

By the summer of 1961, Herbert Lee was a wealthy man by local standards—local black standards. After thirty years of farming in the deepest corner of the Deep South, Lee had a small dairy farm, a modest home, nine children, and a road or two that did not seem like a dead end. So one day that scorching summer, when a young, bespectacled black man from New York showed up on his porch wearing bib overalls and speaking softly about his right to vote, Lee decided he could take a few risks. He agreed to drive the stranger around Amite County. To friends and family, Lee's decision suggested a death wish.

Blacks did not vote in Mississippi—never had as long as anyone could remember. “Niggers down here don’t need to vote,” one cop said. “Ain’t supposed to vote.” Entire counties where black faces far outnumbered white had not a single black voter. Seventy-some years had passed since Mississippi had crafted a clever combination of poll taxes, literacy tests, and other legalistic voodoo that, within a decade, slashed black voting rolls from 190,000 to just 2,000. Ever since, whenever a Negro had dared to register, terror had taken care of him. A trip to the courthouse registrar landed his name in the newspaper. Soon the “uppity nigger” was beaten, fired, thrown off a plantation, or left trembling in the night by a shotgun fired into his shack. Herbert Lee knew the risks, but when he decided to face them, he did not know he was risking his life.

On the morning of September 25, 1961, Lee was rattling along dusty back roads toward the tiny town of Liberty, Mississippi. Looking in the rearview mirror of his old pickup, he saw a newer truck. Lee pulled into the parking lot of a cotton gin. The other pickup, its tires popping the gravel, pulled

alongside. Lee recognized the driver, a burly white man with jug ears and a broad, shiny forehead, pink from the summer sun. Lee had known "Mister Hurst" all his life, had even played with him as a boy. The two men's farms were not far apart. Perhaps Mister Hurst just wanted to talk. Then Lee spotted the .38 in his neighbor's hand.

Through the window of his pickup, Lee shouted, "I'm not going to talk to you until you put the gun down!" Hurst said nothing, just bolted out of his truck. Lee frantically slid across his seat and scrambled out the passenger door. Hurst circled, gun waving.

"I'm not playing with you this morning!" the hulking white man said. Before Lee could run two steps, Hurst put a bullet in his left temple. Lee fell facedown in the gravel. The new pickup sped away. The parking lot fell silent. The body, encircled by onlookers, lay in a pool of blood for hours beneath the sizzling sun. Blacks were afraid to move it, and whites refused.

No one knew how many black men were murdered in Mississippi in 1961. No one could remember the Magnolia State ever convicting a white man of killing a black man. At the coroner's inquest, Hurst spun a story about a tire iron Herbert Lee had brandished. His gun, Hurst said, had gone off by accident. A witness was coerced into swearing he saw the tire iron, too, the same one "found" under Herbert Lee's body. State legislator E. H. Hurst never went to trial. But the bullet that killed Herbert Lee set off a string of firecrackers that clustered in a single summer, a season so radically different, so idealistic, so savage, so daring, that it redefined freedom in America.

BOOK ONE

Crossroads

And the problem of living as a Negro was cold and hard. What was it that made the hate of whites for blacks so steady, seemingly so woven into the texture of things? What kind of life was possible under that hate? How had this hate come to be?

—Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

Prologue

In the fall of 1963, America was suffused with an unbearable whiteness of being. Confident and assertive, the nation rode an unprecedented wave of prosperity. The engines of the American economy were at full bore; the young, handsome president was well liked and respected. The enemy was unmistakable—a mushroom cloud, a bald bully banging his shoe at the United Nations, a worldwide threat that had to be contained. Americans drove two-thirds of the world's cars and held half the world's wealth. Cars were big and beefy, with fins, flamboyant taillights, and loud engines under expansive hoods. Jars of Miracle Whip and loaves of Wonder Bread were in most kitchens; Marlboros and Kents were advertised on TV, and half of all adults smoked a pack or more a day. Only one or two cities had enclosed malls. Ninety-nine percent of homes had TVs—almost all black and white—yet none received more than seven channels. These featured “a vast wasteland” of Westerns, medical shows, and silly sitcoms. Not a single program showed a dark face in any but the most subservient role. In the halls of Congress and in city halls across the nation, all but a few politicians were as white as the ballots that elected them. Yet from this ivory tower, the future could be spotted.

That fall in Southeast Asia, American advisers sent back discouraging reports, causing President Kennedy to consider ending involvement in Vietnam. College students strummed folk songs, their younger siblings danced to syrupy pop music, but off in England a shaggy-haired rock band was riding a wave of frenzy that would soon sweep across the Atlantic and sweep away old mores. Across the South, blacks were marching into police dogs and fire hoses, demanding decency and human rights. But the most significant

signpost in the autumn of 1963 arose in the nation's poorest state. There, on a November weekend shortly before events in Dallas began to change everything, thousands of bone-poor citizens gave America a long-overdue lesson in democracy.

Mississippi's official ballot listed Republican and Democratic candidates for governor. Yet in a southern state still voting as if Lincoln headed the GOP, the election was never in doubt. Everyone knew Democrat Paul B. Johnson, following in his father's footsteps, would be the next governor. White voters admired how, as lieutenant governor, "Paul Stood Tall Last Fall," blocking a black man's entry to the state university. White voters relished Johnson's sneers at the most hated politicians in Mississippi, Jack and Bobby Kennedy, whose federal troops, so the story went, had incited the integration riots at "Ole Miss." White voters sniggered at Johnson's joke that NAACP stood for "Niggers, Alligators, Apes, Coons, and Possums." And on November 5, white voters comfortably elected "Tall Paul." But that Tuesday, whites were not the only voters in Mississippi.

From the buff sands of the Gulf Coast to the cotton fields of the Delta, a parallel election was held, a black election, a "Freedom Election." In little wooden churches with majestic names, whole congregations rose from the pews. While gospel choirs chanted—"We-ee shall not, we shall not be moved"—men and women slipped "Freedom Ballots" into wooden boxes. In cafés sweetened by the smell of cornbread, withered hands marked Xs beside "Aaron Henry—Governor" and "Reverend Edwin King—Lt. Governor." On teetering porches, black men in overalls and black women in gingham spoke with students from Yale and Stanford recruited for this prelude to "Freedom Summer." Nodding politely, calling their clean-cut guests "sir," lifelong sharecroppers learned that voting did not have to remain "white folks' business." And thousands, forging raw democracy out of Mississippi's red clay, cast "Freedom Votes" in beauty parlors and grocery stores, in barbershops and pool halls. Yet thousands more were far too terrified to risk anything so dangerous as voting.

Throughout that weekend, fear had quickened the pulse of Mississippi. Much more than a governorship was being decided. In a "closed society" where segregation ran as deep as the fertile soil of the Delta, black and white agreed on little, yet both knew that voting equaled power. Elsewhere in the South, blacks had begun to register—44 percent in Georgia, 58 percent in

Texas, 69 percent in Tennessee—but in Mississippi just 6.7 percent could vote. So long as they remained "second-class citizens," blacks knew they would remain powerless. And whites knew that if "our colored" registered en masse, or worse, if they were led to courthouses by "goddamned NAACP Communist trouble makers," all the nightmares recounted by grandparents would return. Just as during Reconstruction, "Niggers, Alligators, Apes, Coons, and Possums" would run Mississippi, sweeping away white power and all the peculiar institutions of segregation on which it rested. "Citizens," remembered an unrepentant Klansman, "not only have a right but a duty to preserve their culture." In 1963, no one needed to explain this in Mississippi. The brutality that fall weekend was swift, spontaneous, and as blunt as a fist in the face.

On Halloween night, a Yale student stopped for gas in Port Gibson. A century earlier, Union troops had entered Mississippi through this same small town whose gorgeous mansions General Ulysses Grant found "too beautiful to burn." Now in the eyes of locals, another invasion had begun. The "goddamn Yankee" was easy to spot—a white blond-haired stranger in the same car as a black man and woman. Ordering the white man out of the car, four men pummeled him to the pavement, then circled, fists coiled, kicking, pounding. Heads turned, but no one intervened. When the bloodied man climbed back in the car, the thugs followed it for miles along dark roads. Two days later, the same strangers—the men only—were spotted again.

On a warm Saturday morning, the two Freedom Election workers headed north out of Natchez to distribute campaign fliers. Suddenly, a shiny green Chevy Impala pulled behind them. In his rearview mirror, the driver saw two white faces. He made a U-turn, but the Chevy followed, riding his bumper. Heading south past farms and fields, the two cars sped up. Twice the Chevy pulled alongside, but twice the lead driver, who had raced hotrods in high school, roared ahead. The Chevy stayed right on his tail. Engines groaning, gravel flying, the cars soon topped one hundred miles an hour. Finally, the Chevy pulled even and forced the strangers' car into a ditch. This time the locals had a gun. Ordered out of his car, the driver paused—then punched the accelerator. The car lurched back onto the road. A bullet shattered the rear window. Another tore into a side panel. A third grazed the rear tire. Running red lights, weaving into oncoming traffic, slowing as the

tire lost air, the driver finally ducked down a side road as the Chevy roared past.

All that weekend, similar welcomes met "agitators" throughout Mississippi. Up north in Tate County, shots narrowly missed a Freedom Election worker. Down south in Biloxi, a rock-throwing mob broke up a Freedom Election rally. In Yazoo City, gateway to the Delta, cops closed down another rally. Before the weekend ended, seventy election workers had been arrested. Charges ranged from disturbing the peace to driving cars too heavy for their license plates. Roughed up or just told to get out of town, the students got a strong taste of how the law worked in Mississippi in 1963.

The terror nearly succeeded. Organizers had hoped 200,000 blacks would cast Freedom Votes. Not counting ballots confiscated by cops, 82,000 did. Organizers hoped to use the parallel ballots, legally binding under a Reconstruction-era law, to challenge the official election. No one expected the challenge to succeed, but each Freedom Vote signaled a change in Mississippi. Centuries of bowing and scraping, centuries of pleasing "Mr. Charlie," centuries of "yassuh" and "nossuh," had come to their final days. But the Freedom Election also stirred embers as old as the Civil War, or as it was still called in Mississippi, "the War for Southern Independence." Come 1964, Mississippi would be swept by a racial firestorm. The long and vicious year centered around what organizers called the Mississippi Summer Project. The rest of the nation came to call it Freedom Summer, and it would pit the depth of America's bigotry against the height of America's hopes.

Ten weeks before Mississippi elected its new governor, a quarter million people had flocked to Washington, D.C., to hear Martin Luther King Jr. speak of his dream. As the multitude gathered near the Lincoln Memorial, pollsters had fanned out across the country. The Harris Poll on race, taken during a summer of shocking violence across the South, suggested how remote King's dream remained. Along with the stark income gap—blacks earning just 56 percent of what whites earned nationwide—a sizable majority of whites disliked, distrusted, and struggled to distance themselves from blacks. Some were cautious: "It's a rotten, miserable life to be colored." Others were blunt. "We don't hate niggers," a smiling San Diego woman said. "We just don't want them near us. That's why we moved from Chicago."

While King's soaring baritone described his dream that "one day the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood," 71 percent of whites said, "Negroes smell different." While crowds cheered King's hope that someday his children would "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," half of those polled claimed, "Negroes have less native intelligence." And as King rose to a crescendo, dreaming of a time when "all of God's children—black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics—will be able to join hands," 69 percent said, "Negroes have looser morals," three of every four said, "Negroes tend to have less ambition," and 90 percent said they would never let their daughter date a Negro.

"Negroes are oversexed," a Nevada man said. "They're wild."

"I don't like to touch them," a Pennsylvania woman admitted. "It just makes me squeamish."

Revealing prejudice from sea to shining sea, the poll also documented what northerners loved to crow about—that racism ran rampant in the South. There, 73 percent thought blacks less intelligent, 88 percent thought they "smelled different," and 89 percent thought they had "looser morals." The numbers were not broken down by southern state, but everyone knew where the deepest prejudice festered. When Medgar Evers was gunned down in Mississippi that June, the head of the NAACP had not even feigned surprise. "There is no state with a record which approaches that of Mississippi in inhumanity, murder, brutality, and racial hatred," Roy Wilkins said. "It is absolutely at the bottom of the list."

For all its natural beauty, its proud heritage, its subsequent racial progress, Mississippi in 1963 was a mean and snarling state, run by tight-lipped politicians, bigoted sheriffs, and cops "not playing with" anyone who crossed them. Mississippi's mounting brutality had disgraced many of its own citizens. "During the past ten years," native son and novelist Walker Percy wrote, "Mississippi as a society reached a condition which can only be described, in an analogous but exact sense of the word, as insane." Across America, Mississippi had become a symbol of racial terror. Singer Nina Simone crooned, "Everybody knows about Mississippi, goddamn," and nightclub comedian Dick Gregory never missed a chance to mock the state. Seems he was fired from a Chicago post office, Gregory

told audiences, for putting letters to Mississippi in a sack marked "Foreign Mail."

