in* their head, because it's going to come a time when they're going to need it." Smith felt it also imperative that younger people

> Look back and see where they came from. Read up on the history of the black man and see where he came from, because some of them now got these here jobs and don't want to speak to you, you know. But they don't know how we got here and fought for them. You understand what I'm saying? So it should be known to them

what sacrifices that we have done in order for them to be where they are today, and for them to strive for more.[55]

Like many other narrators—including Earl Lucas and Robert Gray—Reuben Smith found too many black elected officials compromised by their desire to stay in office, which necessitated pleasing powerful white interests. "Most people we put into office, they changed overnight. They get in there. They stay on that board too long, they turn white themselves. . . . We've done put some [blacks] on the city board who got up there and closed their mouth, don't say nothing, you know." The crusty William Lucas, Sr., agreed, citing intra-black community divisions for continuing white political dominance of Bolivar County's government. "Negroes is really loyal to white folks. And them few that is not loyal to them, they're earmarked."[56] In these claims, Lucas and Smith echoed the statements made by Earl Lucas and Robert Gray.

Loran Hawkins was proud of having worked as a mail-carrier and a farmer, and, with his wife, to have supported and educated their five children. He was also proud of his record of community service and leadership—even though he acknowledged that his service was not often appreciated by the white community when both black and white organizations worked on similar projects. Like other narrators, Hawkins zeroed in on the fundamental problem that black Deltans faced in the late 1990s—the still-great economic discrepancy between the resources of the black and white communities. In the mid-1990s, he claimed, Mound Bayou's municipal finances were chaotic—the town continued to be reliant on federal and state funds for most salaries and services. Like Earl Lucas and Robert Gray, he saw a pressing need for black entrepreneurship, and for young black people to be competitive in the American and world economy. Because the Delta offered so few real opportunities for educated young African Americans, he said, it was " 'fattening frogs for snakes.' In other words, you produce the frogs, the snakes consume them. So what happens is—most of our young people migrate when we get an education."[57]

In 1996, Preston Holmes recalled with satisfaction that he and his wife Pauline had sent all six of their children to the colleges and universities of their choice—even when that meant that for several years the couple supported three children in higher education. Holmes remembered that he hustled to pay for his children's schooling at Fisk, Stanford, and MIT. He worked as postmaster in Mound Bayou, and also sold magazines and encyclopedias, and picked up and delivered clothing. When he retired from the postal service, he took a job with the state of Mississippi. During this period, his wife Pauline (figure 5.1), left teaching—which she loved—and took a position as a nutritionist with the Delta Health Center because the latter paid better. Their sacrifices had been rewarded—all of their children were "doing very well," and one son, a doctor, practiced in nearby Cleveland. But Holmes regretted that his other children had settled on either coast, because opportunities were so constricted in Mississippi. "See—we go to school here because it enhances our opportunities. As

Figure 5.1 Pauline Holmes, 1997

bad off as we are, if we don't go to school, it could be even worse. So basically we send our children to school at whatever the cost."[58]

But Holmes also lamented the fact that African American professionals like his children were drawn to opportunities and amenities that the Delta communities could not match. He had a daughter making a six-figure salary as a corporate recruiter, and two daughters who were musicians. He remembered when a physician friend who had relocated to Nashville told him, " 'you don't spend all your life getting prepared to stay in a mudhole where you can't rise no higher than the knees. You don't spend your life getting prepared and then stay in a place where you can't see a show, can't go to a fine restaurant.' " Holmes understood his children's choices, and applauded their achievements, but regretted the forlorn look of Mound Bayou, with its dwindling population and muddy residential streets. "I'm glad to see them making that contribution elsewhere, but when I think about how much those services are needed right here, then it makes me feel a little sad."[59]

Like many other women, Pauline Holmes had discovered shocking conditions of poverty when she took the job with the health center in Mound Bayou. As a nutritionist, she traveled out into rural areas to work with patients to educate them about diets, food choice, and budgeting. She saw a shotgun plantation shack occupied by thirty-two people, and children who regularly ate whatever was left in a pan on the floor in front of them. She not only believed that the health center and other federal programs had helped to improve local conditions, but also voiced a familiar conviction among Delta elders:

> I do not think that the children are recipients of the kind of education that we were the recipients of, and we did not have the facilities that they have. I do not think that most teachers are as dedicated as we were when we were teaching school. Now, we have more facilities and there are more things offered, but I don't feel that they are getting, with what they have, as much as we got, with the little we had.[60]

