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C.C. BRYANT: A RACE MAN IS WHAT THEY CALLED HIM

A Thesis  
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Southern Studies The  
University of Mississippi

by

JUDITH E. BARLOW ROBERTS

May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

Many historical contributions have been made to Civil Rights movement history in Mississippi. Thus far, historian John Dittmer's, *Local People: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* has provided the most thorough account of lesser known movement activist. There still exists a need for scholarship from the perspective of community leaders. Curtis Conway Bryant, better known as C.C. Bryant served as the McComb Pike County chapter president of the NAACP from 1954 to 1984. During the summer of 1964, McComb was known as the bombing capital of the world. Throughout the nineteen fifties Bryant worked with national and local NAACP leadership to grow the McComb branch. Throughout the nineteen sixties, Bryant carried out the national directives of the NAACP by encouraging civic engagement through voter registration and education. In the nineteen seventies, Bryant was the principal litigant in the class action lawsuit, *C.C. Bryant vs. Illinois Central Rail Road*. Represented by the NAACP, this case struck down segregation in the workplace. In the nineteen eighties, and throughout his lifetime, Bryant fought to end poverty, stood up for equal access to education and advocated for workers' rights as a railroad union representative. Educated with only a high school diploma, Bryant influenced and mentored politicians, both black and white from McComb to Washington, D.C.

Using, the power of narrative, this research provides: 1) insight into the formation of Bryant's identity through stories of his personal and family background; 2) a greater understanding of his leadership development and relationship with national civil rights organizations; 3) defines

Bryant's role in addressing racial injustice in local and national civil rights movement history.  
Bryant's personal conviction, leadership development and affiliation with the National  
Association for the advancement of Colored People changed the course of Mississippi Civil  
Rights history. This research is will contribute to the growing scholarship of Mississippi civil  
rights history.

## DEDICATION

“This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine!”

Dedicated in loving memory of my grandfather, C.C. “Papa” Bryant.

Thank you for shining your light, Papa.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The African expression Ubuntu: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” encompasses the values of togetherness, trust, commitment and responsibility to and for community, family and friendship. It is impossible for me to acknowledge I have completed this thesis without the support, love and encouragement of friends and family. It is equally inconceivable to believe this work is done for my own personal benefit but rather as an offering to the wider community.

I give thanks to God, for guiding me along this path.

I pay tribute to all the ancestors with me in spirit. Despite the tremendous adversities of slavery, discrimination, racism and violence you made a way out of no way.

I especially give thanks to my grandmother Emogene Gooden Bryant for watching and praying over me. You are the rock of our family.

I give honor to my parents, Billie and Gladys Jackson, for entrusting me with the responsibility of recording my grandfather’s contribution to the struggle. I hope I have made you proud.

To my husband Christopher Kiri Roberts, thank you for affirming the greatness you see in me, when I don’t always see it in myself. I look forward to writing our next chapter together.

To my amazing son Julian, you are my inspiration and I love you very much.

To my thesis committee, Professors Susan Glisson, Katie McKee and Ted Ownby, I am deeply grateful. Thank you for your pushing me to do my very best.

I am especially thankful to Susan Glisson, April Grayson and the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. Susan you have been with me in friendship and solidarity from the very beginning. April, with camera and little Jonah in tow, you were always ready for a road trip to McComb. Capturing much of the oral history for this project would not have been possible without the support and commitment of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation.

To my Springfield College Professors, Clifton Bush Tuesday Cooper, Bobbie Harro and JoAnne Silver Jones, you planted the seed that has finally come to fruition.

For the entire Bryant Family, especially Uncle Curtis, my brother Billie, sister in-law Gianna, cousins, Tim, Marsha and Berneda I love you all. Friends Michelle, Olive, Tracey, Muneer, Hector and Brenda, I thank you for your prayers, support, encouragement and guidance. I am eternally grateful.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	v
PREFACE.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	4
I. EARLY LIFE.....	12
II. LEADERSHP AND JOINING THE NAACP.....	26
III. THE VOTER REGISTRATION MOVEMENT IN MCCOMB.....	64
IV. C.C. BRYANT ET AL. VS. ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD .....	78
CONCLUSION.....	91
REFERENCES.....	93
VITA.....	96

## PREFACE

Researching and writing this thesis has been a long journey of personal discovery in recording my grandfather C.C. Bryant's role in the Civil Rights movement in McComb, Mississippi. It was my grandfather's desire to tell his own story; a story I could never fully understand nor convey what this life's work meant to him. This pilgrimage has been filled with sadness with the loss of my grandfather in 2007 as well as a tremendous amount of healing as I combed through the documents that shaped his story.

I am the first-born of my grandparents' seven grandchildren. As a little girl, I spent every summer with my grandparents in McComb, Mississippi. My parents were eager to send my younger brother Billie and I to my grandparents in Mississippi for summer vacations; they were just as anxious for our arrival. As a child I witnessed him in action. He would receive phone calls and visits from folks seeking his opinion on different matters. As the Pike County president of the NAACP, my grandfather took my cousins and me to NAACP meetings every chance he had.

My most vivid memory happened when I was about ten years of age. My grandfather had taken us to Jackson, Mississippi, for a memorial service for slain Civil Rights leader, Medgar Evers. It was a Sunday afternoon. We arrived at the church in Jackson where my grandfather was ushered to take a seat in the front pew. The church was packed and as the music started a

wave of emotion overwhelmed the room. People locked arms and swayed in unity to the word and music of “We Shall Overcome.” It was at that moment that I knew how important this song was to black Americans. We were united in one song with one voice experiencing emotions larger than life. I looked at my grandfather’s face and his eyes were filled tears. At that time I didn’t know who Medgar Evers was but people were saddened by this remembrance service. I remember that day as if it were yesterday. It was and still is one of the most powerful and transformative experiences I have ever encountered. This was one of the most important moments with my grandfather.

It is as if this work has called me from the time I was a little girl to my call to serve and work in the area of racial justice. This thesis has been a long time coming with long gaps in research and writing. Many tears have been shed in mourning the loss of my grandfather. A few years before my grandfather passed I was invited by the United Methodist Church to speak at a gathering on civil rights in Mississippi. To my surprise, I was invited to speak in the presence of my grandfather. I watched his face beam and light up I as expressed my journey following his path. My grandfather told me he had dedicated me to God as a baby and he told me “little baby you are going to be like me.” My grandfather had never told me he had spoken those words into my life. In fact, the majority of my adult life I had not been anything like him. I lived my life as far apart from this calling on my life. But my grandfather never forgot the words I spoke at 11 years old, “Papa, I don’t know what you are but when I grow up I’m going to be just like you.” Around the age of fourteen years of age, I stopped spending summers in the South. I would beg my parents not to send me to Mississippi. From that point on, my visits would be few and far between.

It was always my grandfather’s desire to publish his own story after being the subject of countless interviews and the focus of civil rights projects. As my grandfather matured in life,

watching others obtain professional and political success on the back of his personal commitment became frustrating and times often resentful. This thesis project gave me the gift of time with my grandfather; a gift that taught me more about his spiritual walk than the historical events of the Civil Rights era. God blessed me with a little more time with my grandfather during my time at the University of Mississippi. It was through that experience of the four hour car rides from McComb back to Oxford that I mourned the inevitable. That I understood just how precious time was and how little time we had left together.

## INTRODUCTION

Much of Mississippi Civil Rights history has focused on 1961-1964 and the outside influence of direct action groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Student Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the Freedom Riders of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). A great body of scholarship has recognized the organizing efforts and violent attacks against these primarily young adult organizations. Their commitment to dismantling a system of apartheid in the Deep South would begin in the nineteen sixties and climaxed during what would be known as Freedom Summer of 1964. Historian Howard Zinn referred to members of SNCC as the “new abolitionists” and credits much of this outside leadership with galvanizing the Mississippi Civil Rights movement. These collective actions, along with the efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), culminate in the voter registration and education projects of Freedom Summer of 1964.

Prior to the emergence of these outside direct action groups, the NAACP had been the only national group of its kind in Mississippi.<sup>1</sup> During the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties local NAACP branches across Mississippi engaged in voter education and registration efforts. This local leadership comprised of railroad men, businessmen, physicians and young returning World War I and World War II veterans. Amzie Moore worked in the Delta; Dr. E.J. Stringer in

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<sup>1</sup> Myrlie Evers with William Peters, *For Us, the Living* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 251.

Columbus; Aaron Henry in Clarksdale; Reverend George Lee and Gus Courts in Belzoni; Doctor. T.R. M Howard and Medgar Evers worked in the independent black community of Mound Bayou and C.C. Bryant in McComb.