In the twenty-first century, the joke would fall flat. Modern Mississippi, having achieved a racial reconciliation to rival South Africa's, has more black elected officials than any other state. Even its former Klan enclaves boast black city councils, black mayors, black police chiefs. But in 1963, for nearly a million blacks too broke, too rooted, or too beaten down to follow Highway 61 north, life in Mississippi was no joke. Before Freedom Summer and the changes it jump-started, Mississippi was a place where a black body floating in a muddy river was "as common as a snake"; spies and informers working for the state kept dossiers on 250 organizations and 10,000 individuals backing integration; black sharecroppers picked cotton from "kin to cain't"—from sunup, when you "kin see," to sundown, when you "cain't"—for three dollars a day; civil rights workers were routinely arrested and beaten while cops laughed off charges of "police brutality"; and the slightest tremor of racial equality unleashed shock waves of raw brutality.

The violence had most recently touched down in Greenwood, a small city in the cotton fields that boasted of being "the long staple cotton capital of the world." Though the majority of Greenwood's residents were black, whites owned 90 percent of everything. Fine mansions and stately oaks earned Greenwood's Grand Boulevard the title "America's Most Beautiful Street." But rows of decrepit shacks stood on "the other side of the tracks," and all public facilities—pools, drinking fountains, even popcorn stands—were segregated. A tired joke said that Greenwood had one black voter, but no one could find him. In the summer of 1962, enraged whites beat back a voting drive with mass arrests, drive-by shootings, and Molotov cocktails torching black homes. When dozens continued marching to the courthouse, when no number of cops flailing nightsticks could stop them, county officials used a more elemental weapon—hunger. As winter approached, they seized federal allotments of rice, flour, and dried milk that helped many sharecroppers survive the lean season. Across Leflore County, as temperatures plunged below zero, thousands were left "neckid, buck-barefoot, and starvin'." Only a "Mississippi airlift," activists driving tons of food into the Delta, averted a famine. Still, one infant died of starvation, and two sharecroppers froze to death. As spring approached in 1963, blacks marched to the courthouse in greater numbers. Whites fired point-blank into cars. Firebombs gutted the

movement's headquarters. A snarling police dog tore into a line of marchers. By summer, with just thirteen new voters to show for all the arrests, all the violence, the Greenwood movement stalled.

Mississippi stood at a crossroads. Years of peaceful protest had been met with bombings, beatings, and simple murder. And the rest of America did not seem to care. With Martin Luther King focusing attention on southern cities, Mississippi remained a neglected outpost of civil rights, too removed, too rural, too simmering with hatred to offer the slightest hope. In the wake of the fall's Freedom Election, a new tactic was needed. The election's architect, a man so saintly he was often compared to Jesus, labored to find that tactic. The Freedom Election, Bob Moses said, "makes it clear that the Negroes of Mississippi will not get the vote until the equivalent of an army is sent here." Finally, the idea blossomed.

What if, instead of Mississippi's black folk struggling in isolation, hundreds of college students from all across the country poured into the state? Wouldn't America pay attention then? And what if, along with registration drives, these volunteers staffed Freedom Schools, teaching black kids subjects their "separate but equal" schools would never teach? Black history. Black literature. The root causes of poverty. What if, in the spirit of America's new Peace Corps, this "domestic Peace Corps" set up Freedom Houses all over Mississippi, with libraries, day cares, and evening classes in literacy and voting rights? And what if, at the culmination of the summer, delegates from a new Freedom Party went to the Democratic National Convention to claim, beneath the spotlight of network news, that they, not Mississippi's all-white delegation, were the rightful representatives from the Magnolia State? "Before the Negro people get the right to vote, there will have to be a massive confrontation," said twenty-four-year-old John Lewis, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, "and it will probably come this summer. . . . We are going to Mississippi full force."

The idea haunted a state still haunted by the Civil War. Mississippi had long been a land of stark contrast—red clay and green grass, mansions and shacks, folks as pleasant as flowering magnolias, folks as mean as swamp snakes. But Freedom Summer, while it brought out the best in America, brought out the worst in Mississippi. When word of the summer project leaked, it sparked rage and resentment not seen in America since Reconstruction. Mississippi newspapers warned of an "invasion." Governor

Johnson denounced the “invaders” and their “dastardly scheme.” “We are going to see that law and order is maintained,” the governor said, “and maintained Mississippi style.” The capital city of Jackson beefed up its police force with shotguns, teargas, and a tank, a six-ton armored vehicle with room for a dozen cops. “This is it,” Mayor Allen Thompson said. “They’re not bluffing, and we’re not bluffing. We’re going to be ready for them. . . . They won’t have a chance.” Rural residents also steeled themselves, Mississippi style.

In small towns with lilting names—Holly Springs, Picayune, Coffeetown—people proud of their southern hospitality seethed at the thought of summer. How dare these “beatniks,” ignoring their Harlems and their Roxburys, invade Mississippi to tell the entire state how to deal with race! In tranquil town squares, where skinny men in suspenders sat on storefront benches, where women in sunglasses and sundresses promenaded beneath covered sidewalks, the majority of whites believed Mississippi had no “Negro problem.” “We give them everything,” Greenwood’s mayor said. “We’re building a new swimming pool. We work very close with the nigger civic league. They’re very satisfied.” For nearly a decade, white Mississippi had watched with dread as integration came to Montgomery, Little Rock, Greensboro, Nashville . . . And now this army of northerners was poised to overrun their state, to change “our way of life.” Word had it the “invaders,” including white women, would be *living in Negro homes!* Visceral fears of “wild” Negroes, of “carpetbaggers,” of the “mongrelization” of black and white, brought generations of hatred bubbling to the surface.

In Mississippi’s most remote hamlets, small “klaverns” of ruthless men met in secret to discuss the “nigger-communist invasion of Mississippi.” They stockpiled kerosene, shotguns, and dynamite, then singled out targets—niggers, Jews, “nigger lovers.” One warm April night, their secret burst into flames. In some sixty counties, blazing crosses lit up courthouse lawns, town squares, and open fields. The Klan was rising again in Mississippi. Like “White Knights,” as their splinter group was named, the Klan planned a holy war against the “dedicated agents of Satan . . . determined to destroy Christian civilization.” The Klan would take care of business, a recruiting poster said. “Get your Bible out and PRAY! You will hear from us.” Finally, as swamplike humidity spread and the noonday sky seemed to catch fire, summer arrived.

Before it was over, all of America would focus on Mississippi. TV and

newspapers would tar and feather the state. Hundreds of doctors, lawyers, and clergymen would come to help student volunteers. Folksingers, Hollywood stars, and Martin Luther King himself would flock to Mississippi, where whiplash violence was shredding the social contract. Thirty-five churches would be torched, five dozen homes and Freedom Houses bombed, and Mississippi would become synonymous with murder. The FBI would give a code name to its investigation, one that eventually named a movie whitewashing the agency’s role—“Mississippi Burning.” But Freedom Summer was more than the sum of its violence.

That summer, the complexion of America began to change. President Johnson signed the landmark Civil Rights Act, and slowly, grudgingly, “Whites Only” signs vanished across the South. Urban riots ended racial complacency in the North. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution plunged America deeper into Vietnam. And at summer’s end, a black sharecropper taking the microphone at the Democratic National Convention nearly ended the political career of the president of the United States. Meanwhile in Mississippi, several hundred students and their host families showed Americans, black and white, how to treat each other with uncommon decency.

That summer, whites hosted in black homes marveled at people who, after lifetimes of degradation, openly shared faith, food, and hope. That summer, Mississippi blacks met whites who shook their hands and spoke to them as equals. “Nobody never come out into the country and talked to real farmers and things . . .,” Fannie Lou Hamer remembered. “And it was these kids what broke a lot of this down. They treated us like we were special and we loved ‘em.” Waking each morning to a rooster’s cackle, the smell of biscuits baking, the sizzle of something frying, suburban students discovered “the other America,” the neglected nation of dirt roads and distended bellies, of tumbledown shacks and outhouses askew. Teaching in makeshift classrooms, volunteers learned the human cost of racism. Canvassing voters porch by porch, they tested their faith in democracy. And when it was over, shaken by violence, inspired by courage, aged years in just one season, veterans of the summer project went home to face down the nation they thought they had known.

“Mississippi changed everything for anyone who was there,” volunteer Gloria Clark remembered. Most were quick to say they were not heroes, not when compared to those who risked their lives just to vote. The volunteers merely dropped in for a summer, then went home to question America. Some

would spearhead the events that defined the 1960s—the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, the antiwar movement, the women’s movement. Others, spreading ideals absorbed in Mississippi, would be forever skeptical of authority, forever democrats with a small *d*, and forever touched by this single season of their youth. But first, they had to survive Freedom Summer.

You who live in the North: Do not think that Mississippi has no relevance to you. . . . My Mississippi is everywhere.

—James Meredith

CHAPTER ONE

“There Is a Moral Wave Building”

School was out and summer was making promises across America when three hundred people descended on a leafy campus in Oxford, Ohio, not far from the Indiana border. All were Americans, most were under twenty-five, and all felt their country changing in ways they could not ignore. Beyond these traits, they had little in common.

They came in two distinct groups. The first—mostly white—had just finished another year at Harvard, Yale, Oberlin, Berkeley. . . . Guitars slung over shoulders, idealism lifting their strides, they piled out of cars sporting a Rand McNally of license plates. California. Massachusetts. “Land of Lincoln.” They wore the *American Bandstand* fashions of 1964—polo shirts and slacks for men, capris and sleeveless blouses for women. Talking of LBJ, Bob Dylan, the civil rights bill struggling in the Senate, they found their way to dorms, met roommates, and settled in to learn about the daring summer they had chosen.

The second group—mostly black—brought no guitars and had little idealism left to pack. They did not wear slacks and polo shirts but denim overalls and white T-shirts. Many sported buttons depicting hands, black and white, clasped above the letters SNCC. And although most were the same age as the students, instead of sharing college stories, they arrived with stories of being beaten, targeted, tortured. Like the students, they sometimes spoke of recent reading—of Kant and Camus, James Baldwin and *The Wretched of the Earth*. But they did not read for grades; they read to arm themselves against the world. And their world was not sunny California, quaint Massachusetts, or the Land of Lincoln. This second group had come less from a state than from a state of war. They had come from Mississippi.

On Sunday afternoon, June 14, when the two groups met on the campus of the Western College for Women, the Mississippi Summer Project began. But the scene suggested the end of summer rather than the beginning. As if it were September, boxy Corvairs and humpbacked VWs braked in front of Gothic, ivied dorms. From them stepped two, three, or four people, stretching legs and casting glances. Across courtyards strewn with students, an occasional transistor radio blared a hit—"My Guy" or "She Loves You"—yet many students, goateed men or women with long, ironed hair, sat beneath trees strumming guitars, making their own music. Within a few hours, they would learn stirring hymns of freedom, but most only knew one such song now, and now seemed too soon to boast of overcoming someday.

Over dinner in the dining hall, where the food was surprisingly good, students talked about their hopes for the summer. Few harbored even postcard images of the South. Most had been in grade school during the Montgomery bus boycott, slightly older when federal troops desegregated Central High in Little Rock, in high school when spontaneous sit-ins desegregated lunch counters across the South and Freedom Rides made headline violence. The previous year, they had seen the appalling images on TV—attack dogs and fire hoses tearing into blacks in Birmingham, dead children, their dark legs dangling, carried from the rubble of the First Baptist Church. And now they were headed to the South, the Deep South. Most could conjure up only fleeting imagery. "At Oxford, my mental picture of Mississippi contained nothing but an unending series of swamps, bayous, and dark, lonely roads," one student later wrote. Some thought they knew the South. It was the fabled land of Faulkner's doomed families, the bittersweet nostalgia of *Gone with the Wind*, the hokum of TV's top show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Few had ever seen a spreading live oak dripping in Spanish moss or sweated in the steam-bath of a Mississippi summer. Even fewer had set foot in a sharecropper's shack, seen a pickup with a gun rack, used an outhouse, been in jail, heard a shotgun blast echo and die in the darkness. They had six days to prepare.

To help them, the denim-clad group from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) arrived in Oxford with a simple plan—tell the truth. The Mississippi Summer Project was a death-defying roll of the dice. In a state where a sassy comment could get a Negro killed or a white battered, it was one thing to risk your own safety; it was another to ask hundreds of strangers to risk theirs. And so, like sergeants in boot camp, SNCC trainers

felt duty bound to turn innocent idealists into anxious, even terrified realists. But only after singing.

The Freedom Songs began after dinner. Standing in the cool twilight beside a circle of trees, volunteers were introduced to songs fired in the crucible of "the Movement." On beyond "We Shall Overcome," they learned "Wade in the Water," "Oh, Freedom," and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." Early that evening, a stocky black woman in a floral dress, her arms thick from a life in the cotton fields, limped to the stage, threw her head back, and belted out song after song, lifting the entire ensemble.

Ohh—ohhhhhhh

This little light of miii-iine,

I'm gonna let it shiii-iine

Soon volunteers and staff were holding hands. Arms crossed, they swayed to the harmonies of songs they would sing all summer without ever tiring of them. Some songs were as feathered as lullabies, others as strident as marches. SNCC veterans stood with eyes closed, heads rolled back, their suffering pouring through the timeless melodies. Volunteers struggled to keep up, fell a syllable behind, then joined in as if they had known the songs since childhood. As the sun set and stars glittered above, the singing continued. The songs made hair stand on end, made souls sink in sorrow and rise again in triumph.