Annyce Campbell and her husband, a postal worker, educated their five children. Campbell herself had worked for Earl Lucas's Systematic Training and Redevelopment (STAR) program in the 1960s. She loved the adult education emphasis, because, she said, it "provided the home—that basic adult education that every parent ought to have. They don't have the knowledge of teaching those children some of your do's and don'ts. Them just little ordinary things, you know, people don't owe you nothing, but politeness is to do and say the kindest things in the kindest way. Obedience is all God requires of the child, and tells us, 'You train him.' Talking about the adult." She believed that many negligent parents took advantage of the services offered by Head Start as an excuse to be lax about their own responsibilities:

> Those people will get up in the morning, they don't know what direction those children going. The bus come for them, it wouldn't matter, you gonna comb the hair when they get to school, you gonna see to them brushing their teeth, and then you gonna give them their breakfast, then you taking away all of the responsibility that the home have. He [the child] need to get some basics from home.[61]

Campbell was proud that her children had done well, and that her daughters still asked her for her opinion when they made important life choices. They asked for her advice about marriage and careers, and one doctor daughter had honored her parents when she opened a "woman clinic" in Jackson—named after her grandfather. One son was a minister, another a musician, and a daughter taught school in Shelby. Another daughter was an attorney.

In 1996, Campbell was most impressed by a trip that she and her family had recently taken to Ghana. She found the Ghanians and their culture reminiscent in some ways to her own growing up years in Bolivar County. "I look at them, but they are doing some of the things my grandmother did. Those folks are making soap. They

make furniture. They make material, and it's not in a factory. Oh, it's a lot of stuff my grandmother taught me to do. I said, 'the old tradition,' and I said, 'we're African Americans, we're born in America, but that's our history. They got that soap. They make that dye.' " The whole trip, she said, "opened my eyes, and it gave me so much more appreciation for the history we have over here in the [Mound Bayou] cemetery."[62]

Campbell had worked with NAACP activists Kermit Stanton and others in Bolivar County in the 1960s, and was glad that better opportunities had opened for her children, and that all had prospered. But she wished that men would "know that God is our creator. We are our brothers' keepers. Not your white brother, not your black brother, we are our brother collective, You know. Blood's the same. Blood's the same. And one day we gonna have to come to that realization."[63]

Assessments

Although most of the Bolivar County narrators saw significant improvements in their own lives and in the lives of their children since the 1960s, they emphasized different causes and solutions for the economic and social ills that afflicted many individuals and families in black communities. Most narrators aged between 50 and 70 tended to point first to the structural causes of inequality and poverty, and to see many ongoing social problems as a direct result of the institutionalized racism, which still characterized many aspects of Mississippi's political culture and economic institutions. Roberta Martin, Earl Lucas, Robert Gray, and L.C. Dorsey spoke first of the structures that had sapped the self-confidence and strength of black Deltans in their long and unequal struggles with powerful regional and local elites—struggles that were only partially assisted by the increased numbers of black voters as a result of the movement, and the ongoing infusion of federal funds. They saw the roots of present-day economic and political dependency within the Delta to lie in the vast inequalities in wealth and social power that originated in slavery, the plantation system, and in the culture of segregation and white supremacy.[64] Political apathy, the co-optation of some black elected officials, and low educational and economic achievement among the poor seemed linked to ongoing habits of racial subordination and acquiescence to the recent economic order that had substituted welfare and other transfer payments for the wages of sharecropping, tenant farming, and other kinds of poorly paid but necessary agricultural and household labor.

Middle-aged narrators also focused on what was lost through political progress—the all-black community schools that were dissolved by desegregation and school consolidation, the solidarity and high standards of black communities under siege, and the harsh, if necessary, disciplines of hard times, frugality, religious and family values, and hard work. What narrators remembered were communities that survived through mutual assistance, care for the young, and by placing an extreme—almost reverential—value on education and achievement. Clearly, the fond memories

of the segregated communities of their youths were *emotional memories* that formed the template of values, comfort, and warmth in their later lives. Psychologists who have studied emotional memories believe that they are fixed during early years, and certainly by the years of the young adult transition—that period of the late teens through the early 20s.[65] Delta narrators' memories conveyed an unfolding world in which emotional, intellectual, and community development occurred. This was a world in which life lessons and values became crystallized—through the care provided and the examples set by family members, siblings, teachers, and community leaders. As youngsters, African Americans absorbed knowledge of the dangerous world of white supremacy and segregation, the necessity for hard work and thrift, and the importance of community cohesion.