Curtis Conway Bryant Sr., better known as C.C. Bryant, served as the McComb Pike County chapter president of the NAACP from 1954 to 1984 in the southwest corner of Mississippi. Throughout the nineteen fifties Bryant worked with national and local NAACP leadership to grow the McComb branch. Throughout the nineteen sixties, Bryant carried out the national directives of the NAACP by encouraging civic engagement through voter registration and education. In the nineteen seventies, Bryant was the principal litigant in the class action lawsuit, *C.C. Bryant vs. Illinois Central Rail Road*. Represented by the NAACP, this case struck down segregation in the workplace. In the nineteen eighties, and throughout his lifetime, Bryant fought to end poverty, stood up for equal access to education and advocated for workers' rights as a railroad union representative. Educated with only a high school diploma, Bryant influenced and mentored politicians, both black and white from McComb to Washington, D.C.

It was Bryant's dream to have his life's work published. Thus far, the most extensive research of C. C. Bryant's involvement appears in John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Through in-depth interviews, Dittmer captures the oral histories of Bryant and numerous Mississippi movement activists from 1946 to the nineteen nineties. Other historical works barely scratch the surface of Bryant's role in Civil Rights history. Bryant exists only in brief mentions in *Parting the Waters by Taylor Branch* and *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965* by Juan Williams, in the context of supporting and inviting SNCC field Secretary Bob Moses to McComb. In the autobiographical account of activist Bob Moses' *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*, Moses pays tribute to Bryant as a father figure and mentor in the early organizing work in the

McComb movement. Bryant is characterized in the 2006, Turner Network Television film *Freedom Song*—a fictionalized account of true Mississippi freedom fighters and events. This thesis will focus on the life and work of McComb, Mississippi, civil rights activist, C.C. Bryant, as a central organizing figure in McComb, his relationship with state NAACP leadership with a directive from the National office and his relationship with emerging outside influences of SNCC and the formation of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). C.C. Bryant’s activism linked the Civil Rights agenda of the NAACP and the AFL-CIO labor rights movement of the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies to secure racial advancement for African Americans. I will center much of my case study on the movement leadership of C.C. Bryant in McComb, Mississippi—a crucial community that sparked a movement across the country. This movement started by local people in McComb, epitomized perseverance and self-determination coupled with the direct action strategies of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This intergenerational relationship created a crucial intersection between a younger militant generation and an older conservative generation.

Bryant’s career can be traced from his early education, to accepting the post of local NAACP president of Pike County in 1954, to championing desegregation laws in the workplace. As a community leader, C.C. Bryant was a catalyst for change because of his servant leadership as a disciple of Christ, his concern for community, union affiliation and involvement in the NAACP. Like other activists of his time, Bryant’s faith in Christianity deeply shaped his involvement in the movement as a servant-leader; a quality also visible in the activism of Fannie Lou Hamer in *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* by Charles Marsh. One of Bryant’s favorite scriptures, John 15:13 “Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for friends,” epitomized his call to risk his life and welfare for his fellow man.

Local leaders and everyday people, like C.C. Bryant, served as the backbone of their communities volunteering through church activities, community organizations and fraternal orders. Bryant, a deacon, Sunday schoolteacher, Boy Scout leader, railroad union leader, and Freemason, dedicated his life's work to the betterment of his people. As a long-standing member of Society Hill Missionary Baptist Church, Bryant committed himself to discipleship. The Freemasons were a fraternal organization of McComb's most influential black men. As a Boy Scout leader, Bryant shared the mission of developing character and preparing young people for citizenship. Bryant also served as the president of the Illinois Central Railroad's black union, where he organized and represented his fellow workers.

In 1961, Bryant invited young SNCC worker Bob Moses to McComb for a voter registration drive. Moses hoped to start a voter registration project in Cleveland, Mississippi, with the support of NAACP president Amzie Moore. Moses arrived in Cleveland only to find, "no place to meet, no equipment and no funds."<sup>2</sup> After reading an article in Jet magazine about Moses, Bryant contacted Amzie Moore and arranged for Moses to travel to McComb. Over the summer of 1961, Moses knocked on the doors through the blistering August days telling all those who would listen that he was C.C. Bryant's voter registration man.<sup>3</sup>

Bryant implemented the voting rights agenda of the national office of the NAACP, while supporting the enthusiasm and voting rights efforts of the newly organized SNCC. The black community of McComb possessed the necessary social and financial resources to support the work of the young SNCC workers. Local people provided the emotional and financial support and leadership to sustain the movement. This tight-knit McComb community, irrespective of education and income, nurtured and aided the workers. Black churches served as a central

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (California: University Press, 1995), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Touchstone), 42.



meeting place where blacks could discuss freely the issues of segregation. Black ministers were essential in communicating and sharing organizing information with their congregations.

McComb's black restaurant owner Aylene Quinn served hot meals to the young members of SNCC. Retired railroad porter, Web Owens, offered his time and vehicle for transportation. The black Freemasons offered their Masonic temple as a voter registration school. Although the older generation did not always agreed on organizing tactics, they always offered support to the younger generation of SNCC.

By the end of the summer of 1961, under the auspices of the Pike County NAACP, SNCC's McComb, Mississippi voter registration initiative was under way. Additional SNCC members, including Marion Barry, Chuck McDew and Charles Sherrod, joined Moses in McComb. Moses continued voter registration while Barry initiated direct action workshops. While Bryant supported the voter registration activities of SNCC, he found himself at odds with their direct action strategies. The younger McComb residents viewed the voter registration drive of the NAACP as moving too slow. Inspired by the radical direct training of SNCC, local youth organized non-violent demonstrations at the local Woolworth's lunch counter and Greyhound bus station. In response, school authorities retaliated against student demonstrators and their supporters staged a walkout demonstration at McComb's black Burgland High School. One hundred sixteen students had been arrested and jailed. School board members refused the students' readmission to school, forcing them to attend classes at Campbell College 86 miles away in Jackson. By the end of the summer of 1961, one hundred and sixteen students were expelled from McComb's public schools, neighboring Amite county NAACP member Herbert Lee had been killed, SNCC members had left McComb and C.C. Bryant was left to answer to his community and the leadership of the NAACP. Between 1961-

1964, the NAACP continued voter registration and education efforts in the Pike County area. For SNCC, McComb had proved that their nonviolent tactics were not always effective and sometimes ruinous when used against a determined white establishment. They also discovered that voter registration in the Deep South offered as much of a test of militancy and courage as did direct action protests.<sup>4</sup>

Although SNCC's McComb 1961 campaign ended abruptly, the knowledge learned and the relationships formed in McComb galvanized members of the NAACP, SNCC and the CORE to form the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). This united coalition organized and launched the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964. Freedom Summer brought a multiracial group of primarily college students from the North who worked side by side with black locals to create change. In addition to voter registration programs, COFO created Freedom Schools to educate blacks on African American history. While voter registration and Freedom Schools continued throughout the summer, a new political party was emerging with the help of COFO. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) aimed to take voter registration to the next political level. In a fight for full Democratic inclusion, the MFDP challenged the "old white party" Democratic Party during the 1964 primaries. The MFDP would be unsuccessful in working outside of the political framework. Once again, Bryant and Moses would be on opposite sides of the political fence as Bryant continued to support the Democratic Party. The national office of the NAACP served as a major organization in enforcing the protection of the U.S. Constitution to enforce voter registration. The voter registration history of the NAACP in Mississippi has been significantly under researched. Historian Charles Eagles has noted that no historian had yet written a major work on the NAACP, while general histories of other black

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<sup>4</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960's* (Cambridge Harvard Press 1981), 50.

advancement groups such as SNCC, CORE and the SCLC are readily available.<sup>5</sup> Historian Manfred Berg espouses the national directive of the NAACP as it applies at the local level in *“The Ticket to Freedom”: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration*. Berg offers extensive research of the agency’s policy decisions. Berg’s research demonstrates that the national NAACP office and staff did not usually stand in the way of local activism but often initiated and supported activities at the local level; particularly in the field of voter registration.<sup>6</sup> Bryant’s strong presence bolstered the local visibility of the NAACP in McComb in contrast to other Mississippi communities with less effective leadership. At the community level, the NAACP relied on local branches to lead voter education and registration initiatives, while the Washington, D.C., based policy and advocacy staff lobbied for political change at the legislative and executive branches of the Federal government. The NAACP’s political pressure, aided by the direct action tactics of activist organizations of SNCC, CORE and the SCLC, eventually secured the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The Voting Rights Act prohibited states from imposing any prerequisites or voting qualifications on United States citizens based on race or color.

The state of Mississippi, like all of the southern states, had successfully used legislation to keep blacks legally subordinate under Jim Crow laws. Unfair voting practices excluded the black vote, preventing challenges to this injustice. The use of poll taxes, literacy tests and the abuse of power by registrars reinforced institutionalized racism. Southern blacks that challenged this system of segregation lived under the constant threat of violence and intimidation from white supremacist groups. Oppressive tactics of economic reprisal and terror kept blacks in inferior positions. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) bombed and burned black

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<sup>5</sup> Charles W. Eagles, *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1986), 465.