In the coming days, the Mississippi veterans would do their best to scare some sense into the students.

Tuesday: "I may be killed and you may be killed."

Thursday: "They—the white folk, the police, the county sheriff, the state police—they are all watching for you. They are looking for you. They are ready and they are armed."

Friday: "They take you to jail, strip you, lay you on the floor and beat you until you're almost dead."

On Sunday evening, however, songs kept terror at bay.

Who's that yonder dressed in red?

Let my people go

Must be the children that Moses led

Let my people go-oooo.

As the week progressed, the truth about Mississippi would sober the volunteers, but it would not send more than a few home. Youthful idealism is more tensile than any truth. Just seven months had passed since John Kennedy had been cut down in Dallas, and his spirit—"Ask not . . ."—suffused the Ohio campus. The summer project reminded many of Kennedy's Peace Corps and had begun with the same call to commitment. "A great change is at hand," Kennedy had told the nation in announcing his civil rights bill the previous June. "Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing rights as well as reality." Throughout the spring of 1964, SNCC speakers touring colleges across the country had recruited the bold. Their horror stories from Mississippi captivated entire auditoriums. Was this America?

By late May, more than seven hundred students had chosen to forgo internships, opt out of summer jobs, let Europe's cathedrals wait, and instead spend a summer in Mississippi. Cynical friends told them they would be "cannon fodder for the Movement," yet they saw a higher purpose. Filling out applications, some had quoted the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, or Jesus. But many had cited Kennedy, the need to "honor the memory" and "carry out the legacy." Sarcasm, burnout, the intense self-consciousness of an entire generation—these would come later in the 1960s. In this crystalline moment on a campus in Ohio, while hundreds of young voices sang of freedom, there seemed nothing trite in SNCC's founding statement: "Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice, hope ends despair. Peace dominates war, faith reconciles doubt."

For all their sincerity, dozens failed their interviews. Guidelines for interviewers were explicit. Each volunteer was asked whether working under black leadership would be difficult. Each had to "possess a learning attitude toward work in Mississippi" and recognize "that his role will be to work *with* local leadership, not to *overwhelm* it." Those displaying a "John Brown complex" were not welcome. "A student who seems determined to carve his own niche, win publicity and glory when he returns home can only have harmful effects on the Mississippi program." Anyone expressing the slightest interest in interracial sex was rejected. Once accepted, volunteers were divided into two groups: Freedom School teachers, who would show up for training the following week, and these first arrivals, whose summer would take them from shack to shack registering voters. But although their jobs would be

distinct, Freedom Summer volunteers who made the cut and made it to Ohio presented a group portrait of American idealism.

As volunteers took over the campus, the *New York Times* saw in their faces "an unmistakable middle-class stamp." Yet their average family income was 50 percent above the national norm. Just two-fifths were female. As with the whole of America in 1964, 90 percent were white. All but a few were in college, almost half from Ivy League or other top schools. Many were the sons and daughters of success, the children of lawyers, doctors, CEOs, even a congressman, but just as many were the children of teachers, social workers, union organizers, and ministers. Taken together, they were the offspring of the entire nation. While four dozen came from metropolitan New York, three dozen from the San Francisco Bay Area, and two dozen from Southern California, the rest came from every corner of the country. From Flint, Michigan, and What Cheer, Iowa. From Tenafly, New Jersey, and Prairie City, Oregon. From Americus, Georgia, and Peoria, Illinois. From Del Rio, Texas, and Vienna, West Virginia. Raised amid Cold War consensus, the vast majority were true believers in America. Some had been jaded by the Bay of Pigs or darkening reports from Vietnam, yet all clung to the hope that whenever America fell short of its ideals, young Americans could restore them.

Accepted for the summer, volunteers were told to bring \$150 in expenses, \$500 for bail, and three publicity photos. They were to show up in Oxford, Ohio, for a week of training starting June 14 for canvassers, June 21 for teachers. Applicants under twenty-one needed parental permission. Some had received it grudgingly. "I don't see how I have any right to stop you," a mother in Manhattan told her son. She then went in the kitchen, did the dishes, and wept. Others had met resistance. One woman got letters from her grandfather saying, "You've deserted us for the niggers." And a few applicants ran into stone walls. "Absolutely mesmerized" by the recruiter on her campus, a student called home to share her summer plans. "My Mom starts crying. Then my Dad gets on and starts yelling about how he's not paying \$2,000—or whatever my tuition was—for me to run off to Mississippi; that I'm there to get an education and that if I have anything else in mind he'll be glad to stop sending the check. End of discussion." Most parents, however, could not argue with ideals that shone so brightly. "Surely, no challenge looms larger than eradicating racial discrimination in this country," one man wrote on his application. "I want to do my part. There is a moral wave building among today's youth and I intend to catch it!"

As a high school senior in Amherst, Massachusetts, Chris Williams would have understood the surfing metaphor, but he preferred rhythm and blues to the Beach Boys. Lean and wisecracking, with a rebellious streak and a lust for adventure, Chris welcomed any challenge to the status quo, especially the racial status quo. He had seen racism's ugly face at an early age. While living in Washington, D.C., Chris had befriended the children of the maid who helped his mother care for his four younger siblings. Neighbors began throwing stones, shouting, "Nigger lover!" The Williams family soon moved north, but Chris never forgot. From the first headlines out of Montgomery, he was drawn to the civil rights movement. "You didn't run into many situations where there was a clear right and wrong," he remembered. "In this case, 'right' seemed very obvious."

In the spring of 1964, Chris was of medium height, with a Boy Scout face but brown hair long enough—over his ears, even—to get him suspended from school. During his spring break, he had followed local ministers to Williamston, North Carolina, to picket a courthouse. A melee on Easter Sunday saw one man hit with a baseball bat; Chris was merely arrested. Finding jail more exhilarating than depressing, he whiled away three days listening to Top 40 radio and joking with fellow protesters, black teenagers who, amused by his hair, called him "Ringo." Bailed out, Chris headed home, vowing to return. The opportunity was not long in coming. At nearby Smith College, he sat in on a civil rights rally that ended with two Yale students describing the Mississippi Summer Project.

Parental permission came readily. Chris's father understood restlessness. Schafer Williams had dropped out of Harvard in 1928 to bum around America, working in sawmills and pipe gangs. When the adventure wore thin, he had returned to college, earning a Ph.D. in medieval history. Now, having grown skeptical of the generation he taught at the University of Massachusetts, he saw the summer project as a way for his son "to actually do something worthwhile." Chris's mother was more apprehensive. "The Birmingham church bombing had occurred the previous fall," Chris remembered. "Medgar Evers had been assassinated—in Mississippi. She knew the danger." Still, Jean Williams told local papers that too many Americans considered teenagers "do-nothings." "American students have finally come around to support something that must be done."

On fire with his summer plans, Chris did not wait to graduate. In early June, he got a crew cut, handed in his schoolbooks, and hitchhiked back to North Carolina. In Williamston, he passed out leaflets, sat in on boisterous church meetings, and ate collard greens with his host family. Then, as the training in Ohio approached, he stuck out his thumb and hitched west. Picked up by cops, he was questioned "like I was the nation's most wanted criminal." Forced to call home to prove he was not a runaway, he cited Thoreau in his journal—"That government which governs best is the government which governs least." He crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains, riding with farmers and soldiers, then waited hours while big, brawny cars roared past, leaving him in the twilight—alone, eighteen, and in love with the road. Somewhere along the way, he lost his wallet and was penniless. But finally, more rides came—from "a homosexual," "a car full of hoods," and two off-duty cops drinking beer and throwing the cans out the window. Through Appalachian hollows, across the rolling farmland of southern Ohio, he slowly made his way to the campus, "and the whole Mississippi adventure began."

Like others at the training, Chris thought he had come solely for the summer. That fall, he expected to enter the University of Pennsylvania. He did not know that in the coming months he would be shot at, smell tear gas, and meet people who would forever become his measure of humanity. He did not know he would meet the woman he would marry. And although he signed up for just a few months, come September he would give up his slot in the Ivy League to continue organizing in rural Mississippi. "I realized Mississippi was more educational than anything I was going to get at Penn. There was a sense that this was not some crazy escapade—this was history in the making. This was going to be written down, talked about. This was a sea change in the United States."

When the singing ended that Sunday night, SNCC staff stayed up late. Released from Mississippi's constant terror, some drank, others debated. Many were already anxious about the volunteers. These "kids" seemed so naive, so vulnerable, so maddeningly certain of themselves. The thought of throwing them into the hellhole of Mississippi terrified those who bore its bruises and bullet wounds. How much truth should the kids be told? Could Yale and Harvard students feel the agony of Mississippi? Could they understand what it was like to drive on a dark road and suddenly see headlights flash in the rearview mirror, see a car coming up fast, ramming your bumper

at sixty, seventy, eighty miles per hour? Could they know what it was like to hit the floor if the car pulled around and passed? To know that when terror loomed, when a mob gathered, when a sheriff took you in, there was no one to call? Not the cops who would watch as some “good ol’ boy” knocked your teeth out. Not the Justice Department, who cared little. Not the FBI, who cared less. In six days, 250 students would leave for places like McComb, Mississippi, where five black men had been killed and fifty flogged since the first of the year. Would they panic? Flaunt their northern superiority? Could they meet violence with nonviolence? The time had come, as Chris Williams noted in his journal, for “the hairy stories.”

On Monday morning, as students talked and joked in a spacious auditorium, a white man in a minister’s collar stepped before them. The previous evening, the Reverend Edwin King had conducted a memorial for Medgar Evers. From throughout the hall, volunteers had seen the large white bandage on King’s jaw, which had been shattered in a car crash when he was run off the road near Jackson. Now the minister called Mississippi a “police state.” Every institution, he told volunteers, would be against them. The government, the courts, the newspapers, the cops, the wealthy businessmen, the small merchants, and especially the poor whites would stop at nothing—not arson, torture, not even murder—to keep Negroes “in their place.” King described the relentless intimidation, the routine police brutality, the “disappearance” of black men, and the juries that acquitted murderers in less than an hour.

But the reverend’s scenario was tepid compared to stories that followed. One by one, black men in their denim and T-shirts described terrors witnessed or endured. Some told of the notorious prison called Parchman Farm, where they were drenched with water on cold nights, left to swelter in the “hot box” on blistering afternoons. Others described the police dog unleashed on marchers in Greenwood, recent beatings in Canton and Natchez, shotguns fired into black homes in almost every town. Volunteers raised to believe that “the policeman is your friend” now heard about cops in Mississippi. “When you go down those cold stairs at the police station,” said Willie Peacock, beaten in police custody just the week before, “you don’t know if you’re going to come back or not. You don’t know if you can take those licks without fighting back because you might decide to fight back. It all depends on how you wanna die.” One tall SNCC staffer did not have to say anything. The bullet holes in his neck were clearly visible above his white T-shirt. Finally, the same stout woman whose singing had lifted the

congregation on Sunday evening described a June night in 1963. Ordered away from a whites-only lunch counter, Fannie Lou Hamer had been led to a cell and forced to lie down as guards handed an inmate a blackjack. “That man beat me till he give out.” The blows had smashed her head, her back, her bare feet. Hamer’s booming voice now chilled the volunteers. “Don’t beat me no more! Don’t beat me no more!” Across the crowded auditorium, hands went to mouths, eyes were averted, tears held back. This was Mississippi—where they would be on Sunday.

At dinner that second evening, the mood on campus resembled that of a prison camp more than a summer camp. Over food that now seemed tasteless, students imagined being battered, shot, killed. White faces seemed whiter somehow. Smiles were gone. Freedom Songs were forgotten. “It just scared the crap out of us,” Chris Williams wrote. Some vented their fears in letters home.

Monday night

June 15

I turned down a chance to work in the southwest part of the state, the most dangerous area. I talked to a staff member covering that area for about fifteen minutes and he told me about the five Negroes who have been taken into the woods and shot in the last three months. . . . I told him that I couldn’t go in there because I was just too scared. I felt so bad I was about to forget about going to Mississippi at all. But I still wanted to go; I just didn’t feel like giving up my life. . . .

Chris found another way of coping. At midnight on Monday, he donned gym shorts and went for a shirtless, barefoot run. Across dewy lawns, beside softly lit dorms, past SNCCs partying in their office, he ran and ran, reconsidering his “Mississippi adventure.” “I just ran until I was really tired and then I wasn’t scared anymore.”

Throughout Tuesday, as workshops focused on Mississippi politics, geography, and history, tensions between the two groups tightened. Some students felt lectured; others lamented the racial divide: “We don’t know what it is to be a Negro, and even if we did, the Negroes here would not accept us. . . . In their eyes we’re rich middle or upper-class whites who’ve taken off a summer to help the Negro.” Yet many were beginning to idolize the Mississippi veterans.