Most midlife narrators, indeed, had warm memories of the communities of their childhood and young adulthood—embattled as these all-black towns and neighborhoods often seemed to be. Accordingly, a number of them expressed their normative sense of what a community should be and should do through their memories of an internally secure, if strictly disciplined, segregated black neighborhood in which families, churches, and schools shared responsibilities and resources for mutual survival. The warm memories of their childhood communities emphasized the communal nature of learning and development within concentrated circles of family, friends, churches, and schools. Both people and institutions within segregated communities were active agents in our narrators' own learning and development. Hence, the emotional memories of the past focused on the interactive and communal conditions of individual development and learning—those fundamental processes of "improvement" that became the foundation of adult achievement and leadership.

Interestingly, midlife and late-life narrators also credited the movement of the 1960s and its related community institutions—like the early Head Start centers—as a similar nurturing environment for growth, development, risk, and change. The movement provided an interactive and collective context for personal and community education, social learning, political organizing, and electoral success. The very real improvements that the movement and federal intervention brought to Delta African Americans were documented by activists' own life stories and family successes. Narrators' own children came to maturity in Mississippi where race relations were no longer enforced by raw terror and state segregation. These children could—and did—become better educated than their parents, and had far more opportunities for employment, economic security, and political participation. Thus, many activists recalled their movement years with the same warmth and affection that they bestowed on the stories of their childhoods in the segregated black communities. Both the early childhood and movement memories, then, are emotional memories of individual and community *development* within a collective experience. The warmth of these memories attests to the movement's centrality in activists' memories of adult development and psychological growth. And their privileging of these memories serves the important function of preserving a history of community memory and

achievement: the civil rights movement did transform the political landscape of the Southern states, and did dismantle state-imposed segregation. And it also stirred enormous hopes within activists and their communities—hopes and confidence that "everything" would be better for African Americans in the Delta.

But both late-life and midlife community leaders decry the more recent changes that have destabilized the institutions within black Delta communities in the wake of increased freedom and mobility of educated and ambitious young people from an economically stagnant region that offers few lucrative opportunities for the poor rural and urban masses. The continuing out-migration of the most talented young people, and the seeming alienation of many younger Deltans, is experienced by many elders as a betrayal of the values that enabled them to succeed, and of the struggles that have resulted in increased opportunities and freedoms for the young. The disappointment voiced by such disparate activists as Kermit Stanton, L.C. Dorsey, Robert Gray, Sarah Williams, Flossie Vence, Reuben Smith, and William Lucas, Sr., illustrated their continuing belief in defining progress through the mutual betterment of the individual, the family, and their community. All posited a satisfaction with their own achievements, and those of their children, but found their surrounding communities dissolving due to consumerism, continued economic deprivation, an erosion of family discipline, and a fundamentally different *psychology* that appeared to be rampant among younger generations. This psychology was individualistic, consumption-oriented, and seemingly oblivious to the needs for collective solidarity and restraint.

The Delta leaders' dismal assessment of their surrounding communities attests to two fundamentally contradictory elements in their visions of positive social change. First, almost all activists expressed youthful desires to be included in an American dream of equality, citizenship, opportunity, and progress. This has traditionally been a vision of individual progress through meritocracy and competition—a process somehow justified by the concept of an equality of opportunity. Opportunity was necessary if all individuals were to experience progress through self-improvement and learning, and through other developmental experiences. Certainly, most activists realized these changes in their own lives, and in the lives of many other colleagues and peers within their communities and families.

But individual achievement and success also widens the choices of young people; hence, many continued to leave the Delta to look for wider and more diversified lives elsewhere. In terms of an American dream of meritocracy and success, these women and men have been acting upon the successes of the Second Reconstruction, a movement that increased the life choices and freedoms of African Americans.

Although activists can applaud these successes in their own children's lives, the impact of such out-migration upon black Delta communities is experienced as a form of abandonment by many older narrators. This is because a third and necessary component of the three-tiered conception of life of older activists is the surrounding community itself. An integral part of their dreams of freedom and progress was the

material, spiritual, and moral improvement of the surrounding black community. This striving and cohesive black community of memory was a centrally important mirror of narrators' successes in childhood and young adulthood. The movement became this kind of foundational context and mirror—individuals *and* communities benefited from the arduous political and social learning that occurred during their years in struggle.