<sup>6</sup> Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Florida: University of Florida, 2005), 4.

churches, businesses and homes, enforcing a reign of terror. They murdered, attacked and intimidated blacks and whites that stood up against this system of oppression. The KKK was especially active in the Southwest corner of Mississippi along with the tactics of the White Citizens Council.

This research will contribute to the body of oral histories available on the Mississippi movement. Part chronological and part topical, recording C.C. Bryant's work is an integral part of preserving the knowledge of Mississippi civil rights history. A large portion of my research will include personal interviews conducted by the author with C.C. Bryant, his daughter Gladys Bryant Jackson , his wife Emogene Bryant as well as McComb movement activist former SNCC Field Secretary Bob Moses and former SNCC Chairman Chuck McDew. The thesis is structured in chapters that deal with C.C. Bryant and his life, his leadership formation and decision to join the NAACP, voter registration in McComb and the case of *C.C. Bryant vs. Illinois Central Rail Road*.

## CHAPTER I: EARLY LIFE

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah 1:5

C.C. Bryant’s leadership in the Civil Rights movement can be traced to the influence of his family, faith formation, educational experience and affiliation in social organization. Bryant’s parents reared their children to value an education, be industrious and possess a strong work ethic. Faith formation in Christianity and his spiritual disciplines were core values that also influenced a young C.C. Bryant. Like many black mothers in the South, C.C. Bryant’s mother Ana Bryant raised her children in the Baptist faith tradition. His father Monroe Bryant believed blacks were equal to whites and should be treated with dignity and respect. C.C. Bryant along with two other siblings attended Prentiss Institute in Prentiss, Mississippi, a school modeled after Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute.

Curtis Conway Bryant, better known as C.C., was born in Walthall County, Mississippi, on January 15, 1917. He was the third child born to Monroe and Anna (Luter) Bryant. His mother Anna had been born on December 22, 1893 to a descendent of a former slave named Emily Jefferson. His father Monroe Bryant was born on December 10, 1890, to Charley and Easter (Magee) Bryant. Charley Bryant’s father Orange Bryant traveled from Virginia, originally settling the family in Summit, Mississippi. The family eventually purchased 220

acres from the Lampton Company of Magee's Creek outside of Tylertown, Mississippi.

Monroe and Ana (Luter) Bryant were married on February 26, 1911, at the residence of the bride's mother, Emily Jefferson. To the union of Anna and Monroe, the following children were born: Charley, Faredean, Selena, Curtis, James Victor (J.V.), Clayman, Eugene, Clementine, Gladys, Monroe Jr. and Percy.<sup>7</sup>

The Bryant family lived in Tylertown, Mississippi, until C. C. was five years of age. In 1922 they moved to Ponchatoula, Louisiana, for a period of six years. Ponchatoula was a booming town with two sawmills the Rasbone and the Williams. The Bryant's lived in the black section known as Webber Quarters. In addition to being designated as the black community, Weber Quarters had thriving black businesses that included barbershops, movie theaters, cafes and the Delphin Hall. The Delphin Hall provided the local entertainment for the black community; they scheduled boxing matches and musical performances. A racially mixed people known as the Freejacks operated Delphin Hall. Of black, Indian and white ancestry, the Freejacks appeared white and lived separately from the darker-skinned blacks in the community.

The Bryant family dwelled in a six-room house where they operated a business in the front two rooms and rented a portion of the home to boarders.<sup>8</sup> Tall in stature, and known for being neat in appearance, Monroe Bryant was a proud, strong black man who stood up in spite of racism—an attitude that he instilled in his children. An industrious man, Bryant laundered and pressed clothes for both black and white workers from the local sawmill. He also operated a small barbershop and sold the mill's scrap lumber in the black community. Every Friday was down to his father's shop to complain. Bryant recalls that his father was cutting hair that day and the white man told him, "You don't treat a white man's clothes like that." Monroe Bryant

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<sup>7</sup> Ana Luter Bryant presented the Roots of the Bryant Family typed report, McComb, MS, Bryant Family Reunion, July 4, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Griot Production Company, interview with C.C. Bryant, McComb, Mississippi, 1992 Tape 1.

threatened, “If he didn’t get away from there, he would beat his bump (butt).”<sup>9</sup>

Bryant remembers first witnessing the Ku Klux Klan: “The year was 1922, the Klan paraded through the all-black Webbers Quarters. They didn’t do anything but ride through the Negro quarters. I learned what that meant. But Daddy didn’t pay them no attention.” For some of the residents of the Webbers Quarters, the Klan posed a real threat, Bryant remembers, “An older black man suffered from a heart attack that night”<sup>10</sup>

When C.C. Bryant was not working in his father’s barbershop or delivering pressed laundry, he attended school. Education was very important for Ana Bryant’s children. For six months of the year, C.C. Bryant and his siblings attended a Rosenwald school. Charlie Smith was the principal of the school. Smith and Bryant’s mother Ana were schoolmates back in the town of Darbun, Mississippi. Post- Reconstruction governments instituted a segregated public education system across the South. Directed public dollars built and supported white schools while insufficient funds forced black citizens to seek financial assistance to build and maintain schools. The major contributors in supporting black education in the South came in the form of grants from white elite foundations like the Peabody, Slater, Jeanes, Phelps-Stokes, and the Rosenwald Funds.<sup>11</sup>

The Rosenwald rural school building program provided public education to southern blacks during the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Julius Rosenwald, a wealthy Jewish philanthropist, of Chicago, Illinois, contributed greatly to the success of the Sears and Roebuck Company. In Rosenwald Schools of the American South, historian Mary S. Hoffschwelle asserts, “Rosenwald envisioned the schools as tangible, lasting structures for African American uplift

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Minnie Finch, *The NAACP: Its Fight For Justice* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 31.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.rosenwaldschools.com> (accessed January 31, 2008).

that would promote black citizenship.”<sup>13</sup> Rosenwald worked closely with Tuskegee Institute founder Booker T. Washington to establish educational institutions for blacks. Washington’s gospel of self-help for black southerners emphasized economic advancement through vocational education without challenging racial segregation and disfranchisement. Booker T. Washington also believed that whites would be more receptive to listen to blacks who were polite, well-spoken and neat in appearance. Washington articulated in his famous Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition Speech that the surest way for blacks to gain equal social rights was to demonstrate "industry, thrift, intelligence and property." <sup>14</sup> Washington replied that confrontation would lead to disaster for the outnumbered blacks, and that cooperation with supportive whites was the only way to overcome pervasive racism in the long run. At the same time, he secretly funded litigation for civil rights cases, such as challenges to southern constitutions and laws that disfranchised blacks. The Tuskegee-style industrial vocational curriculum combined basic education skills in literacy and math with agriculture and trades programs for boys and home economics study for girls. <sup>15</sup> Washington believed that rural blacks deserved safe, purpose-built structures for teaching children. Most public southern black schools were dilapidated structures. County- funded schools for blacks were few if any. Churches, Masonic lodge halls and private buildings became classrooms. Rosenwald showed interest in supporting building programs by offering matching grants for the construction of YMCA buildings. It was Washington’s desire to improve the quality of education for Southern blacks in rural communities. Southern blacks could not afford the financial undertaking of constructing their own schools.

The Rosenwald grants for school construction relied on community in-kind support, land

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<sup>13</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), xiii.

<sup>14</sup> Booker T. Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work*, Library of Congress: Booker T. Washington, 1901) © This work is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. IT may be used freely by individuals for research, teaching and personal use as long as this statement of availability is included in the text.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.rosenwaldschools.com> (accessed January 31, 2008).



donations, building materials and labor. In addition, Rosenwald matched grants for teacher-training institutions that modeled the Tuskegee curriculum. As part of the Rosenwald grant requirements, schools were expected to meet standards for classroom size, length of school term, blackboards, desks and sanitary facilities. In addition to community in-kind support, the Rosenwald fund asked for financial support from white friends of the schools. Overall the personal contributions by white southerners constituted the smallest category of support for the Rosenwald schools. Each county school board was responsible for maintaining the new schools as part of the public schools system.<sup>16</sup> Rosenwald, already a supporter of Washington's Tuskegee Institute, believed at that time that by improving the conditions of black people you also improved the conditions of whites: "Negroes are one-tenth of our population. If we promote better citizenship among the Negroes not only are they improved, but our entire citizenship is benefited."<sup>17</sup> By 1928 one in every five rural schools for black students in the South was a Rosenwald school, and these schools housed one third of the region's rural black schoolchildren and teachers. At the program's conclusion in 1932 it had produced 4,977 new schools, 217 teacher's homes and 163 shop buildings .constructed at a total cost of \$28,408,520.00 to serve 663,615 students in 883 counties of 15 states.<sup>18</sup> Historian Mary Hoffschwelle acknowledges that the partnership of community members, Washington and Rosenwald, provided, "secured new spaces for historic African American tradition, new places invested with their cultural capital that correlated education with community advancement."<sup>19</sup> The Rosenwald schoolhouses became central meeting places in the black community providing adequate facilities for Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Charles H. Wilson, SR., M.A., *Education for Negroes in Mississippi Since 1910* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1947), 69.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.rosenwaldschools.com> (accessed January 31, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *the Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), xiii.

teachers' meetings, as well as a space for a mothers' club.<sup>20</sup>

Guided by his mother Ana Bryant, religion was also important in shaping a young C.C. Everyone in Ponchatoula worked six days a week with Sundays as a day of rest. On Sunday mornings C.C. would gather all of the community children and go to "old man" Lyman's house. Lyman was the presiding elder in the church and did not have children of his own; he prepared dinner and a young C.C. would preach. This early experience served C.C. well in later years as a Boy Scout leader and Sunday school teacher.