Wherever students met on campus, stories circulated about this organization called SNCC (pronounced "Snick"). How in 1960, a brave and brilliant black woman named Ella Baker, active in civil rights since the 1930s, had gathered dozens of college students fresh from the "sit-ins" that had sprung up at lunch counters in southern cities. How Baker had forged them into the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a political force designed to earn blacks "more than a hamburger." How SNCC soon had chapters on campuses across the country and how its members had kept the Freedom Rides going. (In May 1961, thirteen Freedom Riders—seven blacks and six whites—rode buses into the South, daring the federal government to enforce laws desegregating interstate travel. Freedom Riders were arrested in North Carolina, beaten by mobs in South Carolina, and saw their bus fire-bombed in Alabama. Unprotected by police, they abandoned their ride in Birmingham. But SNCC members soon came from Nashville to continue the Freedom Rides into Mississippi, where they were rounded up in Jackson and sent to Parchman Farm Prison.) The Freedom Rides made SNCC the "shock troops" of the Movement, its members pitting Gandhian pacifism against kneejerk brutality, singing through weeks of "jail—no bail," surviving on spaghetti and hamburgers, talking into the night about love, compassion, and nonviolence. In small projects from Georgia to Arkansas, SNCC members met poor blacks on their porches, slept on cots or floors, ventured into Klan territory, all for a salary of \$9.64 a week, after taxes.

Even among daring civil rights workers, SNCC staffers—often just called "SNCCs"—stood out. SNCCs were cooler, braver, feisty to a fault. "They would argue with a signpost," member Joyce Ladner recalled. Though they waxed eloquent about creating a "beautiful community," "a circle of trust," SNCC jargon made the Movement sound like World War II. They spoke of "cracking Mississippi," of establishing "beachheads," of working "behind enemy lines." Historian Howard Zinn, who traveled with SNCC, wrote: "To be with them, walking a picket line in the rain in Hattiesburg, Mississippi . . . to see them jabbed by electric prod poles and flung into paddy wagons in Selma, Alabama, or link arms and sing at the close of a church meeting in the Delta—is to feel the presence of greatness." And in their presence in Ohio, most volunteers were in awe. The training changed her life, one later said, "because I met those SNCC people and my mouth fell open."

Disdaining the celebrity status of Martin Luther King, SNCC fostered "group-centered leadership," no member more important than another, all

decisions made by consensus hammered out in meetings that seemed to last for days. SNCC became its own university as members shared books or talked in jail cells—about overcoming fear, about philosophy, mathematics, or sometimes just about women. Seeing themselves not as leaders but as organizers, SNCCs empowered locals to stifle fear and organize the Movement in their own communities. Group-centered leadership meant that while every volunteer in Ohio knew of Dr. King, few recognized the pantheon of future civil rights icons in their midst. In one corner stood James Forman, the suave, pipe-smoking air force veteran who had grown up in Mississippi so poor he had sometimes tried to eat dirt, but who returned from college to forge SNCC's ragtag revolutionaries into a white-hot force. Elsewhere was John Lewis, the shy son of Alabama sharecroppers who was SNCC's chairman and would later serve in Congress. Also on campus were other future leaders of this brave new generation of African Americans—Julian Bond, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, Victoria Gray, Marion Barry. . . . But even in this remarkable gathering, one SNCC stood out, no matter how hard he tried not to.

With his bib overalls, glasses, and thick, furrowed brow, he looked like a wise sharecropper, and his small stature helped him slip unnoticed through crowds. But when he spoke, he gave himself away. "He is more or less the Jesus of the whole project," one volunteer noted. This was the man the press recognized as the mastermind, the Negro with "the Masters' degree from Harvard." Who left a cushy job teaching math at a New York prep school. Who went to Mississippi in 1960, when no other civil rights leader dared to. Who went there alone. Frequently arrested and attacked, he had developed an icy calm that astounded everyone in his presence. How could one comprehend the courage it took to enter an office just ransacked by a mob, set up a cot, and take a nap? And his name, as if chosen by more than chance, came straight from the Freedom Song they had sung the night before. This was Moses. Bob Moses.

Before he came to Mississippi, there was little in Robert Parris Moses' life that suggested he would be a leader, let alone a legend. Raised in Harlem, one of three sons of a hardworking janitor, he had excelled in school, earning scholarships to Stuyvesant High, Hamilton College, and finally a doctoral program at Harvard. There he studied mathematical logic, earning his master's in 1957. The following year, however, his mother died of cancer, and his father, overcome with grief, wound up in a mental institution.

Moses left Harvard and went home, taking odd jobs to support the family and his father's eventual recovery. One job, tutoring the teen crooner Frankie Lymon ("Why Do Fools Fall in Love?"), took Moses to ghettos around the country, where he pondered the fate of blacks who had fled the South for "the promised land." Feeling the hopelessness Harvard had helped him escape, he began seeking answers. Then on February 1, 1960, four black men took seats at an all-white lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Moses studied newspaper photos of that first sit-in, studied them for weeks. Seated at the counter, the four seemed so serene, so confident. "Before, the Negro in the South had always looked on the defensive, cringing," he recalled. "This time they were taking the initiative. They were kids my age, and I knew this had something to do with my own life. . . . This was the answer." While in college, Moses had worked in Quaker summer camps in Europe and Japan, building housing for the poor, talking with new friends about pacifism and its power. His favorite author was Albert Camus, whose novels portrayed ordinary men ennobled by their opposition to evil, whose essays convinced him that "words are more powerful than munitions." Four months after the Greensboro sit-ins, Moses, then twenty-four, put Camus's philosophy and his own to the test, heading south.

While visiting his uncle, an architect in Virginia, Moses picketed in Newport News. The simple protest brought him great relief. After a lifetime of stifling resentment, of "playing it cool," he was finally, as Camus would have said, *engagé*. Heading on to Atlanta, he worked for Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), stuffing envelopes at an old desk and discussing Kant with a coworker. The intense newcomer unnerved some in the SCLC office. Julian Bond recalled many thinking the somber, intellectual Moses had to be a Communist. "We were immensely suspicious of him," Bond remembered. "We had tunnel vision. . . . Bob Moses, on the other hand, had already begun to project a systematic analysis; not just of the South, but of the country, the world." When SNCC needed someone to go to Mississippi to recruit for a conference, Moses volunteered, paying for his own bus ticket. Armed only with his passport and the names of local NAACP leaders, he crossed Alabama and headed for America's poorest region, the land of sprawling cotton fields flanked by sharecroppers' shacks, the land whose sorrows birthed the blues, the land known simply as the Delta.

In the flat, sun-baked town of Cleveland, Mississippi, Moses met NAACP organizer Amzie Moore. The Harvard Ph.D. candidate and the owner of a Delta gas station became instant friends. Moore saw in Moses the quiet courage black Mississippi needed to "uncover what is covered." And to Moses, the stout, stocky Moore suggested the old spiritual, "a tree beside the water" that would not be moved. Amzie Moore wasn't interested in sit-ins, Moses learned. Sharecroppers earning \$500 a year could not afford to eat at lunch counters. Voting, Moore said, was the key to change in Mississippi. Blacks outnumbered whites two to one in the Delta, but only 3 percent could vote. Since World War II, even the smallest registration campaigns had sparked shattering violence. As they talked in the fading light, Moses noticed the loaded rifle Moore kept at his side and the bright lights outside protecting him from the drive-by shooting, the sniper, the firestorm in the night. And as they talked, Moses drafted a plan for voter registration to begin the following summer. Moore soon drove his young protégé around the Delta, talking of local politics, explaining how a burdened people moved and survived—a black ocean, deep and serene, encircling human volcanoes. Moore had Moses speak to church groups, watching to see how Delta folk responded. "There's something coming," Moses told the tired faces in each tiny church. "Get ready. It's inevitably coming your way whether you like it or not. It sent me to tell you that." Most people lowered their eyes, but some softly said, "Amen." With these few, a handful of seeds in each terrified town, Moses and SNCC would sow the Movement in Mississippi.

Reluctantly, Moses returned to New York for a final year in his teaching contract. In the summer of 1961, he headed south again. He would stay in Mississippi nearly four years. By the time he left, embittered, exhausted, but somehow still alive, Mississippi would be swarming with voting campaigns, Freedom Schools, and change that had been centuries in coming.

At the Ohio training, volunteers quickly recognized Moses' inner strength, and some tried to copy him, walking and speaking slowly, wearing bib overalls. But because he was too self-effacing to share his own tales of terror, few yet knew them. Later they would learn how, in August 1961, Moses had set up voter registration classes in the backwoods hill country of southwest Mississippi, a place he described as so "rural, impoverished, brutal that [it] hardly seemed a part of America." They would hear of him leading blacks to courthouses, walking right up to sour-faced registrars, answering

their hatred with gentle words. And how curious clerks had dropped into one registrar's office to see this "New York nigger," and how a highway patrolman had pulled him over on his way out of town.

"You the nigger that came down from New York to stir up a lot of trouble?"

"I'm the Negro who came down from New York to instruct people in voter registration," Moses corrected. Then he began to take down the cop's badge number.

"Get in the car, nigger!"

Taken to the police station, Moses was allowed the customary phone call. Cops listened as he asked the operator to call the Justice Department in Washington, D.C. Collect. He then detailed the violations of civil rights laws in Amite County. Startled cops asked Moses to pay just five dollars in court costs. He refused and spent two days in jail. The NAACP finally bailed him out, but not before a local asked him, "Boy, are you sure you know what you're about?"

Within weeks, word spread. Blacks heard that "Dr. King and some other big people" were in the area. Teenagers Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes went searching for King, found Moses, and joined SNCC. Meanwhile, whites heard that some "nigger from New York" was stirring up trouble, and the name Bob Moses soon topped a Klan hit list. The hit was not long in coming. In late August, as Moses led three people to the squat brick courthouse in Liberty, a man pounced, smashing his head with a knife handle. With blood streaming down his face, Moses led the trembling applicants up the courthouse steps. The registrar's office was closed. After getting nine stitches, Moses then did another thing blacks simply did not do in Mississippi in 1961—he pressed charges. Before a courtroom packed with shotgun-toting farmers, Moses coolly testified about the beating, then let the sheriff escort him to city limits. His assailant was acquitted—self-defense. The terror soon escalated, culminating in the murder of Herbert Lee. Fear crippled the Movement, and SNCC pulled out of southwest Mississippi, but stories about Bob Moses inspired more to join him in SNCC's new beachhead—the Delta. By 1964, Moses was little known outside civil rights circles but a legend within. Still, those few volunteers who had heard of him must have been surprised when they heard him speak.

In a voice as soft as silk, Moses spoke briefly on Sunday night, then periodically throughout the week. He broke every rule of elocution. He often

looked at his feet. He never repeated himself, rarely told stories, never smiled. And yet, because in the timeless tradition of genuine leaders he spoke truth to power, he had everyone's attention.

"No administration in this country is going to commit political suicide over the rights of Negroes," Moses told volunteers. "This is part of what we are doing . . . getting the country involved through yourselves." Convinced that only a bold move would change Mississippi, Moses had lobbied heavily for the summer project, overcoming strong objections by Movement veterans. But now he did not seem so sure: "Don't come to Mississippi this summer to save the Mississippi Negro," he told volunteers. "Only come if you understand, really understand, that his freedom and yours are one. Maybe we're not going to get very many people registered this summer. Maybe, even, we're not going to get very many people into Freedom Schools. Maybe all we're going to do is live through this summer. In Mississippi, that will be so much."

Sighing as if the world were on his shoulders, Moses told volunteers about the murder of Herbert Lee. But he did not tell them about his nagging concerns. By Tuesday afternoon, he was very worried. Despite all the "hairy stories," no one had gone home. In long, soul-searching discussions, volunteers had aired their doubts. Weren't they being egocentric? Masochistic? Did they have Messiah complexes? As whites raised in America, weren't they also steeped in racism? Volunteers quoted Gandhi, Tolstoy, and James Baldwin, yet none took the commonsense option of leaving. Moses' concern was shared by other SNCCs.

"It's not working," said Charles McLaurin, still nursing bruises from a recent beating. "It's really not working. They're really not getting through to each other." Sitting through sessions that ranged from the character of southern whites to the history of slavery, volunteers seemed studious, solemn. But when released from workshops, they played touch football or strummed "Blowin' in the Wind," acting as if headed for summer at the seashore. Students read SNCC's security handbook: "No one should go *anywhere* alone, but certainly not in an automobile and certainly not at night. . . . Try not to sleep near open windows; try to sleep at the back of the house. . . . Do not stand in doorways at night with the light at your back." But just as Mississippi's strange savagery was sinking in, the naïveté resurfaced. During a frank discussion on sex, one woman asked, "We have talked about interracial dating. Is there a policy you'd like for us to follow?" SNCC staffers were

incredulous. A *policy*? Had anyone heard of Emmett Till? Beaten to a pulp, shot in the head, tied to a fan, and thrown in the Tallahatchie River for just whistling at a white woman? Emmett Till was fourteen years old. It wasn't working. Further proof came Tuesday night.