The freedoms and opportunities available to the young have pulled many away from the intimate black communities of the narrators' remembered pasts. Still other young people have found different models of African American success and freedom through electronic and visual media. In the eyes of their elders, these young people have developed values as consumers that appear to be antithetical to the frugality, restraint, and hard work of the segregated black communities. Indeed, the habits chosen by younger generations do not mirror the values and lives of older activists, and hence do not appear to affirm the importance of the struggles of older black Deltans—those movement-based community efforts that have made succeeding generations more free and less fearful.

Stories and Meanings

For a number of Bolivar County activists, the memories of segregated Mississippi communities, and of activism itself, became sites of mourning. Many interviews communicated a kind of despairing grief over the condition of Delta communities in the 1990s. Women and men lamented what they saw as the invasion of a cohesive rural culture by consumerism and the media. They expressed despair about political apathy among young people, and about the spread of drugs, crime, and violence within the Delta. Like the narrators of Sunflower County, the Bolivar activists blamed the young for negligent parenting practices, even as they contended that white elites—those in control of the federal and state governments—continued to perpetuate the conditions of dependence, poverty, and apathy within African American communities. From the creation of welfare policies to the co-optation of local politicians, economic and political elites remained in charge of the lives of impoverished African Americans, who seemingly accepted the situation. But former activists themselves appeared to be caught in a traditional imagery of power and authority that dominated Southern society since the inception of plantation slavery. If their image of authority was both personal and abstract, it was no less white than it had been in the old days. As Preston Holmes commented ruefully: "Mississippi—it's hell, but it's home."

Earl Lucas, the former mayor of Mound Bayou who had brought millions of dollars worth of federal grants to his community, communicated something close to depression when he stated, "most of us could go to a mental institution and get some treatment, because we been out here in this society this long. Every day—this is what

really bothered me when I was mayor—every month when I was mayor, for twenty-four years, I found out something new that white folks was doing to black folks or mistreating black folks in this country. Every day for twenty-four years. Every month for twenty-four years. And when I came down here [to the Delta Foundation], and started working, I started finding the same thing out again, and that bothers me." Like several other Delta narrators, Lucas was disillusioned with the performance of many African American politicians: "They ain't about nothin'." The power of African American leaders appeared insignificant, and white elites continued to do harm to African American individuals and to their communities.

Lucas's friend Robert Gray expressed a similar despair over his community of Shelby and about the Delta in general. Continuing out-migration of young and talented people depleted local communities, and, he charged, Shelby's African Americans "[were] waiting for a white man to ride in on a white horse with a big white hat and save the community." This white man on the horse was both planter-patron and the potential member of a "mob crew"—a white lord with the power to distribute largesse, or to destroy individuals and communities. Gray believed that while African Americans waited for deliverance from white elites, they also became increasingly critical of their own elected officials. Because black political leaders were not able to deliver significant economic improvements to their constituencies, "All the blame is falling down on our shoulders. Which is destroying the confidence that people have in you."

Gray elaborated his image of white people and their power in his comments concerning school desegregation. He compared practices of disciplining children within white and black communities—practices that differed greatly. Whereas many African American families traditionally practiced corporal punishment upon disobedient children, whites, he said, did not. Instead, they threatened, "I'm not going to carry you to London this summer. I'm not going to carry you to Egypt. I'm not going to carry you to the coast for spring break." Vacation destinations of London and Egypt might have been common among the 3 percent of white families who were major landowners or business people in the Delta, but such plans could not have been common among most white Mississippi families in the 1990s, whose wages, health care, and wealth still lagged behind those of the majority of Americans. Gray's imagination of white power and of the ability of white elites to harm African Americans was tinged with a sense of manipulation, depredation, and tragic losses. The losses of black businesses and schools amounted to an "oppressive retrogression" that continued to diminish the African American community—and that was harming the white community as well. Gray's optimism of the movement years had given way to a midlife despair and grief about his community and its future. Despite political victories, the African American community had lost too much.

Kermit Stanton echoed Gray's despair over the fate of Shelby and other Delta communities. He was distressed by the power of the welfare system over the lives of poor African Americans, and by the drug use and idleness of the unemployed in his

town. Like Robert Gray, Stanton deplored the spread of consumer culture and its values throughout African American culture. If the bright and ambitious left the Delta for better jobs and more opportunities elsewhere, those young people who remained in the community were "further in debt than they were thirty years ago. They're living better, and everything, but they don't own anything. . . . The values are all screwed up." Individuals from sharecropping and farm families of the 1930s and 1940s were especially affronted by contemporary American attitudes toward consumption and debt. Their own desires and spending habits had been based on a reverence for thrift and saving, and a fear of debt and destitution. These values had supported the intensive home production of farming families, and fostered practices of restraint and discipline concerning consumption. Clearly, the consumer culture that had invaded African American communities since the 1960s represented a moral decline to men like Stanton and Gray, because consumerism had displaced the survival-based virtues of thrift, hard work, and community service.