During the 1920s, Ponchatoula proved to be a busy lumber town that provided an opportunity for Monroe Bryant to care for his growing family. However, the two sawmills' constant cutting destroyed the forest, shutting down the mills in the town and forcing many residents to leave the area to earn a living. Around 1929, the Bryant family loaded their wagon and made the trip to McComb, Mississippi. The Bryant family worked at the Wardlaw family farm as sharecroppers until C.C.'s parents rented their own farm with the intentions of purchase in 1934. This farm was located six miles outside of McComb on the Holmesville Road. In addition to pressing clothes and cutting hair, Monroe Bryant raised corn, cotton, sugarcane, butter beans, peas, okra and raised cattle, hogs and chicken.

Even though segregated public places existed in the Jim Crow South, the Bryant family worked and lived side-by-side with their white neighbors. White and black families often helped and worked each other's farms in order to survive. Under the barter system, whites and blacks commonly exchanged goods, livestock and crops. C.C. Bryant recalls an incident between his father and a white neighbor. One time his father paid a man with bartered pigs. The man claimed Bryant did not pay him. Monroe Bryant never backed down to the white man. The white man and his son attacked Monroe Bryant. C.C. recalls the episode jokingly,

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.rosenwaldschools.com> (accessed January 31, 2008).

“My daddy beat him and his son. Daddy got back on his wagon and came home like nothing happened.”<sup>21</sup> Jim Crow created not just segregated spaces; it also perpetuated an attitude of racial superiority for southern whites. Monroe Bryant continued to stand up to the intimidation of white people. C.C. remembers another incident when a white insurance agent came to the Bryant house, “The man sat on the edge of my father’s bed instead of taking a chair. My daddy told him to get out of there. The white man thought he was superior to my daddy. I learned early what those things meant.”<sup>22</sup> March 11, 1936, C.C. completed his elementary education in Mississippi at Whites Town grammar school in Pike County and then later went onto high school at Prentiss Normal and Industrial Institute, a co-ed boarding school located in Prentiss, Mississippi, in Jefferson Davis County. Constructed with financial support from the Rosenwald fund, the school served as a junior college with two years of high school added in 1917.<sup>23</sup> At the age of nineteen, C.C., along with his brothers Charlie and Monroe were fortunate enough to attend Prentiss.

Education at Prentiss fostered a sense of African American heritage and pride coupled with a responsibility to community. Once considered by both black and white leaders as one of Mississippi’s finest black schools, Prentiss emulated the philosophy of Booker T. Washington’s model of black self- determination and white cooperation. A non-denominational Christian school, the institute attracted some of the best and brightest African American educators and lecturers in the country. The institute’s teachers were all college graduates with some pursuing graduate studies at prestigious northern universities.<sup>24</sup> Jonas Edward Johnson (J.E. Johnson) and his wife Bertha LaBranche Johnson founded Prentiss in

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<sup>21</sup> Griot Production Company, interview with C.C. Bryant, McComb, Mississippi, 1992 Tape 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Charles H. Wilson, SR., M.A., *Education for Negroes in Mississippi Since 1910* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1947), 470.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 471.

1907. Mississippi did not provide public education for all children until 1919, the last state in the union to do so, 116 years after Mississippi Congress had reserved every sixteenth section of the state's land for school purposes.<sup>25</sup> Professor Johnson was born in 1879, five miles outside of Magnolia, Mississippi, and graduated from Alcorn A. & M. College. He led the local Magnolia black public school as principal. In 1904 Professor Johnson married Bertha LaBranche. Known as a teacher-training school, Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute attracted a young Bertha. In addition to sharing the same birthday, the two campaigned across the country in support of industrial education in Mississippi. The institute grew from the purchase of a master's house, a few slave cabins, and twenty five acres of land to an academic building that doubled as the girls sleeping quarters, a boys' dormitory, laundry, two homes for teachers, and a trading building. The school provided a regular academic program of English, Algebra, History, Geometry and Science. The school offered vocational training in agriculture, auto mechanics, black smith, carpentry, home economics, shoe and leather work. The school also prepared students who could understand, engage and participate in the political process through civics instruction. Students were also equipped with starting, building and working for themselves in business education classes.<sup>26</sup>

In an example of the school's relationship to the white community, businessmen of the Prentiss Rotary Club attended graduation exercises in 1940. The white editor of the McComb Enterprise Daily newspaper, J.O. Emmerich, delivered the commencement address at Prentiss. Emmerich later wrote, "The cooperation extended by the people of Prentiss bespeaks the fine work that is being accomplished for they have for thirty- three years been the next door neighbors

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<sup>25</sup> William P. Randel, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Century of Infamy* (Philadelphia: Chilton company, 1965), 100.

<sup>26</sup> Charles H. Wilson, SR., M.A., *Education for Negroes in Mississippi Since 1910* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1947),470.

to the institute.”<sup>27</sup> White wealthy Mississippians also contributed to the advancement of the institute. Dr. Josh Garner, a historian at the University of Illinois, created a foundation in his will to materially aid the work of Prentiss. Emmerich considered this a great testament to the life work of the Johnsons.<sup>28</sup>

Professor Johnson and his wife suffered many financial hardships. Funding for the school came primarily by private subscriptions.<sup>29</sup> Students provided their own school supplies. Tuition was also offset by food rations. Students contributed bushels of corn, peas, potatoes and, very often, two or three hundred pounds of beef or pork to offset the cost of tuition. Without the continuation of such support, students could not remain enrolled in school. Like other historically black colleges like Tuskegee, Fisk and Hampton, Prentiss relied on funding from their traveling spiritual quartettes— well-trained musical groups that toured across the country. C.C.’s brother Charlie sang in the quartette, while C.C. found employment as a night watchman for the school. As a young student, C.C. became very engaged in social activities. Bryant served as president of his class, head of the debate team and president of the school’s Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Prentiss hosted both a YMCA and a Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) on campus.

Originally founded in London, England in 1844, the YMCA in America was founded in 1851, in Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>30</sup> The YMCA focused on character building and wholesome Christian living. Black YMCA chapters in the North assisted in improving living conditions to uplift the black race. Educated black elites welcomed the YMCA’s mission to develop the whole man—body, mind and spirit, particularly at a time when white society refused to

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<sup>27</sup> Editorial, McComb City Enterprise (Daily), May 3, 1940.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Charles H. Wilson, SR., M.A., Education for Negroes in Mississippi Since 1910 (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1947),469.

<sup>30</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YMCA> (Retrieved March 7, 2012).

recognize African-American men as equals.<sup>31</sup> They embraced the YMCA's character-building programs as a means for racial advancement and led in the establishment of separate black associations under black leadership. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, George Foster Peabody, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and Julius Rosenwald contributed matching funds to black YMCA fund-raising campaigns.<sup>32</sup>

During Reconstruction the YMCA began to encourage African Americans to organize their own branches in the South. The black associations founded during Reconstruction received very little financial and administrative support from the national YMCA.”<sup>33</sup> Henry Edwards Brown, a northern white abolitionist, was extremely successful in promoting the YMCA on black college and universities campuses in the South. Upon college graduation, Brown hoped these students would continue the mission of the association within their own community.<sup>34</sup> The YMCA and the YWCA provided a means for the furthering of the religious life of the student body by encouraging independent religious research, and religious services, by sponsoring discussions relating to the current problems of life, and by providing a means for participating in worthy philanthropic projects for community betterment, all in connection with the national project of the general organization.<sup>35</sup>

Following Reconstruction in the South, the YMCA desired to increase black participation in the association. In 1891 the YMCA appointed the association's first African American international director, William Hunton. Along with his assistant Jesse Moorland, Hunton traveled the North and South advocating for black semiautonomous YMCA's that promoted racial

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<sup>31</sup> Jesse E. Moorland, *The Young Men's Christian Association: A Potent Agency in the Salvation of Young Men* .d., box 126-27, no. 565, P.2, Jesse Moorland Papers, Moorland-Springam Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

<sup>32</sup> Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*3.