After dinner, volunteers watched *Mississippi and the Fifteenth Amendment*. The CBS documentary detailed how the Magnolia State had defied the Constitution by disenfranchising its black populace. The federal government had filed lawsuits, but Mississippi judges had stonewalled, nitpicked, thrown most out of court. Volunteers seethed or sat disgusted. But then the camera fell on a hideously fat man in a white shirt and horn-rimmed glasses. Laughter rippled through the auditorium. SNCC staffers fumed. This was no comical stereotype. This was Theron Lynd, registrar in Forrest County, who had never registered a Negro until hit by a lawsuit. The audience quieted as a black man onscreen told of a shotgun fired into his home, wounding two little girls, but when his wife came on in a funny hat, some giggled. Several SNCCs stormed out. When the documentary ended, another jumped onstage. "You should be ashamed! You could laugh at that film!"

"The flash point," as one volunteer called it, had arrived. Across the auditorium, whispers and stares punctuated an aching silence. A few volunteers stood and spoke, calling SNCC staffers distant, arrogant, patronizing. They acted superior to anyone who had not shared their suffering. In one corner, Bob Moses stood with his arm around his wife, Dona, a recent University of Chicago philosophy grad. Both were stone-faced. Other SNCCs let the tension linger, as in their own meetings, before finally lifting it. They told of the fat registrar—"We know that bastard." The previous January, Theron Lynd had been the target of Hattiesburg's Freedom Day. Hundreds had picketed in the rain. Moses was arrested, one marcher was beaten in jail, and here these kids were, safe in Ohio, laughing. Another SNCC erupted: "Ask Jimmie over there what he thinks about Mississippi. He has six slugs in him, man, and the last one went right through the back of his neck. . . . Ask Jesse here—he's been beaten so we couldn't recognize him, time and time and time and time again. If you don't get scared, pack up and get the hell out of here because we don't need any people who don't know what they're doing." The confrontation went on until 2:00 a.m. When it was over, everyone joined hands and sang SNCC's mournful anthem, "Never Turn Back," written in memory of Herbert Lee. Volunteers slowly filed back to their dorms, but staff again stayed up, talking, drinking, more worried than ever. Bob Moses and his

wife were near tears, but one volunteer, crying as he wrote home, noted: "The crisis is past, I think."

On Wednesday, a workshop turned into a heated debate. The Reverend James Lawson, who had written SNCC's lofty mission statement on nonviolence, argued with Stokely Carmichael, who would later take SNCC into the realm of Black Power. As rapt volunteers watched, the tall, gangly Carmichael said nonviolence had once worked because it was new and made news. But having been beaten in jail and tortured in Parchman Farm, he considered nonviolence useless against vicious racists. Lawson admitted goodness had its price. "When you turn the other cheek," he said, "you must accept the fact that you will get clobbered on it." Many volunteers remained uncertain. Wasn't violence sometimes justified? In self-defense? Finally, one of the few white SNCC staffers spoke up. Alabaman Bob Zellner had been the lone white in a peaceful protest in McComb in 1961. Singled out by a mob, he was clubbed, beaten, and had his eyes gouged while he gripped a railing, holding on for his life. "You must understand that nonviolence is essential to our program this summer," Zellner told the group. "If you can't accept this, please don't come with us." Again, no one left.

After lunch, an outdoor workshop beneath a bright blue sky taught volunteers how to take a beating. Near a tree pinned with a sign—"Courthouse"—students became a mob, shouting "Nigger!" and "Commie bastard!" swarming around their new friends, lashing out, knocking some to the ground. Volunteers learned to fall, roll in a ball, absorb the blows. "Your legs, your thighs, your buttocks, your kidneys, your back can take a kick or a billy club. So can your arms and your hands. Your head can't. Your neck can't. Your groin can't." Some students shuddered at the viciousness of the "mob." One attacker, twenty-year-old Andrew Goodman, seemed to lose himself in the moment, shouting, screaming, then looking slightly sheepish at the anger within. Yet this faux Mississippi still seemed surreal—college kids playing at violence on a green lawn in Ohio. College kids who would be in Mississippi in just four days.

That Wednesday afternoon, a call came to SNCC's campus office. The long-distance line was scratchy, but the voice had an unmistakable drawl. No one ever found out how the caller got the number. "I got me a twen'y foot pit out bay-ack," the voice said. "Y'all just come on down." SNCC did not tell

volunteers about the call, but the following afternoon, staffers shared hate mail that had come to the campus. Phrases from one letter leaped out: "morally rotten outcasts of the White race. . . . 'White Negroes' are the rottenest of the race-mixing criminals. . . . it will be a long, hot, summer—but the 'heat' will be applied to the race-mixing TRASH by the DECENT people who do not believe in racial mongrelization through racial prostitution."

Volunteers listened, sickened by the hatred. But for one black woman, the hate mail was just more information to be filed under "Survival." Like other volunteers, Muriel Tillinghast had come to Ohio straight from another campus. Two weeks earlier, she had graduated from Howard University, where she had majored in sociology and political science but spent most of her time with NAG, Howard's Non-Violent Action Group. "We were renegades," Muriel recalled with pride. "Within the black community of Washington, D.C., we were an alienated group. We looked different, we talked differently, we hung together." Centered around Stokely Carmichael, then a Howard philosophy student, NAG's "Weekend Warriors" held endless late-night discussions, talking, passing a hat to send someone out for cold cuts, talking more. Protesting on weekends, NAG members kept pressure on segregated Maryland, Delaware, and D.C. In Cambridge, Maryland, Muriel had survived "NAG's local Mississippi," when marchers confronted the Maryland National Guard. With bayonets fixed, guardsmen laced the streets with tear gas, sending Muriel, Carmichael, and others coughing, vomiting, burning in retreat.

Savvy, street-smart, and fiercely independent, Muriel Tillinghast was the latest incarnation of the rock-solid women who helped generations survive slavery. When gripped by fear, she was sometimes overwhelmed, yet able to summon deep rivers within. When despair surfaced, a quick and sarcastic wit kept her going. And when these resources failed, she fell back on her family. "I did not come out of a family where you played the victim," she said, "but from multi generations of people who fought back." The Tillinghasts, intensely involved in the Lutheran church and "about eighty other groups," had long been an "organizational family." Even in 1964, they still shared the story of how, sometime around 1900, Muriel's grandmother had left a Texas plantation and *walked* to Washington, D.C. There Gloria Carter had married a "race man." Muriel's grandfather was "no bigger than a match stick" but, widely traveled and defiantly self-educated, he shared a household

where books were cherished, college was mandatory, and children "spent time in meetings from when we could walk."

Growing up in D.C., Muriel rarely encountered the dark racism of the Deep South. But she remembered a visit to Florida where she was told not to even touch the clothes in a department store, and *never* to try them on. And closer to home, she had often met racism's lighter-skinned cousin. Like the old spiritual turned into SNCC's anthem, she had been "'buked and scorned" more times than she cared to count. Her sophomore class had been the first to integrate D.C.'s Roosevelt High School, facing down the hatred of the principal and student body. Each affront gave Muriel a steely strength hidden in a slight frame. By the time she reached Howard, meticulous and driven, she was a natural for NAG's nonviolent protests. But as an urbanite who knew the Deep South only in legend and in Movement lore, was she ready for Mississippi? As a woman who had not yet learned to drive, was she prepared for harrowing chases down back roads? And as a black woman who chose not to straighten her hair, instead letting it grow into an Afro long before the style became popular, could she stand up to the relentless bigotry she was about to encounter?

Muriel knew Mississippi only as "a distant well of human woe," yet human woe had been beckoning. During the winter of 1963, when Delta officials cut off federal food allotments, she had collected enough clothes and food to fill half a semitruck, then found a teamster willing to arm himself and drive it to Leflore County. A year later, she had again reached out to Mississippi when NAG members began calling isolated SNCCs there, offering solidarity, friendship, human contact. Muriel recognized one name on the list—Charlie Cobb in Greenville. Cobb had been a fellow Howard student and NAG member. His aunt had also been Muriel's fifth-grade teacher, so she called him up unannounced. Cobb soon became her "Sunday call." "He would tell me about what they were doing, their daily work which was mostly staying alive." As plans for the summer solidified, Cobb began telling this kind female voice on the phone about the upcoming project.

Some volunteers had agonized about going to Mississippi. Others had leaped at the chance. For Muriel, Mississippi was simply the next logical step. Her mother, having taught school in Mississippi, was "beside herself" over her daughter's decision, but Muriel did not consider it a decision. "At NAG meetings, I was informed around February that something was going on in

Mississippi that summer and the attitude was, 'You're going, aren't you?' As we got into May, it was, 'The bus is leaving at such and such a time—you're going to be on it, right?'" On June 12, NAG members left Washington, D.C., for Ohio. Seated beside her battered blue suitcase filled with more books than clothes, twenty-two-year-old Muriel Tillinghast was on the bus.

Once on the Ohio campus, Muriel did not concern herself with the tension between staff and recruits. As she had all her life, she got down to business. Her experience with NAG immediately moved her from volunteer to SNCC staffer, privy to all the endless meetings, strategies, and concerns. Becoming "a sponge" of information, she pestered Charlie Cobb and other veterans for survival tips. She learned how she would have to walk in Mississippi—a slow rural pace that did not call attention to her. She learned how she would have to address people, and how she could organize small, quarreling communities into cohesive armies united in the fight. SNCC's horror stories "brought us to the stark reality that some of us were not going to come back," but Muriel tried not to think about that. Instead, she called on her inherited strength, her organizational skills, the solidarity she had learned at Howard, and prepared to take them south. Courage had nothing to do with it. "It was *esprit de corps*. These were my friends and they were going and I was going with them."

Suddenly there were just two days till departure. Volunteers wrote to President Lyndon Johnson, asking, "As we depart for that troubled state, to hear your voice in support of those principles to which Americans have dedicated and sacrificed themselves." Bob Moses had already written LBJ requesting federal protection for the project. Neither Moses nor volunteers heard from the president.

Buses would head south on Saturday afternoon, entering Mississippi on Sunday under cover of darkness. As if to highlight the danger, the media began to swarm over the campus. Final workshops unfolded before TV cameras. Volunteers were interviewed again and again. "Are you scared?" "Do you really think it will do any good?" "You *are* scared, aren't you?" Besieged by reporters, volunteers tried to explain their motives. "Part of it is the American dream, you know, and part is shame," one told the *Saturday Evening Post*. "I feel a very real sense of guilt. But I hope I'm not going down there to get my little red badge of liberalism." Berkeley student Mario Savio told the *Los Angeles Times*, "The injustices to the Negro in Mississippi are

also an infringement upon my rights." Newspapers alerted the country—Mississippi was in for "a long, hot summer," a "racial explosion." Syndicated columnist Joseph Alsop feared "guerilla war."

Muriel Tillinghast barely noticed the media, but Chris Williams was incensed. "The guy from *Life* was a real jerk," he wrote in his journal. "The TV men were a pain in the neck as well with their big grinding cameras. They loved Non-Violent Workshops because that was where the action was. It was the closest thing to actual violence they could find. Sadists!" Volunteers wrote to parents, telling Mom and Dad to look for them in print or on TV. "*Look* magazine is searching for the ideal naïve northern middle-class white girl," one wrote. "For the national press, that's the big story. And when one of us gets killed, the story will be even bigger." Two days left.

On Thursday, volunteers learned of their legal rights and how little they would mean that summer. Chris met attorney William Kunstler, later famous for defending the Chicago Seven, who was handling his case in North Carolina. Kunstler's daughter, Karin, was among the volunteers. That morning, a graying man puffing a cigar stepped before the group. Jess Brown, one of four black lawyers in Mississippi, pointed a bony finger at the sweep of faces before him. "Now get this in your heads and remember what I am going to say!" Brown began. Mississippi sheriffs, cops, and highway patrolmen already knew their names, their hometowns, their full descriptions. "All I can do is give you some pointers on how to stay alive. If you are riding down the highway—say, on Highway 80 near Bolton, Mississippi—and the police stop you and arrest you, don't get out and argue with the cops and say, 'I know my rights.' You may invite that club on your head. There ain't no point in standing there trying to teach them some constitutional law at twelve o'clock at night. Go to jail and wait for your lawyer." In Mississippi, Brown warned, they would be classified into two groups—"niggers and nigger-lovers. And they're tougher on nigger-lovers." That night, Muriel Tillinghast gathered more survival tips; Chris Williams took another midnight run.

On Friday morning, volunteers heard from the Department of Justice. In the field of civil rights, John Doar was as close to a hero as anyone at the federal level. As assistant attorney general in the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, Doar had filed lawsuits against the fat registrar in Forrest County and elsewhere. He had worked closely with Bob Moses, taking his collect call from jail in Liberty, coming to Amite County to investigate threats against Herbert Lee, only to learn back in D.C. of his murder. At

Medgar Evers's funeral in Jackson, Doar had helped calm angry marchers, averting a riot. Now he praised the volunteers as "real heroes." But when someone asked, "What are you going to do to enable us to see the fall?" Doar answered, "Nothing. There is no federal police force. The responsibility for protection is that of the local police." Boos filled the auditorium. Shouts erupted. "We can protect the Vietnamese, but not the Americans, is that right?" Finally, Moses stepped beside his friend. "We don't do that," he cautioned. The room fell silent. Doar was just being honest, Moses said. The session left volunteers feeling more vulnerable than ever. Back in Massachusetts, Jean Williams felt her son's fears in a letter arriving that afternoon.