Dr. L.C. Dorsey also mourned the lost solidarity and "community ownership" of children that she remembered from the past, and contrasted that sense of connection among neighbors with the crime and consumerism of the 1990s. Her fond memories of the transformation and growth among impoverished children at Head Start centers in the 1960s and 1970s had been replaced by more disturbing images from recent years—"kids who are neglected, who are abused, who are socially deprived, who have not experienced nurturing." She saw children who were "damaged" and who were not "being rescued from their circumstances. . . . They leave school and go to a virtual battleground." What Dorsey depicted, and Sammie Rash mourned, was a virtual war of all against all—even in the streets of small Delta towns, where drug use and violence had made inroads in the 1990s.

Rash decried the temptations that led many young men to a fast track from high school to crime and to prison—a disturbingly common development in the Delta in the 1990s. He told the young men in his church, " 'You've got to understand what they're *doing* to you. You've got to check out your mind, keep your mind straight. You've got to stay focused, see what's happening, see what they're *doing to you*." His phrases echoed the vigilance urged by the prophets of uplift, who cast African American progress in stark terms of discipline and hard work and vigilance as opposed to idleness, dissipation, and corruption. His prescription for young people was education and remembering, learning about the dark journey of the past, and "what's happening to us now." Rash believed that learning and remembering African American history was critical: "It's kind of like the Jews in the Holocaust—you can't forget, not with hate or anything, but you can't forget."

For many narrators, images of consumerism were linked to drug consumption, manipulation, and forgetting the past and the sacrifices of previous generations. Former activists seemed to be engaged in a struggle for memory and ownership of this past, which they felt was under assault by a media-saturated consumer culture that damaged traditional bonds and communication among generations of African

Americans. And the images they used were evocative of consumer culture itself. Reuben Smith wanted young people to "quit wearing their head backwards, and try to put something *in* their head." The image of the backward baseball cap was telling, as also his prescription for the young. "So it should be known to them what sacrifices that we have done in order for them to be where they are today, and for them to strive for more." Memory, in this formulation, would produce awareness, gratitude, and ambition in the young.

Perhaps what is most striking in the narratives of grief and disappointment from Delta activists is their discomfort with recent history because their communities did not experience the progress that they had imagined for the future from the vantage point of the movement years. Power remained, however abstracted, in the control of white elites, and African American communities had experienced a loosening of collective bonds that had once been strengthened by the institutions of black-owned businesses, and by all-black schools. The depersonalization of relationships among families and communities, the intrusion of consumer culture into the ambitions and desires of younger generations, and the forgetting of history and sacrifice are all tied to the modernization that came so late to the Mississippi Delta. Depersonalization and abstraction are products of consumer culture and the rising incomes among some African Americans, of drug use and crime among others, and by the dependence of the poor in a region where underpaid and exploitative labor has been replaced by underemployment and unemployment.

Whereas jeremiads against consumer culture and the feckless spending habits of the young have been a common complaint in Mississippi's black rural communities since at least the 1930s, the language of loss and mourning of African American community activists points to a vast sense of disillusionment and grief.[66] These women and men experienced and created a social revolution, and have come to understand that history is not necessarily a record of progress, but can be the occasion for loss and mourning. People who survived experiences of collective trauma and social suffering created a social movement devoted to collective agency, redemption, and improvement. The ashes that they tasted in the middle of the 1990s were the reminders that the damage imposed by collective trauma and systemic underdevelopment live on, even unto successor generations.