<sup>35</sup> Charles H. Wilson, SR., M.A., *Education for Negroes in Mississippi Since 1910* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1947),408.

solidarity and the betterment of the black race.<sup>36</sup> The YMCA participated in maintaining “separate but equal” spaces. This practice did not deter African American participation. Blacks joined the YMCA in large numbers, built their own associations and staffed them with black leadership. After organizing a strong black constituency, African Americans challenged Jim Crow segregation by pressuring the YMCA to desegregate all facilities.<sup>37</sup>

C.C. and his brother Charlie were fortunate to obtain some secondary education but eventually left Prentiss due to financial reasons. Continued family hardships would later deter Bryant’s pursuit of a college education. Bryant explains, “I was unable to continue a formal education because of family hardships due to the Great Depression. During the Depression it was hard to for anyone to get a job, let alone an education.”<sup>38</sup> When Bryant was 16 years old he worked in the McColgan Hotel Café as a bus boy to financially assist his family. Established in 1889 by the McColgan brothers, William and Hugh, the McColgan Hotel and Café, located along the rail lines, provided prominent lodging and counter service as well as a large dining area for private parties. X.A. Kramer, a civil engineer, purchased the establishment in the 1920.<sup>39</sup> There were not many employment opportunities for young black men, Bryant recalled: “The biggest things Negroes could do were to be a bellhop or a bus boy and I worked for 12 hours a day for \$3.50 a week.”<sup>40</sup> One day a waitress called the young C.C. Bryant a nigger;

Bryant quickly responded, “My name is Curtis and I want you to call me that from now on.”<sup>41</sup>

Forced to work menial jobs with little pay, the black staff took advantage of segregation at the McColgan café. Bryant remembered laughingly, “We could eat what we wanted. The white

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<sup>36</sup> Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*2.

<sup>38</sup> C.C. Bryant, interview by Gladys Bryant Jackson recording, McComb, Mississippi, March 23, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> [http://www.McCombmainstreet.com?mmsa\\_iframe\\_006\\_02.htm](http://www.McCombmainstreet.com?mmsa_iframe_006_02.htm) (Retrieved October 8, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Griot Production Company, interview with C.C. Bryant, McComb, Mississippi, 1992 Tape 1.

<sup>41</sup> C.C. Bryant, interview by Gladys Bryant Jackson recording, McComb, Mississippi, March 23, 2004

man had to pay for his dinner in the dining room but we ate what we wanted.”<sup>42</sup> Although Bryant made the best of his work situation, he also remembered violence associated with the McColgan hotel. Bryant recalled, “A lot of times they’d lynch a Negro and you wouldn’t know anything about it.” Noah Johnson’s son was the first person Bryant remembered being lynched: “They lynched him underground at the McColgan hotel.”<sup>43</sup> According to C.C. Bryant, quite often a lynching occurred because, “A white man was going with a Negro woman and she had a black man too. They’d shoot him (the black man) and a lot of times they wouldn’t lynch you, they’d shoot him.”<sup>44</sup>

After leaving Prentiss Institute, Bryant resumed high school education and received a diploma from South McComb High School in the Universal Separate District High School in Pike County--a graduate of the class of 1940. While attending Prentiss, Bryant studied the Bible and Greek and considered becoming a missionary but when he attended high school and fell in love with Emogene Gooden, “that took away all of that other stuff,” recalled Bryant.<sup>45</sup> In 1941, Bryant married his high school sweetheart Emogene Gooden at the home of the bride in the Baertown section of McComb. Emogene Gooden Bryant’s family ties would later have deeper implications for Bryant throughout his career as a Civil Rights activist. Emogene Gooden Bryant was a relative of McComb’s wealthy White family. Captain J. J. White, a noted member of McComb’s founding families, established a sawmill, an industrial building and the McComb Cotton Mills around 1904.<sup>46</sup> Captain J.J. White also fathered Emogene Gooden Bryant’s grandmother. The common practice of miscegenation between white men and black women in the South was often known throughout both black and white

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> C.C. Bryant Interview by Renee Poussaint with National Visionary Leadership Project, McComb, Mississippi 2008.

<sup>46</sup> <http://tourofMcComb.com/3.html> (Retrieved June 12, 2012).



communities but not openly acknowledged. Public acknowledgement of mixed-race relations was considered a crime punishable under Jim Crow law. In a 2008 interview conducted by the National Visionary Leadership Project, Bryant openly reveals the family connection of his wife, “Something they don’t talk about, my wife’s grandmother (Leila Granberry Crawford) was a White, kin to the Whites, Governor White. She looked just like him.”<sup>47</sup>

The intimate details surrounding the relations between the married Captain J.J. White and an African American or possibly biracial woman named Dale Granberry are uncertain. White owned the private Liberty-White rail line that hauled lumber between Amite County, McComb and Columbia, Mississippi. Dale Granberry lived in Columbia, Mississippi, where the two most likely came in contact. A relationship between Dale Granberry and J.J. White produced a daughter named Leila. Although white in complexion and eyes of blue, Leila Granberry lived as a black woman. The Jim Crow law of hypo descent, also known as the one-drop black blood rule, designated and relegated bi-racial people as black. The familial relationship between Leila Granberry and the White family may never be fully understood but it cannot be denied in the memory of Emogene Bryant. As a young child, Emogene Bryant recalls fond memories of her grandmother, Leila Granberry. She worked and lived at the White family’s McComb home as a cook with separate living quarters on the property. When Emogene Bryant’s mother Sylvia was at work, Emogene and her younger brother Robert Lee stayed with their grandmother Leila Granberry. As children, Emogene and Robert Lee spent plenty of time playing with Robert and Helen Brumfield, the white grandchildren of Captain J.J. White. In his adult life Robert Brumfield became a McComb Judge and provided legal advice to Emogene and C.C. Bryant.

When Leila Granberry’s half-brother Hugh L. White became Governor of Mississippi from 1936- 1956, Granberry continued working as his personal cook. Mississippi historians’ note

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<sup>47</sup> C.C. Bryant Interview by Renee Poussaint with National Visionary Leadership Project, McComb, Mississippi 2008

that White was perhaps the wealthiest governor in Mississippi history in modern times and also possibly the largest; the Governor White often boasted of his voracious appetite.<sup>48</sup>

The early teachings, experiences and relationships guided Bryant's commitment to uplift the conditions of his people. Bryant's foundational years in the black community of Ponchatoula, Louisiana, nurtured the tradition and values of the African American culture. His formative years at Prentiss honed his skills for leadership in the public sphere. As a young adult, Bryant's belief in God ordered his steps.

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<sup>48</sup><http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/265/index.php?s=extra&id=145> (Retrieved June 12, 2012).

## CHAPTER II: LEADERSHP AND JOINING THE NAACP

“Learn to do good; seek justice, relieve the oppressed...” Isaiah 1:17 (KJV)

W.E.B Du Bois and Booker T. Washington emerged as the two most influential figures of black leadership. Du Bois desired to channel black frustration and anger as a catalyst for change, while Washington saw racial progress as a gradual compromise. Washington advocated for vocational training for southern blacks as the first step in creating self-sufficient black communities. Washington believed a well-trained labor force would open up more economic resources and networks within the black community. The NAACP knew it would take more than the accomodationist approach of Booker T. Washington to ensure racial advancement for blacks; it would take the involvement of political pressure to turn the tide against disenfranchisement.<sup>49</sup> During the organization’s early years the NAACP fought to abolish lynching; advocate for equal education for all children; create equal access to public institutions of higher learning and enforce protection of every American citizen’s right to vote, especially for Negroes in the Deep South.<sup>50</sup> After Reconstruction, through legislative actions, blacks in the South had become disfranchised from their right to vote. The Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution secured the right to vote for blacks, but through the use of poll taxes, real property ownership laws, and voter registration requirements, Southern blacks were barred from engaging in the political process. Since its inception the NAACP recognized

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<sup>49</sup> Langston Hughes, *Fight For Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (New York: Norton & Company, Inc. 1962), 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

“there could be no solution to the race problem until the blacks in the South could be free to cast an independent and intelligent vote.”<sup>51</sup> Bryant’s educational experience at Prentiss reflected the philosophies of both W.E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington in creating racial advancement for black Americans. W.E. B. Dubois believed the talented ten percent of the black race would rise to the top of leadership, train and uplift their people out of poverty and ignorance while battling discrimination. Booker T. Washington’s famous Atlanta Compromise speech encouraged blacks to maintain friendly relations with southern whites by, “Casting down your bucket where you are.... making friends in every manly way of the people of all races, by whom you are surrounded.”<sup>52</sup> Prentiss Institute founders Bertha and J.E. Johnson modeled the leadership of Booker T. Washington and maintained cooperative relations with influential white Mississippians.