Dear People at home in the Safe, Safe North,

June 17

Mississippi is going to be hell this summer. We are going into the very hard-core of segregation and White Supremacy. . . . I'd venture to say that every member of the Mississippi staff has been beaten up at least once and he who has not been shot at is rare. It is impossible for you to imagine what we are going in to, as it is for me now, but I'm beginning to see. . . .

Love,

Xtoph

On the last night in "the Safe, Safe North," the singing again began after dinner. Crossing arms and holding hands, volunteers sang the songs they now knew well, songs of jail, of picket lines, of endurance. Despite all the truth told about Mississippi, idealism still trumped fear. SNCC staffers had a term for such spirit—"freedom high"—and it kept the singing going till midnight. Between songs, some shared the news they had just heard on the radio. LBJ's civil rights bill had finally passed the Senate. Now the South would be forced to desegregate. And they would be in Mississippi to see history happen. After midnight, most volunteers tried to sleep. A few stayed up drinking beer, talking, trying to imagine the mysterious places they were headed—Tchula, Mississippi. Moss Point. Itta Bena. At 3:00 a.m., a station wagon crammed with two trainers and six volunteers left for Mississippi to investigate a church burning in Neshoba County. No one saw them drive away.

Saturday: packing, a lingering lunch, long good-byes. At makeshift barbers' chairs, lines were three deep as men had hair trimmed, beards shaved.

"Before You Leave Oxford," a sign announced, "Write Your Congressmen Asking Them to Act to Insure Your Safety." The afternoon was as bright and sunny as the day the students had arrived. Beside green lawns, two rattletrap charter buses waited, but no one seemed eager to board. Encircled by TV cameras and reporters, volunteers and staffers again joined hands and sang. They had been two groups when they arrived; they were one now.

Finally, the call came to depart. Black and white sang one last chorus of "We Shall Overcome." Then volunteers piled duffel bags, suitcases, and guitars in the back of each bus and crammed into seats. Some hung out windows to clasp hands with staffers who were staying to train the next group. Others just stared blankly, eyes fixed straight ahead. From inside the buses came sad voices singing SNCC's woeful anthem, "We'll Never Turn Back":

We have walked through the shadows of death,

We've had to walk all by ourselves.

We have hung our head and cried

For those like Lee who died. . . .

And the buses pulled away.

Across the cornfields of southern Ohio, where fugitive slaves had first tasted freedom, the singing continued. In the Cincinnati bus terminal, charter buses were exchanged for Greyhounds while students sang "Freedom Train." Filled with song, two buses crossed the Ohio River into Kentucky. Volunteers stopped for dinner in Louisville, saw a livid red sun disappear behind the hills, and continued into Tennessee. Nashville, then through the warm night to Memphis. Looking out the bus window, Chris Williams spotted the "little guy" from *Life* and knew the press was still following. He tried to read but fell asleep. In the bus farther ahead, Muriel Tillinghast was wide awake. All her confidence, all her take-charge spirit, were beginning to wither. In the black southern night, she felt fear mounting. Leaving Memphis, Muriel's bus was still rocking, singing. "We hit the Mississippi state line at midnight," she recalled, "and the bus went *silent*. There was no turning back now." Through windows, some volunteers spotted a billboard depicting an antebellum mansion, a sailboat, and a flowering magnolia beside tall pines. Above the bucolic scene were the words "Welcome to Mississippi." Beyond the billboard, lined up along the highway, stood several highway patrol cars. A welcoming committee.

Ours is surely the black belt. It is all very well for Cheyenne or Schenectady or Stockholm or Moscow, where a black-faced visitor is a day's wonder, to exclaim: "There is no race problem! Southerners are barbarians and brutes." There never is a race problem until the two races living in close contact approach numerical equality.

—William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*

CHAPTER TWO

"Not Even Past"

Shortly after rain clouds parted on a spring day in '61, Confederate troops marched through downtown Jackson. Five thousand proud Rebels, their double-breasted topcoats starched, their Enfield rifles shouldered, their mustachioed faces as stiff as statues, tramped along the glistening streets. Brass bands blared out sparkling renditions of "Dixie," and teeming crowds sang along. Women in long floral dresses blew kisses from beneath parasols. Boys could not take their eyes off the officers on horseback, the glint of bayonets, the unfurling stars and bars. Flanking the governor's mansion, where the governor waved from between white pillars, the troops marched on in a rippling ribbon of gray. Confederate flags were everywhere, waving in defiance of the Union. The parade, said to be the largest in the history of Mississippi, continued for hours. Then everyone got in their cars and went home. For this Confederate glory, this celebration of Mississippi's secession from the United States of America, took place not in 1861 but in 1961.

The old cliché about history—that it is "written by the winners"—has always been, as Henry Ford said of history itself, "more or less bunk." Countries defeated in war always write their own versions of history, versions that turn defeat into a noble cause and suffering into martyrdom. These unofficial versions soothe consciences and salve war wounds, yet with tragic regularity, they lead to more violence. Consider Germany after World War I. France after its revolution. The Balkans. The South.

"The past is never dead," William Faulkner wrote. "It's not even past." Faulkner was not referring to the rest of America, where time gradually turned the butchery of the Civil War into a period piece. In the North, where a single town in Pennsylvania had seen the face of battle, the war was remembered

in aging monuments, in daguerreotypes, in medals displayed on mantels but finally stored in attics. Yet across the former Confederacy, and especially in Mississippi, the War for Southern Independence was woven into the fabric of life. Every southern boy, Faulkner wrote, could easily summon the dreamlike moment at Gettysburg just before Pickett's Charge, before the war became a slaughterhouse and defeat became inevitable. Faulkner wrote this in 1948, eighty-five years after Gettysburg. He wrote it in the present tense. And he wrote it in Mississippi, where the war, living on in laments, eulogized by sons and daughters of Confederate soldiers, still defined every reaction. Such was the century-long enshrinement of the Civil War in Mississippi, a state invaded, occupied, driven to its knees.

From the moment Northern troops crossed its border in 1862, Mississippi spearheaded Confederate suffering. It was the first Confederate state to be looted and burned, the first under siege, the first to see its capital destroyed. Northerners could not deny Mississippi's bravery. "Mississippians," one said, "don't know, and refuse to learn, how to surrender." After routing Grant at Holly Springs, Mississippi soldiers defeated Sherman at Chickasaw Bluffs. At Vicksburg, they held off Grant again, making the entire South salute. But after a forty-eight-day siege that saw townspeople burrow into caves and survive on dead dogs and rats, Vicksburg fell, and total war swept across the land. William Tecumseh Sherman, before he cut his famous path through Georgia, practiced his savagery on Mississippi, where his men burned mansions and cotton fields, sacked small towns, and tortured the earth. After tearing up Meridian, Sherman boasted, "Meridian, with its depots, storehouses, arsenal, hospitals, offices, hotels, and cantonment, no longer exists." Battleground Mississippi saw its rivers patrolled by Union gunboats, its railroad depots crammed with rotting corpses, and its capital so devastated that survivors called it "Chimneyville." The day Vicksburg fell, news came from Gettysburg, where the proud Mississippi Greys, 103 students from Ole Miss, had led Pickett's Charge. Every last one had been killed. And when the war was over, Mississippi had achieved another first. Its 78,000 soldiers—the Benita Sharpshooters, the Oktibbeha Ploughboys, the Tullahoma Hardshells, and others—had suffered 28,000 dead and 31,000 wounded, the highest per capita casualty rate in either South or North. In 1866, one-third of Mississippi's budget was spent on artificial limbs.

Before the war, Mississippi had been America's fifth wealthiest state—although most of that wealth was measured in muscle, the monetary value

of 436,631 slaves, more than half the state's population. In the wake of the war Mississippi became, and has been ever since, the nation's poorest state. Rising from the ashes of Carthaginian destruction, Mississippians made a vow—*never* to forget. Yet for every Civil War horror, more painful memories followed. Wartime battles had been brief compared to the struggle to repel the occupation historians term Reconstruction and Mississippians came to call "The Tragic Era." Here, too, Mississippi led the South—in resistance. Ranging from simple election fraud to a full-blown race war, the reaction tainted American democracy right through to Freedom Summer. Following four years of total war and a dozen of occupation and guerilla fighting, moderation in Mississippi became like snow, something occasionally in the air, especially farther north, but which vanished whenever the heat was turned up. As one freed slave observed, "Things was hurt by Mr. Lincoln gettin' kilt."

Lincoln was barely in his grave when the power struggle began. Four months after Appomattox, Mississippi crafted a constitution that would earn readmittance to the Union. But the hastily drawn accord, coupled with "Black Codes" denying freed slaves any vestige of citizenship, did not fool Congress. Refused statehood, Mississippi was occupied as part of the Fourth Military District. Only in 1870 did the Magnolia State again become a state. With former slaves voting freely, Mississippi sent America's first black senator to Washington, D.C. Freedmen never dominated Mississippi politics, but an ex-slave was elected mayor of Natchez, another became police chief in Vicksburg, and still others served as judges, sheriffs, even secretary of state. At one point, nearly half the legislature was black. In less than a decade, the social system of an entire state had been plowed up, turned over, and replanted with the flimsiest of roots. The uprooting was soon termed "redemption," and like the war, its ennobled savagery would scar Mississippi for a full century.

In Mississippi, redemption began in 1871, when members of the upstart Ku Klux Klan turned the streets of Meridian into a shooting gallery. After killing two black politicians, whites roamed the countryside, hunting and lynching Negroes. Thirty were racked up before federal troops arrived. The Meridian riot inspired congressional "Ku Klux" laws. Seven hundred Mississippi Klansmen were indicted, yet in a state whose remote jungle landscape gave it a Wild West lawlessness, rebellion was not confined beneath white hoods.

Over the next four years, raw violence "redeemed" Mississippi. The battles of Reconstruction were not as costly as those of the war, but they were battles nonetheless. The Second Battle of Vicksburg started on July 4, 1874, with gunshots in the streets. Enraged by a recent interracial marriage, whites took over the town and began slogging through alligator-infested bayous to hunt down terrified blacks. During elections that August, terror kept blacks from voting, allowing whites to rule unopposed. The taking of Vicksburg turned the coming election year into a vigilante campaign to slaughter democracy. Pitched fighting between black and white broke out in Clinton, Yazoo City, Clarksdale. . . . Fearing "a war of races," Governor Adelbert Ames, a former Union officer whites despised as a "carpetbagger," begged President Grant to send troops. This time Grant refused. "The whole public are tired out with these annual, autumnal outbreaks in the South," the president wrote back. "The great majority are ready now to condemn any interference on the part of the government."

Come Election Day in 1875, the shotgun, the noose, and the mob ended black political power in Mississippi. "Democrats Standing Manfully by Their Guns!" the *Atlanta Constitution* boasted. "Mississippi Redeemed at Last!" Governor Ames, impeached and driven from the state, lamented: "A revolution has taken place—by force of arms—and a race are disenfranchised—they are to be returned to a condition of serfdom—an era of second slavery." Over the next two years, inspired by "the Mississippi plan," other southern states wore down northern will to fight for the Negro and brokered a deal that removed federal troops from the South.

Reconstruction was over—a mistake in the eyes of all but ex-slaves, who had tasted political power only to have it stolen by mob rule. Mississippi's second black senator lost the next election. He was the last African American in the U.S. Senate until 1966. In 1890, as black laborers cleared the Delta of bears, wildcats, and snake-infested canebrake taller than a man, Mississippi's new constitution legalized what mobs had set in motion. Literacy tests and poll taxes, fully sanctioned by the U.S. Supreme Court, ended black voting. By 1900, blacks comprised 62 percent of Mississippi, the highest percentage in the nation. Yet the state had not one black elected official. Meanwhile, the sharecropping system, under which ex-slaves picked cotton and harvested mounting debt to "the boss man," kept 90 percent of Mississippi blacks mired in the "era of second slavery." Ex-slaves were free, all right—free to pick cotton from "kin to cain't," free to live in tarpaper shacks, free

to send their children to decaying schools where “we could study the earth through the floor and the stars through the roof.” Jim Crow had settled in to stay, tamping down an entire people. Black subjugation was ingrained at all levels, from the all-white university to “Whites Only” signs to the very nursery rhymes children sang:

*Naught's a naught,
Five's a figger.
All fer de white man,
None fer de Nigger.*

From top to bottom, segregation was enforced by custom as much as law. And custom—imposed whenever blacks stepped off the sidewalk as a white approached, whenever a black man was called “boy,” whenever “Nigger!” was spit into the face of a child—made Mississippi, as one Delta woman noted, “jus’ as different here from other places as tar from biscuit dough.”

Having redeemed its politics, Mississippi set about redeeming its honor. History written by the defeated does not often become the official version, yet as an American apartheid spread from Texas to the Mason-Dixon line, historians rewrote Reconstruction. In an era of minstrel shows, weekly lynchings, and calls to “Take up the White Man’s Burden,” North and South suddenly agreed: freed slaves had been slothful politicians, Klansmen were liberators, and vigilantes had been not white but black. Popular books such as *The Clansman* and *The Negro: A Menace to American Civilization* sold white supremacy to the whole nation. Northerners, the *New York Times* noted in 1900, no longer denounced the suppression of black voting because “the necessity of it under the supreme law of self-preservation is candidly recognized.” Reconstruction soon became “The Tragic Era.”