Notes

Introduction

1. See James C. Cobb, "*The Most Southern Place on Earth": The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
2. Cobb, "*The Most Southern Place on Earth*"; J. William Harris, *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont, and Sea Island Society in the Era of Segregation* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
3. See John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Aaron Henry with Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).
4. See Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
5. James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1963).
6. Constance Curry, *Silver Rights* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1995).
7. See Dittmer, *Local People*.
8. See Monte Piliawsky, *Exit 13: Oppression and Racism in Academia* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 167–187.
9. See Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London & New York: Verso, 1998), 246–290.
10. Piliawsky, *Exit 13*, 167–203.
11. See William T. Andrews, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and Its Legacy* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 174–200.
12. *Mississippi: Handbook of Selected Data, 1999* (Center for Policy Research and Planning, Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning, 1999), 49, 52.
13. The New Orleans interviews are collected in the Kim Lacy Rogers-Glenda B. Stevens Collection at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. The book that I wrote from these interviews is *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).
14. Tom Dent, *Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1997).
15. Please see the listing of relevant works in the bibliography.
16. Although this literature, like that above is voluminous, some important works on the relationality of identity include John Paul Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999); Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); Jerome

Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1990); Julie Cruikshank, The Social Life of *Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

17. Arthur Kleinman, "Experience and Its Moral Modes: Culture, Human Conditions, and Disorder," The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Delivered at Stanford University, April 13–16, 1998; Richard Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality* (London & New York: Routledge 1996).
18. Two of our narrators, Mrs. Isabell Lee of Sunflower County, and T.R. Sanders of Washington County, were in their 90s at the time of the interview.
19. We also conducted ten interviews in Jackson and in Canton, Mississippi, with people who had movement, and sometimes statewide political experiences.
20. See Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphele Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, eds., *Violence and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Das et al., eds., *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Kai Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1994); Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G.M. Robben, eds., *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
21. See Das, et al., *Violence and Subjectivity*; Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble*; Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies*.
22. See Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1–46.
23. Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers, eds., *Interactive Oral History Interviewing* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1994); Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994); David C. Rubin, ed., *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
24. See Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*.
25. See Andrews, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, 174–200.

Chapter One Conditions of Life and Death

1. For a detailed study of the sharecropping system in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta, see Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); see also James C. Cobb, "*The Most Southern Place on Earth": The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London & New York: Verso Press, 1998); Stewart E.

Tolnay, *The Bottom Rung: African American Family Life on Southern Farms* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

2. John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937); Tolnay, *The Bottom Rung*; Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Constance Curry, *Silver Rights* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1995).
3. Arthur Kleinman, "The Violences of Everyday Life: The Multiple Forms and Dynamics of Social Violence," in Veena Das, Maphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, eds., *Violence and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 226–241.
4. David Oshinsky, "*Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 112–113.
5. Tolnay, *The Bottom Rung*, 96–97.
6. "Births in Mississippi—Resident and Non-Resident, 1940," Mississippi State Department of Health, Bureau of Public Health Statistics, Jackson, Mississippi.
7. W. Michael Byrd and Linda A. Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma: Race, Medicine, and Health Care in the United States, 1900–2000* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 156–159.
8. Dorothy Dickins, "A Nutrition Investigation of Negro Tenants in the Yazoo Mississippi Delta," *Bulletin*, Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station, A&M College; no. 254 (State College: Mississippi: Mississippi State University, 1928), 30–33.
9. Dickins, "A Nutrition Investigation," 47.
10. Howard Odom, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 51–59.
11. Cobb, "Most Southern Place," 262–264.
12. Oshinsky, "Worse than Slavery," 116.
13. Oshinsky, "Worse than Slavery," 117.
14. Woodruff, *American Congo*, chapter 5.
15. Woodruff, *American Congo*, chapter 5, p. 168.
16. Oshinsky, "Worse than Slavery," 118.
17. See Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 235; Kim Lacy Rogers, "Lynching Stories: Family and Community Memory in the Mississippi Delta," in Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, and Grahan Dawson, eds., *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 113–130; Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 199–240.
18. Oshinsky, "Worse than Slavery," 128–129.
19. See Nan Woodruff, *American Congo*, for a vivid description of the violent suppression of the STFU in the Arkansas Delta during 1936 and 1937.
20. See Woodruff, *American Congo*, chapter 5.
21. Corrine Bankhead, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, November 29, 1995, Cleveland, MS, transcript,16–24.
22. Presumably, a common-law marriage. Common-law arrangements were common among the rural poor. See Tolnay, *The Bottom Rung*.
23. Bankhead, 29.
24. Mary Tyler Dotson, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, October 2, 1995, Indianola, MS, The Delta Oral History Project (DOHP), transcript, 3.