After serving World War II, Bryant’s brothers, Eugene and J.V., migrated to northern cities in the hope of acquiring better opportunities for employment and to escape the Jim Crow south. Unable to serve in the military for medical reasons, Bryant remained in his home state of Mississippi. The knowledge and skills acquired from Prentiss Institute propelled Bryant to serve in a leadership role of the NAACP. Experience as the president of the school’s debate team developed Bryant’s oratory skills for public speaking. Bryant’s membership in the YMCA Prentiss Institute chapter prepared him for leadership. The YMCA’s mission to provide a strong model for character building based on wholesome Christian living aligned with Bryant’s faith belief. Bryant never drank alcohol or smoked a cigarette in his life. The YMCA emphasized a community based organizing approach. Bryant’s strong work ethic, Christian faith, and passion for learning were values he learned at an early age from his parents.

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<sup>51</sup> Minnie Finch, *The NAACP: Its Fight For Justice* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1981), 28.

<sup>52</sup> Louis R. Harlan, ed., *the Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 583-587.

Christianity shaped Bryant's spiritual identity; part of his daily faith practice included studying and knowing his scripture. Bryant's commitments to family, God and his fellow man kept him involved in the life of his church community. C.C. Bryant worshipped at Sweet Home Missionary Baptist Church in Whitestown. Bryant's wife Emogene grew up as a member of Society Hill Missionary Baptist church. The couple raised their two children, Gladys Jean Bryant and Curtis Conway Bryant, Junior in Society Hill Missionary Baptist Church in McComb's black Baertown community. Society Hill Missionary Baptist Church played a significant role during the peak of the McComb movement. Bryant served as a disciple of Christ, as a Sunday school teacher, deacon and a member of the church board of directors. Bryant worked with youth as a Boy Scout leader instilling the values of citizenship, leadership and religious development.

Social organizations like the Masons, the Elks, American Legion and the Eastern Stars, were also active in McComb. Although the Freemasons in the United States are not considered a religious organization, they believed in God—as the Great Architect of the Universe.<sup>53</sup> Bryant had a great deal of pride as a Mason, obtaining the highest obtainable status of Master Mason of the Third Degree. In 1791 a freed slave named Prince Hall had established the black fraternal organization of Masons. After Hall's death in 1807, the African American lodges were named after him.<sup>54</sup> Racially segregated Masonic lodges remained in existence until the nineteen sixties when several mainstream white lodges entered into visiting relations with Prince Hall Masonic lodges.<sup>55</sup>

Located in the southwest corner of the Mississippi, McComb, also known as the Camellia City for its beautiful flowering plants, is the largest city in Pike County. Founded in 1871, it was

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<sup>53</sup> Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World's Most Powerful Secret Society* (New York: Arcade Publishing Company, 2011), 264.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

named for railroad president Colonel Henry Simpson McComb. New Orleans was the major port city for Midwest commerce and the freight lines between Jackson and New Orleans were essential. Colonel Henry Simpson McComb originally wanted to name the city “Elizabethtown” in honor of his wife but his friends insisted he accept the honor.<sup>56</sup> Colonel Henry Simpson McComb believed in building the company’s shops in small towns, away from congested cities. He believed building maintenance shops in small areas removed the worker from the higher costs of living in cities and the ready access to strong drink.<sup>57</sup> Colonel McComb selected the city with the provision that there would never be an open licensed saloon in the city.<sup>58</sup>

The Illinois Central Railroad was the primary employer of blacks and whites well into the nineteen sixties.<sup>59</sup> The Illinois Central had demographic significance as well, for its tracks neatly separated McComb’s 9,000 whites from its 4,000 black residents.<sup>60</sup> In the town’s early years, blacks also found employment in the McComb icehouse and the McColgan Hotel and Café, owned by brothers William and Hugh McColgan and sawmills owned by J.J. White. In 1926, Xavier A. Kramer, a civil engineer and wealthy business owner in nearby Magnolia, purchased a large tract of property that would later be known as Kramertown.<sup>61</sup> Kramer later served several terms as mayor, and purchased the realty interests in the hotel and the ice plant from the McColgan Brothers. Kramer established cotton warehouses, a milk processing plant, and helped to diversify the agriculture of the area.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to the working-class railroad employees, McComb boasted a strong black professional population. Black insurance agents, ministers, dry cleaners, barbers, beauticians, restaurant owners, teachers, nurses, general contractors, mortuary operators and a physician

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<sup>56</sup> McComb’s Centennial Edition, 1872-1972: Enterprise –Journal, McComb, Mississippi, March 31, 1972.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Townsend Davis, *Weary Feet Rested Souls* (New York: Norton & Co., 1998), 230.

<sup>60</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1995), 100.

<sup>61</sup> McComb’s Centennial Edition, 1872-1972: Enterprise-Journal, McComb, Mississippi, March 31, 1972.

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.McCombms.com/history.html> (Retrieved October 9, 2010).

were among the black middle class. Self-employed blacks with independent means, as described by former southern field secretary for the NAACP Vernon Jordan, “were the backbone of the old NAACP.”<sup>63</sup> This group wielded great financial independence even in the Jim Crow South because whites refused to provide professional services to African Americans. If you did not work in a professional occupation or were not self-employed, there were limited job options for black women beyond domestic work for white families.

C.C. Bryant never wanted his wife Emogene to work in any white man’s kitchen, partly because she had a family of her own and more importantly because of the sexual, emotional and physical vulnerability of black women in white households. Content with being a homemaker, Emogene Bryant also participated in the life of her church, community and her children. She volunteered as a member of the P.T.A. as well as several social clubs and organizations in the black McComb social circle. Like white debutante societies, the black Oloridae Club schooled the middle class young ladies of McComb in etiquette, showcased their talents, nurtured career aspirations and introduced them to the educated social circle. On December 30, 1960, the Oloridae Club presented its Black Debutante coterie of McComb and Summit at the annual ball.<sup>64</sup> Gladys Bryant was among the debutantes preparing for college with aspirations in law and business. After her children were young adults, Emogene Bryant worked for the black-owned Universal Life Insurance Company as an insurance agent.

Several African American neighborhoods, Baertown, Algiers, Summit, Burglund, Morgan Town and Whites Town, comprised the community of McComb. Bryant’s daughter Gladys (Bryant) Jackson recalled the black McComb neighborhood of Baertown as a small community of about 500 or 600 people. Bryant and his family lived in Baertown; the next

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<sup>63</sup> Pat Watters, *Down to Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), 30.

<sup>64</sup> McComb Enterprise Journal, Friday, December 16, 1960.

closest community was Algiers and they all had a working relationship. Gladys and Curtis Bryant Junior attended school in Baertown at the crowded concrete Universal Elementary building.<sup>65</sup> All the black kids around Baertown and Algiers attended the same elementary school, recalls Gladys Bryant Jackson: “We had lots of activities at the school. Our churches were very well connected.”<sup>66</sup>

The C.C. Bryant family was extremely active in the life of their church, Society Hill Missionary Baptist Church. The cornerstone of the black community, the church has long been considered a safe meeting place where blacks could speak freely and openly where ministers held a position of authority. Beyond the significance of worship service, the church was also a gathering place to share news and information as well as participate in social events. Out of the black church grew the fraternal, social and civic organizations with the church sometimes serving as a meeting place.<sup>67</sup> Church social functions were often community events. Funerals were considered social occasions so much so that NAACP chapters have been organized after funerals.<sup>68</sup> There were mostly Baptist churches in the McComb community with the exception of a few Methodist and Pentecostal churches. Congregations typically combined fellowship activities especially for Christmas and Easter pageants. Gladys (Bryant) Jackson recalls: “We often attended functions at each church. Community activities, I can remember doing community organizational kinds of things, where families would get together.”<sup>69</sup> Extended families would come together for Easter Sunday service; it was a time for dressing in one’s best. Gladys Bryant Jackson recollects about the pride people took in their Sunday attire: “Mothers would get you all dressed up and you wore your hats and handbags and of course that

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<sup>65</sup> Four New Schools Are in Use, McComb Enterprise Journal, September 5, 1961.

<sup>66</sup> Gladys Bryant Jackson, interview by Author, McComb, Mississippi, October 31, 2004.