The nationwide best seller by that name recounted “the darkest days in Mississippi,” when the legislature was “one of the most grotesque bodies that ever assembled. A mulatto was Speaker of the House, a darker man was Lt. Governor.” Evil carpetbaggers and traitorous scalawags had labored to “inflare the Negroes,” causing them to attack white women. “Rape,” *The Tragic Era* noted, “is the foul daughter of Reconstruction.” Riding to the rescue, as Klansmen did in the popular film *Birth of a Nation*, the Klan “was organized for the protection of women, property, civilization itself.” Revisionism did more than justify Jim Crow—it pacified the North and solidified

the South. In his landmark study of race, *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal observed, “The South needs to believe that when the Negro voted, life was unbearable.”

The generations came and went. The price of cotton rose and fell. The Mississippi River did likewise. Through sweltering summers and gray, bone-chilling winters, descendants of Confederates and descendants of slaves shared a volatile truce. Segregated yet strangely intertwined, the two cultures coexisted—tar and biscuit dough, cordial, edgy, neither separate nor equal. White folks had their side of town and all the twentieth century could add—fine and finer homes, Model Ts, shopping trips to Memphis or New Orleans. And black folks had their side of town and what little they could scrape together—a few barnyard animals, perhaps a mule, and a shack barely big enough for two, let alone the eight or ten crammed inside. Life in white Mississippi was intensely social, based on kinship and the camaraderie of cotillions and hunting trips. But life in black Mississippi was more hopeless than any other in America. In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Among the “colored” of Mississippi, the problem was Mississippi itself, where “Mr. Charlie” cheated sharecroppers at annual “settlements,” where dresses had to be made out of flour sacks, where submission was ground into the soul.

During World War I, blacks fled north to factory jobs. So many left that those left behind joked, “What are the three largest cities in Mississippi?” Hint: none were actually *in* Mississippi. Back home, a few blacks in each town inched ahead, bought a little land, opened a barbershop or funeral parlor, kept up modest homes. But the vast majority, serfs under the feudal rule of King Cotton, lived for Saturday-night revelry at “juke joints.” When that turned violent—over women, usually—some ended up in Mississippi’s own corner of hell, Parchman Farm Penitentiary, whose bestial murders, rapes, and tortures made it “worse than slavery.” Those who survived Saturday night repented on Sunday in churches where the spirit was barely contained within wooden walls. And then came Monday, when hordes of blacks rose at dawn and headed again for the fields, not to return till dusk.

In the 1920s Harlem hosted a Renaissance of art, jazz, and literature. In Mississippi, blacks sat on swaybacked porches playing beat-up guitars with bottlenecks and table knives. To some their music sounded like fingernails on a blackboard, to others like human anguish distilled into song. It came to be called the Delta blues. By the 1930s, textile mills dotted the upper

South. Atlanta was a bustling city, Birmingham a steel town. But Mississippi remained a state of rural hamlets, zoned by race and railroad tracks, surrounded by snarled backwoods and linked by dirt roads. This gave the state a quaint charm locals loved—you could still hunt, fish, live as your granddaddy lived. Yet to “outsiders” riding the Illinois Central through the Delta, it seemed the twentieth century had yet to come downriver from St. Louis. Even into the 1940s, sprawling plantations were tended by blacks in overalls stuffing cotton into bulging sacks. Even into the atomic age, Baptist tent revivals drew the devil out of sinful small-townners. And the generations came and went. The price of cotton rose and fell. The river did likewise.

Justifying the economics was an ideology, also in black and white. In *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash explored how the Civil War shaped the thinking of an entire region. Refusing to repent for their secession, southerners romanticized the antebellum world the war had rendered “gone with the wind.” Slavery had not been one of the worst crimes in history but a humane, paternal system. “Never was there happier dependence of labor and capital on each other,” recalled Confederate president and Mississippian Jefferson Davis. The slave system had protected white women—“the loveliest and purest of God’s creatures”—from lustful black men. And not a word was said about why some Negroes had lighter skin. A genteel culture with cotillions and calling cards preferred to talk about acts of kindness—and there were many—between black and white. Yet the same culture also required savage retaliation against any black who through “reckless eyeballing” dared to offend whites, especially white women. Atrocities, including the lynching of more than five hundred Mississippi Negroes—more than any other state—were ennobled as righteous. Lynching went unpunished, murder was “self-defense,” and many towns announced their meanness in a road sign—“Nigger, Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on You Here.” Whites who disapproved learned to keep quiet. Criticism of Jim Crow became disloyalty to be dealt with, Cash noted, by “making such criticism so dangerous that none but a madman would risk it.”

Yet until the 1950s, criticism was marginal. All but a few northerners dismissed “the Negro problem” as a southern problem, and all but a few southerners chose not to see a problem. Understanding is a two-way street, but it ran one way through Greenwood, Jackson, and Liberty, Mississippi. Black women cleaned and cooked in white homes, cared for white children, were often “a part of the family.” They knew too well how whites lived. Yet

whites, though they might play with blacks as children, never went to “Niggertown” and rarely compared their own comforts to those of their maids and cooks. Blacks smiled a lot, therefore they must be happy. “When civil rights came along, a lot of us were shocked,” said one Natchez woman. “I was shocked to find black people we knew participating in the marches, because we didn’t know they were unhappy.” And when Freedom Summer focused the eyes of America on Mississippi, many whites there would not recognize the state others saw. Seemed they had never been to black Mississippi, even though it was just across town.

To sidestep the minefield of class, Mississippi politicians played the race card expertly. Because Mississippi was a one-party state—almost no one voting for the party of Lincoln—incumbent congressmen held their seats for generations, becoming the most powerful men on Capitol Hill. And whenever an election was at risk, politicians found a convenient whipping boy in the Negro. James K. Vardaman, Mississippi governor: “The Negro is a lazy, lustful animal which no conceivable amount of training can transform into a tolerable citizen.” Vardaman’s successor to Mississippi’s power elite, a balding little bigot named Theodore G. Bilbo, was more blunt. Toward the end of his long and corrupt career, Senator Bilbo announced, “I am calling upon every red-blooded American who believes in the superiority and integrity of the white race to get out and see that no nigger votes . . . and the best time to do it is the night before.”

Bilbo’s call to arms came in 1946 when, home from World War II, blacks in Mississippi were beginning to clamor for citizenship. Things were finally changing, thanks in part to technology. Late in the war, the first mechanical cotton picker was demonstrated on a Delta plantation. The cost of picking a bale of cotton by hand was \$39.41; the cost by machine was \$5.26. In the decade following the war, 315,000 blacks displaced by automation headed north, and Mississippi’s racial lava cooled. A new generation of black leaders began speaking out. Small NAACP chapters began meeting in lamplit churches. Lynching, in decline since the 1930s, stopped. Several thousand Negroes registered to vote, and no one shot into their homes. Few spoke of universal Negro suffrage, but stagnation seemed at an end. “Segregation will never end in my lifetime, of course,” many said, “but my children will see its end.” Yet those who remembered the great Mississippi flood of 1927, which spread the river across the Delta for a hundred miles, knew how stealthily disaster could come.

Levees do not break as dams do—with a roar and rush. Instead, the relentless pressure of rising water forms “boils,” small geysers that bubble through softer soil. Sandbag each boil, and you can hold back the floodwaters, but if enough boils bubble through, the whole levee goes. For Mississippi and the entire South, the first boil surfaced on May 17, 1954.

Mississippians, their governor announced, were “shocked and stunned.” Senator James Eastland, owner of a huge Delta plantation, flailed his fists and proclaimed, “We are about to embark on a great crusade to restore Americanism.” A Mississippi judge bemoaned “Black Monday.” The Monday in question was the day the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Influenced by psychological studies of black children, the court ruled that “to separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” Separate schools, the court unanimously declared, were “inherently unequal.” Alarm was still rippling across the South when, late in 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

As in resisting Reconstruction, Mississippi led resistance to the civil rights movement. Two months after the *Brown* decision, planters, lawyers, and other prominent Delta men met in Indianola to form the White Citizens’ Council. The council often clothed its policies in the garb of “states rights,” but one pamphlet succinctly defined its purpose: “The Citizens’ Council is the South’s answer to the mongrelizers. We will not be integrated! We are proud of our white blood and our white heritage. . . . If we are bigoted, prejudiced, un-American, etc., so were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and other illustrious forebears who believed in segregation.” Within a year, Citizens’ Council chapters had sprung up throughout Mississippi. Within two years, similar councils were meeting across the South.

Sometimes called “the uptown Klan,” Mississippi’s Citizens’ Councils used a variety of tactics. They held high school essay contests on “Why Separate Schools Should be Maintained for the White and Negro Races.” They sent volunteers house-to-house to survey racial attitudes. Their list of subversive organizations—those backing integration—ranged from the Methodist and Episcopal churches to the Elks Club, the YWCA, and the U.S. Air Force. The Citizens’ Council’s primary weapon was the mimeograph machine,

churning out some five million pages of pamphlets and press releases to rally “right thinking” Mississippians. Many spouted the familiar tenets of white supremacy; others served up a more mendacious venom. In 1956, the South was deluged with mimeographs of a speech by Professor Roosevelt Williams of Howard University. At an NAACP meeting in Jackson, Williams claimed that white women yearned for black men and any black man could get any white woman he wanted. The speech was widely quoted until a Georgia journalist found there was no Professor Roosevelt Williams of Howard University. The “speech” had been distributed by the Citizens’ Council in Mississippi. But as the Citizens’ Council gained enough power to elect Governor Ross Barnett—“God was the original segregationist”—disinformation proved a mild tactic compared to economic warfare. Blacks who dared register to vote, who joined the NAACP, who signed petitions demanding school integration, quickly had their credit cut off, their taxes audited, their insurance canceled. Soon the phone threats started. For most “agitators,” these were enough. They stopped fooling around with “dat Brown mess.” Those who persisted were handled by citizens not quite so “uptown.”

Rednecks. Peckerwoods. White trash. By whatever degrading name, the impoverished whites of Mississippi kept one rung up on the social ladder by beating down the blacks below them. Shunned by better-off whites, they carved out hardscrabble lives in shacks and hovels where, living close to the unforgiving earth, they absorbed its cruelty. Growing up in Yazoo City, writer Willie Morris knew them well. “And then there were the redneck boys,” Morris wrote.

Almost all of them were rough and open, and you learned early to treat them with a diffident respect; they were bigger and often older, from failing a grade or from having to stay out of school, sometimes for days at a time, during picking season. . . . Pity the poor colored child who walked past the schoolhouse when they were outside. There would be cries of “coon” or “nigger baby,” followed by a barrage of rocks and dirt clods. When I was a grown man and saw the deputy sheriffs and the mobs pummeling Negro demonstrators on television, I needed no one to tell me they had been doing the same thing since the age of eight.

The “redneck boys” hung out in packs where they hardened each other with a junkyard meanness passed down from father to son. Bottled up

throughout boyhood, it exploded when mixed with moonshine and a mob mentality, especially when blacks tried to climb the ladder.

In May 1955, George Lee, a minister who had urged fellow blacks to register, was driving through Belzoni when shots rang out. His face blown off, Lee died en route to the hospital. The murder was reported in Jackson papers as an "odd accident." That August, a black veteran was gunned down on a crowded courthouse lawn in Brookhaven. Two weeks later, teenager Emmett Till, having come from Chicago to visit relatives, flirted with a white woman in Money, Mississippi (pop. 55). No African American of "the Emmett Till generation" would ever forget the photo of Till's monstrously mangled face in the casket his mother left open to let "the world see what they did to my boy." More than one hundred reporters sat in the segregated courtroom where the sheriff greeted the black press—"Good morning, niggers"—and where the defense urged the jury, "every last Anglo Saxon one of you," to find the killers not guilty. The jury complied in just over an hour. William Faulkner observed, "If we in America have reached that point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or what color, we don't deserve to survive, and probably won't." A less eloquent white man proved more prophetic. "There's open season on Negroes now," he said. Within four years, ten more Mississippi blacks were murdered by whites; no guilty verdicts were rendered. The reign of terror also revived lynching. In the tiny town of Poplarville, Mack Parker, accused of rape, was dragged from jail and later found in chains, drifting in a logjam on the Pearl River. But the Emmett Till murder galvanized blacks more than whites. "From that point on," Bob Moses' mentor Amzie Moore remembered, "Mississippi began to move."

And when it moved, the movement came from the bottom up. "It was the so-called dumb people," a Holmes County farmer remembered. "... The school teachers, the educated people, they ain't did a damn thang! The preachers ain't neither. The so-called dumb people open the way for everybody. See, the table was set." The Mississippi movement began with common laborers whose dignity would not be denied and with self-employed farmers whites could neither fire nor frighten. A chapter of the NAACP or the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, a place to meet, and a coalition of the brave—these were the sparks. And Emmett Till's face, printed in *Jet* magazine and passed from hand to hand, was the fan reminding blacks that little had changed in Mississippi, and that everything had to.