25. Dotson, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 5.
26. Tolnay, *The Bottom Rung*, 96–110.
27. Dotson, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 9–10.
28. Robert Cableton, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, October 25, 1995, Indianola, MS, DOHP, transcript, 6–7.
29. Cableton, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 11–16.
30. Juanita Scott, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, September 15, 1995, Cleveland, MS, DOHP, transcript, 2–3.
31. Scott, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 9–10.
32. Ida Mae Turner, interview by Kim Lacy Rogers and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., July 10, 1998, DOHP, transcript, 1–8.
33. Turner, interview by Rogers and Ward, 15–17.
34. Alice Giles, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, September 1, 1995, Indianola, MS, DOHP, transcript, 21–23.
35. Dr. L.C. Dorsey, interview by Owen Brooks and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., June 21, 1996, Jackson, MS, DOHP, transcript, 2.
36. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Ward, 1996, 6–7.
37. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Ward, 1996, 8–9.
38. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Ward, 1996, 10–13.
39. McKinley Mack, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, August 11, 1995, Indianola, MS, DOHP, transcript, 2–4.
40. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 6.
41. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 9–10.
42. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Ward, 1996, 32–33.
43. Dr. L.C. Dorsey, interview by Owen Brooks, Kim Lacy Rogers, and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., July 18, 1997, Jackson, MS, DOHP, transcript, 41–42.
44. Dorsey, interview by Brooks, Rogers, and Ward, 1997, 42–43.
45. Dotson, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 40–41.
46. Dotson, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 42–44.
47. Oshinsky, "Worse than Slavery," 122–123.
48. Wilhelm Mader, "Emotionality and Continuity in Biographical Contexts," in James E. Birren, Gary M. Kenyon, Jan-Erik Roth, Johannes Schroots, and Tobjorn Svensson, eds., *Aging and Biography: Explorations in Adult Development* (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1996), 39–60.
49. See Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) on the problematic need to justify in memory the conditions of care and survival, even when those conditions included exposure to abuse or neglect.
50. See Katherine S. Newman, *Falling from Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1988); see also Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

Chapter Two Change and Movement Among the Poor

1. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 1–40; James Baldwin, *Next Time the Fire* (New York: Dell, 1963).

2. See Dittmer, *Local People*, 41–69; Joseph Todd Moye, " 'Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired': Social Origins and Consequences of the Black Freedom Struggle in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986" (PhD Dissertation: University of Texas, 1999), 1–100; On lynching crowds, see Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002).
3. See Dittmer, *Local People*, 19–115; Moye, " 'Sick and Tired' " 48–173.
4. See Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Councils: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954–1964* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).
5. Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 181–182.
6. Moye, " 'Sick and Tired' " 180–262.
7. See Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *2002 State Health Profiles* (Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, CDC, 2002), 53, 107–121; Richard Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality* (London & New York, 1996), 72–109.
8. Mckinley Mack, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, August 11, 1995, Indianola, MS, DOHP, transcript, 10.
9. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 12–13.
10. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 13–14. Mack's reference to "whistling" here is, of course, a statement about the Emmett Till lynching of 1955, an event that haunted Delta African Americans for decades afterward.
11. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 17.
12. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 19.
13. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 24–26.
14. Moye, "Sick and Tired," 223–224.
15. James C. Cobb, "The Most Southern Place on Earth": The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 257–261.
16. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 24.
17. Cora Fleming, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, August 16, 1995, Indianola, MS, DOHP, transcript, 57.
18. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 13–14, 55.
19. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 20–23.
20. Moye, "Sick and Tired," 262–300.
21. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 23–25.
22. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 28–29.
23. Mary Tyler Dotson, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, October 2, 1995, Indianola, MS, DOHP, transcript, 12–13.
24. Alice Giles, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, September 1, 1995, Indianola, MS, DOHP, transcript, 1–15.
25. See Dittmer, *Local People*, 369–372.
26. See Andrews, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, 136–154; Dittmer, *Local People*, 363–388; Polly Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes: A Biased Biography of the Child Development Group of Mississippi* (Washington, DC: Youth Policy Institute, 1990).
27. See Dittmer, *Local People*, 363–388; Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
28. Dittmer, *Local People*, 363–388, Newman, *Divine Agitators*, 84–127.