<sup>67</sup> Langston Hughes, *Fight For Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (NEW York: Norton & Company, Inc. 1962), 16.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Gladys Bryant Jackson, interview by Author, McComb, Mississippi, October 31, 2004.



southern tradition of wearing white gloves.”<sup>70</sup> The feeling of community was extremely important to the black folk of McComb. McComb’s black residents also enjoyed social activities after Sunday service. Baseball was a popular sport and people would get together on weekends and play baseball and have picnics. Gladys Bryant Jackson reminisced that Sunday afternoons was a time for “families to get together and go to Big Mama’s house. We would go after church and stay late into the night.”<sup>71</sup>

Sunday church services was not the only social space of interaction; front yards and porches were regular gathering spots for friends and neighbors in the Baertown section of McComb. People got together for baseball games, rent parties, fish fries and radio broadcast events. The Bryant’s yard hosted many social gatherings, especially during a radio broadcast of a Joe Lewis boxing match. Gladys Bryant Jackson recalls, “Not everybody had a radio back then. People would come, bring food and coffee and the kids would play in the yard. When Joe Lewis landed a punch everybody would get excited.” In the Jim Crow South, blacks created their own spaces and forms of entertainment. If it was not a boxing match, there were plenty of rent parties, fish fries and card parties to bring friends and neighbors together. Gladys Bryant Jackson remembers, “It was the only way we could get together and socialize.”<sup>72</sup>

Bryant’s barbershop was another popular Baertown meeting space. During the week C.C. Bryant worked as a crane operator for the Illinois Central Railroad. On the weekends, Bryant, a licensed barber, along with his younger brother Monroe operated a small shop adjacent to his home on Venable Street. From Thursdays afternoons until late Saturday nights a steady stream of customers received a cut and shave at Bryant’s location. It was not uncommon for Bryant’s wife Emogene and their children to frequent the shop for visits and chat with friends. Friday

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

nights attracted the regular customers. Folks came by the shop just to hang around and socialize. Mama Johnnie's café, a popular local dining spot, served up fish dinners and seafood gumbo. Gladys Bryant Jackson recalls, "Whoever was at the barbershop would go get fish from Mama Johnnie's café and everybody would come by the shop."<sup>73</sup>

In addition to cutting hair, Bryant recruited clients and conducted the business of the NAACP from his barbershop. SNCC activist Chuck McDew describes Bryant's barbershop in this way: "more than cutting of hair took place there. Mr. Bryant was the center of information about what was going on in the outside world...Everything discussed in that town was passed through the barbershop."<sup>74</sup> As a railroad worker Bryant had easy access to black news that was censored in Mississippi and his barbershop served as a hub of information. The Pittsburgh Courier, Chicago Defender, Ebony, Jet and the NAACP's Crisis magazines raised the racial consciousness of black readers. Time magazine and the New York Times newspaper informed customers of current events and political points of view. Black Railroad porters' maintained an underground communication network between northern and southern blacks. The segregated space of the black barbershop cultivated the ironic situation in which a "resourceful minority could often be better informed regarding national global politics than were the wealthier, privileged whites managing state institutions and enforcing segregation."<sup>75</sup>

In addition to reading black publications, the rise of black consciousness heightened at the end of World War II. According to historian John Dittmer in, *Local People: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, the first NAACP branch had been established in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1918. However the NAACP did not become a viable presence in Mississippi until after

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Chuck McDew, interview by Author, Oxford, Mississippi, March 29, 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi T.V., 1959-1969* (Duke University Press, 2004), 152-153.

World War II.<sup>76</sup> Returning veterans dissatisfied with living under the oppression of Jim Crow saw the mission of NAACP as a means of gaining racial inclusion. In an effort to grow Mississippi's NAACP presence, Carsie A. Hall, president of the Jackson, Mississippi, NAACP branch, recommended membership consideration on behalf of residents in Pike County to Ella Baker, NAACP national director of branches. In a letter written by Hall, he reported, "24 people attended a meeting expressing their desire to start a branch. I know of your desire to have at least 50 persons to organize a branch but it is my thinking that the National office will not go wrong in granting a charter to the good people of McComb, Mississippi."<sup>77</sup> In response to the request for a charter, Ella Baker responded that the application would officially be presented to the National Board of Directors at its regular meeting. Until that time the McComb branch was authorized by Ella Baker to serve as a regular unit of the association.<sup>78</sup> On November 27, 1944, sixty-three signing members with a total of \$157 in collected fees filed an application for charter for a McComb, Mississippi NAACP branch. They were housewives, auto mechanics, machinists' helpers, beauty operators, janitors, firemen, and farmers, roundhouse laborers, preachers and warehouse workers. Bryant's brother-in law, Ned Thomas, husband to Selena Bryant, was a charter member.<sup>79</sup> On December 11, 1944; the national office approved the charter. Under the direction of the national office, each organized local committee would apply for branch membership, with the approval of the Board of Directors. This charter could be suspended or revoked by the Board of Directors of the Association if the board deemed it for the best interest of the Association.

The following incident was a major decision in Bryant accepting the post as branch

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<sup>76</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: Univ. Of Illinois, 1995), 29.

<sup>77</sup> Correspondence from NAACP Branch Files, Library of Congress, Box C97.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> McComb NAACP Branch 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary program, December 10, 1994.

president. While walking home from church one night, he came upon two policemen beating a young black man, who at first appeared to be drunk. It quickly became clear to Bryant that this man was not drunk but had a physical condition that made it difficult to stand up straight. Bryant intervened and asked the officers to “stop beating him like that!” Their reply was “shut up or we’ll beat you.” Bryant then stated, “No, you won’t beat me. This was 1954”.<sup>80</sup> Bryant was an active member of the NAACP branch at this time, and decided it was his responsibility to fight this kind of abuse, injustice and discrimination.

Joseph Parham was the first NAACP McComb Pike County branch president serving from 1944 - 1954 before resigning at 90 years of age. As an educator Joseph Parham’s wife taught C.C. Bryant and his children Gladys and Curtis Jr. Jerry Francis Gibson served as first vice president, Argentine Johnson was the first secretary and Webb Owen was the first membership chairperson. Prior to Bryant taking the post as president, Joseph Parham was an integral part of the NAACP’s existence in McComb. The branch struggled with increasing its membership and was often reminded by Lucille Black, national NAACP secretary. In a letter dated October 11, 1948, Black wrote to branch McComb Pike County NAACP president Joseph Parham inquiring about new membership. “I notice that your branch has sent in only twenty members to date towards its goal of 150 members. Please let me know what is being done to improve your membership before the close of the year. During 1947 we received 51 memberships from the branch office and I certainly don’t want you to fall below that number in 1948.”<sup>81</sup> The national office of the NAACP focused on the judicial challenge of “rules that infringed on the constitutional rights so often breached by state or local laws and preventing the unfair

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<sup>80</sup> C.C. Bryant interview by Gladys Bryant Jackson. Tape Recording. McComb, Mississippi, March 23, 2004.

<sup>81</sup> Correspondence from NAACP Branch Files, Library of Congress, Box C97.

enforcement of local statutes in regards to Negroes.”<sup>82</sup> Through its magazine publication *The Crisis*, mass meetings and a speaker’s bureau, the NAACP used mass communication “to create a climate of public opinion in favor of equal rights and human brotherhood.”<sup>83</sup> The national NAACP office encouraged Negroes to qualify for voting and to vote.<sup>84</sup> Branch leadership concentrated on membership drives and voter registration.

Branches were responsible for electing their own officers including a president, a vice president, an executive secretary and treasurer; with the exception of the executive secretary, officers served in a voluntary capacity without a salary. The large amount of correspondence between the National Office, regional offices and the state conferences justified a salary for the position of the executive secretary. The responsibility of the president encompassed the role of chief executive officer or administrator. Requirement to fulfill this role required the individual be a good organizer, director, coordinator, reporter and financier.<sup>85</sup> In addition to the president, vice president, executive secretary and treasurer, chairmen of any standing committee, as well as the president of the youth council, comprised the Executive Committee. Youth Council membership was open to any young person between twelve and twenty-five years of age.<sup>86</sup> Annual budgets, major policies and community programs affecting the branch were entrusted to the power of the Executive Committee.<sup>87</sup>

The Pike County NAACP elected Bryant president in 1954, at a time he describes as being “very, very dangerous, [when] no one [else] would take the position.”<sup>88</sup> He served as first vice

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>84</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944) p.822 Cf. also Ralph Bunch, “The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organization,” “Research Memorandum Book No. 1, prepared for the Carnegie Myrdal Study, p.45.

<sup>85</sup> Warren D. St. James, Ph.D. *The NAACP: A Case Study in Pressure Groups*, (New York: Exposition Press, 1958), 78.

<sup>86</sup> NAACP Branch Constitution, Article VI.

<sup>87</sup> NAACP Branch Constitution, Article III.