When vigilantes and the Citizens' Council could not contain the movement, the state stepped in. In the wake of *Brown*, prospective voters were required not just to read but to *interpret* part of the Mississippi constitution, a document, as Senator Bilbo noted, "that damn few white men and no niggers at all can explain." The state constitution had 285 sections. Each "interpretation" was left open to the registrar. No appeal was allowed. Black teachers, doctors, and Ph.D.s routinely "failed" the test most whites did not have to take, and statewide black voting rolls fell from 22,000 to 8,000. In 1956, state legislators declared *Brown* "invalid, unconstitutional, and not of lawful effect." The vote was 136–0. After voting, legislators sang "Dixie." That same year, the legislature created Mississippi's own KGB, the State Sovereignty Commission. Chaired by the governor, funded by taxpayers and private donations, the Sovereignty Commission spied, paid informers, tapped phones, and convinced newspaper editors to plant false stories and kill factual ones. The commission's most extreme actions now seem comical, such as when investigators examined a baby born out of wedlock, checking its hair, nose, and fingernails to discover if he was part Negro. But other tactics seemed more appropriate for Khrushchev's Soviet Union than for Eisenhower's America.

During its first five years, the Sovereignty Commission spent much of its time fielding letters of support from segregationists across the nation. But members also found time to stir things up in Mississippi. The commission used black informers to imprison a man who tried to integrate the University of Southern Mississippi. It investigated NAACP leaders. Who were their friends? Were they Christian? What sexual habits might lead to their disgrace? Commission reports on racial violence inevitably blamed blacks and exonerated whites. Then Bob Moses came to Mississippi. An investigator interviewed Moses and concluded he was "working hand-in-glove with Communist sympathizers if not out-right Communist agitators. It is my opinion that Moses is himself a Communist." Moses and SNCC deepened the siege mentality that set in across the state when, several years after the Montgomery bus boycott, the civil rights movement finally took hold in Mississippi.

By the summer of 1962, SNCC was building a "beachhead" in the most impoverished and explosive spot in America—the Mississippi Delta. Meanwhile in Jackson, blacks were boycotting segregated stores, sitting in at lunch counters, going limp as cops dragged them into paddy wagons. And across

Mississippi, from the Delta south to the Piney Woods, blacks were lining up to register at county courthouses.

In Mississippi, the courthouse was more than a symbol of law and order—it was the heart of white society. Situated at the hub of each county seat, framed by a tidy town square, each courthouse was the oldest and best-preserved building for miles around. Each stood with towering cupola and an ornate brick facade. And on each courthouse lawn, a stone soldier stood atop a pedestal chiseled with the roll call of the Confederate dead. Every white birth, death, and marriage was recorded in the courthouse. And now as blacks came en masse to register, it was as if they were tearing a hole in these nostalgic portraits of the Old South. Because terror alone could not stop them, Mississippi barred its doors, locked its mind, and clung to the past that was not even past.

But preserving the status quo in the 1960s was not as easy as it had once been. A new invader, television, threatened to spread northern ideas about integration. Even if most Mississippi towns had just one or two TV channels, they had to be controlled. When novelist James Baldwin appeared on the *Today* show, he was not seen in Mississippi. NBC affiliates statewide showed an old movie. When NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall spoke on TV, WLBT in Jackson flashed the sign “Cable Difficulty.” The announcement “Sorry, Cable Trouble” soon became common on Mississippi TV. Newscasts were often preceded by a warning: “The following program is Northern-managed news.” Such control depended on media monopoly. The manager of WLBT was a Citizens’ Council director. So were the station’s owners, the Hederman family, which also owned Mississippi’s two statewide dailies, the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* and the *Jackson Daily News*. As with the rest of Jim Crow, opposition to “northern” media sometimes reached absurd heights. In the spring of 1964, rumors that the hit Western *Bonanza* would feature a “Negro cow-girl” led to a boycott of the show and its sponsors. A few months later, Mississippi’s ABC affiliates protested the new sitcom *Bewitched*, arguing that a show about a man marrying a witch might be seen as “a veiled argument for racial intermarriage.”

Blackouts, spies, vigilantes, cops cracking down, Citizens’ Council chapters lobbying the “right thinking”—all turned Mississippi into “The Closed Society.” And when Ole Miss history professor James Silver coined the term in 1963, he too became a target. Denounced by the governor, investigated

by the university, Silver began sleeping with a shotgun by his bed. He never drove at night. Other moderates faced similar harassment. At Ole Miss, speakers were screened for their views on integration. The campus director of religious life was forced to leave. His crime? Hosting a black journalist. Protesting “intellectual straight-jacketing,” professors resigned one after another until a quarter of the faculty had quit. Clergymen also felt the pressure. In January 1963, twenty-eight Methodist ministers signed a statement urging church integration. Within a year, half had left the state.

Dick Gregory once joked that a Mississippi moderate was someone “who will lynch you from a low tree.” But despite the dangers, a few voices of reason remained, courageously crying out in what one called “The Magnolia Jungle.” Hazel Brannon Smith, publisher of the *Lexington Advertiser*, waged a one-woman campaign against the Citizens’ Council and its “private Gestapo,” the Sovereignty Commission. In her front-page column, “Through Hazel Eyes,” Smith observed: “Today we live in fear in Holmes County and in Mississippi. It hangs like a dark cloud over us dominating every facet of public and private life. None speaks freely without being afraid of being misunderstood. Almost every man and woman is afraid to try to do anything to promote good will and harmony between the races.”

Smith was ostracized in her small town. Advertising dried up, her name was linked to Communists, her husband lost his job, and she was found guilty of libel for denouncing a white cop who had shot a black man. Yet Smith kept speaking out, and a month before Freedom Summer, she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing. Farther south, in Petal, Mississippi, P. D. East, editor, publisher, ad salesman, reporter, and typesetter for the *Petal Paper*, denounced the spreading “assdom.” East ran mock Citizens’ Council ads asking readers to “Join the Glorious Citizens Clan . . . the Bigger and Better Bigots Bureau.” Like Hazel Brannon Smith, East was boycotted. The *Petal Paper* survived only on out-of-state sales. And still farther south, in the shipyard town of Pascagoula, publisher Ira Harkey Jr. had the audacity to remove the labels “nigger” and “colored” from his newspaper, then editorialize against local “goons” and “Hateists.” They responded by shooting into his house and burning a cross on his lawn. The hatred hardened, finally bringing on Mississippi’s greatest fear—the return of northern troops.

Mississippians thought they knew how to handle any Negro who tried

to enroll at Ole Miss. The first, in 1958, was sent to a mental institution. But in 1962, James Meredith's pending enrollment threw the charming old town of Oxford into an uproar. "Dixie" blared on radio stations. Confederate flags flew. Rebel yells sounded in the streets, and whites from as far south as the Gulf Coast poured into Oxford armed for battle. Federal marshals arrived on troop trucks. On September 30, as darkness descended on campus, bricks smashed cars and windows. Mississippi highway patrolmen withdrew, enraging Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who sent in more marshals. All night the rioting continued, leaving two dead, twenty-eight shot, hundreds beaten, cars burned, buildings gutted. The next morning, federal troops escorted Meredith through the rubble and into class. "We hate violence," one student said, "but we are determined to keep our way of life. Nobody can take it away from us, and I would die for it."

Federal troops stayed on the Ole Miss campus until the following August. Come 1964, three years after the centennial secession parade, the Civil War remained an open sore, the Oxford "occupation" had rekindled smoldering hatreds, and Mississippi had become a pressure cooker. In March, news of the summer project sent tremors through the state. Freedom Summer planners announced, again and again, that volunteers coming to Mississippi would not march, sit in, or protest. In a letter to all county sheriffs, planners explained, "The project is concerned with construction, not agitation." Yet that spring, the Mississippi legislature passed a spate of laws doubling the number of state police and banning picketing, leafleting, and assembly.

While the state legislature met in emergency session, Mississippi's KGB made its own preparations for Freedom Summer. Throughout April and May, the State Sovereignty Commission held clinics for sheriffs and cops, advising them of new state laws for handling the incoming wave of "communists, sex perverts, odd balls, and do-gooders." The agency also hired two black spies it called Informant X and Informant Y. X's job was to travel with civil rights workers. "It will be a long hot summer in Mississippi," X reported back, "because they are going to demonstrate in the streets of Jackson until the 'walls of segregation' come tumbling down." Attending the Ohio training, X reported, "The white girls have been going around with the Negro boys and Negro girls going with the white boys." While X traveled, Y infiltrated the Jackson headquarters of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an umbrella group of civil rights agencies in Mississippi.

COFO headquarters would be the nerve center of Freedom Summer. Located on Lynch Street in the black section of Jackson, COFO shared a low brick building with the Streamline Bar and Billiards. As Freedom Summer approached, the office was far busier than the adjacent bar. Phones rang incessantly. Women sat at typewriters clacking out letters, lists, solicitations, and a stream of reports on all aspects of the summer project. Meetings in smoke-filled back rooms went on past midnight. Boxes of books and clothes—donations from around the country—piled up in corners. Moving freely through the clutter was Informant Y. Along with stealing key documents, including lists of all volunteers with their home addresses, Y also sent fanciful reports to the Sovereignty Commission. Apparently the COFO office was thick with Communists and even a "queer." Photos of Khrushchev and Lenin adorned the wall, Y reported, Marxist literature was everywhere, and talk was of a new world "where black and white will walk together and where Communism will dominate. They do not talk of love but only of sex to satisfy the body." As the summer unfolded, Informant X would continue to file dry reports while Informant Y would tell the State Sovereignty Commission just what it wanted to hear.

By June 1964, Mississippi's past was digging in against the onslaught of the present. All but a few moderates had been silenced or exiled. Pascagoula publisher Ira Harkey had sold his crusading paper. Frank Smith, the lone Mississippi moderate in Congress, had been defeated for reelection. P. D. East had moved to Alabama, and William Faulkner was dead. Unfettered, Confederate pride resurged with a vengeance. Reconstruction-era insults—"carpetbagger" and "scalawag"—were common. The *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* was running a Civil War column—"This Week in 1864"—recounting atrocities by Union troops. Behind the scenes, softer voices pleaded for understanding. "I know we've had a hundred years," a Hattiesburg doctor said. "I know that, and I'm ashamed to ask it, but we need more time. If we had more time, we'd work it out." To most Mississippians, however, it was too late for pleas. "In my life span, I have never felt so compelled to stand up for God and our country," a Jackson man wrote the *Clarion-Ledger*. "I ask both white and colored not to let Mississippi turn into a small New York."

With Freedom Summer just a week away, rumors verged on panic. Not just a few hundred but thirty thousand "invaders" were on their way! In Jackson, word that Negro gangs were "forming to rape white women" led

to a run on gun shops. Mississippi police stockpiled tear gas, riot guns, and electric cattle prods. Cops took riot training. The Klan announced it had 91,000 members in Mississippi and was actively recruiting. In this spreading alarm, violence became common currency.

Early one June evening, two cars stopped in front of COFO headquarters in Jackson. Two young white men stepped out. Each calmly pulled out a gun, aimed at the office, and fired. Windows shattered. Screams came from inside. The men drove off. Six days later, a bomb hit the Freedom House in Canton. That same day in volatile southwest Mississippi, whites mauled three journalists. "This is just a taste of what you Northern agitators will get," one attacker said.

With the days melting away, Mississippi braced for the "long, hot summer." Chambers of commerce shared strategies. Stay calm. Discourage the Klan in your area. Trust the police. Stonewall the press. In southwest Mississippi, two new organizations began meeting. The Americans for the Preservation of the White Race urged peaceful defiance. "Don't do no violence," a preacher told the group. "The day we kill three or four, they'd be martial law in Mississippi." In McComb, the neighborhood watch group Help, Inc. organized block captains and mailed out "Guidelines for Self-protection and Preservation." Among them: "Know where small children are at all times. . . . Look before unlocking door to anyone. . . . Learn alarm codes. . . . Temporary alarm to be three blasts from a shotgun or car horn." And in klaverns dotted throughout Mississippi, Klansmen steeled themselves. "This summer, within a very few days, the enemy will launch his final push for victory here in Mississippi," the Klan's shadowy Imperial Wizard announced. "We must use all of the time which is left to us in these next few days preparing to meet this attack. Weapons and ammunition must be accumulated and stored. Squads must drill. . . . And a solemn, determined spirit of Christian reverence must be stimulated in all members."

On the last day of spring, as volunteers boarded buses in Ohio, Jackson's huge armored tank waited at police headquarters. Nearby, the county fairgrounds had become a holding camp big enough to house thousands of prisoners. After months of rumors and threats, Mississippi hunkered down for the worst. In Jackson, Eudora Welty wrote a friend, "I hear that this summer all hell is going to break loose." The State Sovereignty Commission reported "increased activity in weapon shipments." From towns carved out of the clay to those rising from cotton fields, Mississippi waited. Then

shortly after midnight on the first day of summer, young men' and women rode buses south from Memphis, singing as they approached the state line. When a blood-red sun rose that Sunday, Mississippi was again engulfed in the wars—between white and black, between North and South, between tolerance and intolerance—that had never really ended.