29. Dittmer, *Local People*, 363–388.
30. Giles, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 23–26.
31. Giles, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 36–37.
32. Giles, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 51.
33. Giles, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 44–45.
34. Dr. L.C. Dorsey, interview by Owen Brooks and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., June 21, 1996, Jackson, MS, DOHP, transcript, 1996, 20.
35. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Ward, 1996, 51–52.
36. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Ward, 1996, 52.
37. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Ward, 1996, 88.
38. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Ward, 1996, 70–71.
39. See Lemann, *The Promised Land, The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 309–339.
40. *Mississippi: Handbook of Selected Data, 1999*, 6, 49, 52, 68.
41. See Moye, "Sick and Tired," Cobb, "*The Most Southern Place*," and Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London & New York: Verso Press, 1998).
42. Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators*, *The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 2004) 217.
43. Larry Doolittle and Jerry Davis, "Social and Economic Change in the Mississippi Delta: An Update of *Portrait* Data," Social Science Research Report Series 96-2 (Starkville, MS: Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center, 1996), 1–39.
44. Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies*, 79, 157.
45. CDC, *2002 State Health Profiles*, 110–121.
46. Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies*, 153–172.
47. Juanita Scott, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, September 15, 1995, Cleveland, MS, DOHP, transcript, 18.
48. Scott, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 19.
49. Scott, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 8.
50. Scott, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 24–25.
51. Scott, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 27.
52. William Wiseman, Gertrude Moeller-Kato, and Charles Menifield, "Health in the Mississippi Delta: Prevention and Policy," Social Research Report Series 93-3 (Mississippi State University: Social Science Research Center, 1993).
53. See Woods, *Development Arrested*, 240–250; McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 88–90.
54. See Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies*.
55. Dotson, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 57.
56. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 56–57.
57. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 50–51.
58. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 50.
59. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 51–52.
60. Giles, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 55–60.
61. Bankhead, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 4–5, 42–44.
62. Cableton was directing this charge to the white interviewer.
63. Robert Cableton, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, October 25, 1995, Indianola, MS, DOHP, transcript, 67–74.
64. Mack, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 67–70.

65. Ida Mae Turner, interview by Kim Lacy Rogers and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., July 10, 1998, DOHP, transcript, 35–40.
66. Dorsey, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 1997, 45–47.
67. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*; Kai Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters* (New York & London: W. W. Norton, 1994).
68. Das et al. eds., *Social Suffering*; Das et al. *Violence and Subjectivity*; Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
69. Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2003), 125.
70. Fleming, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 14–15.
71. Giles, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 23–26.
72. Giles, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 55–60.

Chapter Three Achieving in the Rural: Independence and Leadership in Bolivar County

1. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
2. James C. Cobb, "*The Most Southern Place on Earth": The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 69–152.
3. Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclass from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 28, 73–104.
4. James, *The Dispossessed*, 80–81.
5. Milburn Crowe, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, February 19, 1996, Mound Bayou, MS, DOHP.
6. See Cobb, "*The Most Southern Place*," 46–68.
7. Kermit Stanton, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, April 8, 1996, Shelby, MS, DOHP, transcript, 20–21.
8. Olevia Johnson, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, February 15, 1996, Cleveland, MS, DOHP, transcript, 5–6.
9. Stanton, interview by Brooks and Rogers, April 8, 1996, Shelby, MS, transcript, 1–7.
10. William Lucas, Sr., interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, February 6, 1996, Mound Bayou, MS. DOHP, transcript, 10–11.
11. Lucas, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 12–13.
12. Cobb, "*The Most Southern Place*," 195.
13. Annyce Campbell, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, March 27, 1996, Mound Bayou, MS, DOHP, transcript, 3–27.
14. Lillie Robinson, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, December 8, 1995, Cleveland, MS, DOHP, transcript, 1–3.
15. Loran Hawkins, interview by Kim Lacy Rogers, February 22, 1996, Mound Bayou, MS, DOHP, transcript 15–16.
16. Hawkins, interview by Rogers, 6–7.
17. Pauline Holmes, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, March 6, 1996, Mound Bayou, MS, DOHP, transcript, 1–7.

18. Holmes, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 6–8.
19. Holmes, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 10–25.
20. Neil. R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 12–114.
21. Jones, *The Dispossessed*, 95–97.
22. Sarah Williams and Flossie Vence, interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, March 7, 1996, Cleveland, MS, DOHP, transcript, 5–6.
23. Williams and Vence, 16–24.
24. Williams and Vence, interview by Brooks and Rogers, 28–31.
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Glossary

ACBC	Associated Communities of Bolivar County
ACSC	Associated Communities of Sunflower County
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CDGM	Child Development Group of Mississippi
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
MAP	Mississippi Action for Progress
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
OEO	Office of Economic Opportunity
RCNL	Regional Council of Negro Leadership
REA	Rural Electrification Authority
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
WPA	Works Progress Administration

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