<sup>88</sup> C.C. Bryant, interview by Author, McComb, Mississippi, July 26, 2004.

president of the State chapter under the leadership of field secretary Medgar Evers and state president Aaron Henry, both of whom became close friends and colleagues. Bryant, unlike Medgar Evers, Amzie Moore and Aaron Henry, was not among the new breed of returning African American WWII veterans. Bryant quickly pulled in the support of other NAACP members. One of the first in line was Web Owens, branch membership campaign chairman. In 1955, after years of slow membership growth, the national office recognized the work of Web Owens and Bryant to increase membership and commended the branch with merit certificates<sup>89</sup>. Owens also worked for the Illinois Central Railroad as a porter. Bob Moses and members of SNCC would fondly call Owens as “Super Cool Daddy” for being a smart, slim, cigar- smoking, cane carrying, sharp-dressing gregarious man liked and trusted by all.<sup>90</sup> Owens’ affiliation with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters rallied support to the local NAACP branch. The Supreme Court victory case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* reenergized the movement—blacks found new courage and confidence in the NAACP. Other independent McComb black business owners like Ernest Nobles, a World War II veteran who operated a successful dry-cleaning business, and Aylene Quinn, owner of South of the Border cafe restaurant, continued their support of Bryant and the NAACP.<sup>91</sup> The 1955 campaign led by Web Owens and recently elected president C.C. Bryant boosted NAACP membership by over 50 percent, surpassing the goal of 100 dues-paying members.”<sup>92</sup> An August 8, 1956

letter to Beulah Owens McComb branch secretary, from Lucille Black offered words of encouragement: “It was good to hear from you and to learn that the McComb branch is still carrying on its local program despite the many pressures against our people.”<sup>93</sup>

Despite Bryant’s success in collecting membership dues, not all of McComb’s black community was so accepting of the mission of the NAACP. Bryant experienced varying degrees of support

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<sup>89</sup> NAACP Branch Files, Library of Congress Box C97.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Moses and Charles Cobb, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 43.

<sup>91</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois, 1995), 101.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>93</sup> NAACP Branch Files, Library of Congress, Box C97.

from the black church. Society Hill Missionary Baptist Church’s pastor Reverend Ned Taylor actively participated in the McComb NAACP. Bryant recalled during the nineteen fifties, “Many times I walked down streets of McComb and the black leadership –ministers, whatever—would move to the other side. They were afraid to do anything.”<sup>94</sup> Some pastors were supportive of the NAACP and “allowed meetings at their churches and the distribution of information while others were intimidated.”<sup>95</sup> As a kid Bryant’s daughter Gladys can recall cutting remarks from schoolmates and teachers; “I often had kids tease me because my dad was the president of the branch; they would call him Mr. NAACP. I don’t know whether it was out of jest or not understanding, or just recognizing that he had taken on this challenge but not knowing perhaps how serious and how important it was in our community.”<sup>96</sup> For black teachers in the South, public support of the NAACP quite often would result in some form of reprisal. Distrust existed between teachers and the NAACP, “who were not only hesitant to register themselves but might report political activities to their white superiors.”<sup>97</sup>

As head of the McComb Pike County NAACP branch, Bryant worked on developing leadership skills through NAACP training programs. NAACP Branches were to assume responsibility for the general welfare of the Negro population of the particular locality. Local NAACP branches were expected to check on “biased and discriminatory legislation, biased and discriminatory administration of the law, and injustice in the courts.”<sup>98</sup> In 1951, Ruby Hurley began an assignment as the NAACP regional coordinator to assist membership drive efforts in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee. Hurley facilitated workshops on local issues, political

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<sup>94</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois, 1995), 73.

<sup>95</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 875. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 4-12.

<sup>96</sup> Gladys Bryant Jackson, interview by Author, McComb, Mississippi, October 31, 2004.

<sup>97</sup> Manfred Berg, “Ticket to Freedom”: *The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 147.

<sup>98</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944) p. 822 Cf. also Ralph Bunch, “The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organization,” *Research Memorandum Book No. 1*, prepared for the Carnegie Myrdal Study, p.45.

action, current legal cases and strategies for conducting membership campaigns for small and large groups, statewide and regional meetings. The local people had the passion but lacked the experience in creating action. Hurley later recalled, “They knew things weren’t right but didn’t know to go about effecting change.”<sup>99</sup> By 1958, Hurley’s efforts focused more attention on community organizing by making recruitment efforts more accessible to community people—area businesses and gathering spots, churches, fraternities, sororities, barber shops and beauty shops, professionals, doctors and dentists. Leadership would spring out of the community versus being directed from the national office.

In addition to working on local issues pertinent to branch activity, the NAACP was equally committed to following and influencing national legislation. The NAACP “employs in each branch of Congress a man whose duty it is to keep it informed by mail and telegram of all proceedings affecting colored people.”<sup>100</sup> Clarence Mitchell served as the director of the Washington Bureau of the NAACP from 1950-1978. A policy maker lobbyist, Mitchell represented the NAACP’s political interest on Capitol Hill by seeking enforcement of the Constitution to protect the rights of African Americans. When Mitchell became the head of the NAACP’s Washington Bureau, he walked the halls of the Senate with the nation’s policymakers, joking and chatting with them but forever arguing that, “they make the Constitution a reality for blacks.”<sup>101</sup> At the peak of his influence in 1965, Mitchell was considered among the most successful lobbyists in U.S. history – a profession that dates back before the founding of the United States of America when colonies kept representatives in London.

NAACP journalist and director of public relations, Henry Lee Moon analyzed the history

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<sup>99</sup> Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: New Press, 2009), 400.

<sup>100</sup> Denton L. Laws, *Lion in the Lobby: Clarence Mitchell, Jr.’s Struggle for the Passage of the Civil Rights Law*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), xvii. .

<sup>101</sup> Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years 1954-1965*, ( New York: Penguin Press, 1987), 257.



and challenges of voting in the black community in a 1948 book, *Balance of Power: the Negro Vote*. Moon asserted that it was not enough for blacks to have access to the ballot but the vote was an instrument to eradicate Jim Crow in all phases of American life.... as a national organization with nearly half-a-million members, we should, with a realistic and aggressive program, be able to develop and organize an army of 50,000 men and women to mobilize our political resources in communities throughout the nation and an army to back up our Secretary and the Washington Bureau when they are making demands for our legislative program...Once we have really mobilized our full political potential, we will get the kind of government action we need, on the local and state levels as well as in the national affairs...Unfortunately, the effective job of mobilizing the Negro vote is not now being done by an organization on national scale. The field is wide open for the NAACP to step into leadership.<sup>102</sup>

Following the *Brown* Supreme Court decision, the NAACP, along with other Civil Rights organizations, galvanized to protect the voting rights of African Americans, especially in southern states. In opposition to *Brown* ninety-nine southern senators signed the “Southern Manifesto” in March of 1956 in resistance to integration in public places. Across southern states, the enforcement of the landmark decision escalated in violence and assaults against blacks. In her annual 1956 report Ruby Hurley concluded that “until Congress and the Federal Government take positive action to insure for Negroes the unhampered right to register and vote, our goal in this area will be difficult to reach.”<sup>103</sup> Encouraged by the success of the *Brown* decision, voter registration continued to be the goal of the national NAACP organization. The active Mississippi NAACP branches conducted classes to familiarize blacks

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<sup>102</sup> Manfred Berg, “Ticket to Freedom: : The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 144. Moon, “What NAACP Political Action Can Accomplish,” delivered on June 24, 1948 to the annual conference, copy in NAACP Records IIA 452.

<sup>103</sup> Manfred Berg, “Ticket to Freedom: : The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 157.

with the State Constitution and thereby qualify them to vote. In 1956, the NAACP's five regional Mississippi Vice Presidents -- Charles R. Darden, Gus Courts, Amzie Moore, E.W. Steptoe and C.C. Bryant -- went to Washington, DC, to lobby for the passage of 1957 Civil Rights bill. Bryant recalled, "Clarence Mitchell taught us how to approach politicians; these are skills we learned from him."<sup>104</sup> Concerned with the securing the right to vote under the fourteenth amendment, the NAACP and other Civil Rights organizations documented evidence of discriminatory practices, such as administration of literacy and comprehension tests, poll taxes and other means. The 1957 Civil Rights Act was to ensure that all Americans could exercise their right to vote. States monitored and established rules for voter registration and elections and the federal government found an oversight role in ensuring that citizens could exercise the constitutional right to vote for federal officers, such as the president, vice-president, and Congress. A clause was added to the 1957 Civil Rights Act that made it a federal crime to interfere with voting.

The NAACP found hope in the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act. The national NAACP office prepared to ramp up voter registration activities across the South. Branch director Gloster Current requested additional training and funds to support the initiative. NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers believed it created "a solid foundation upon which we can build a better Mississippi for the Negro as well as the whites."<sup>105</sup> The national NAACP office expected branches to conduct campaigns that engaged their communities to qualify and exercise the right to vote.

Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act 1957, NAACP Washington Bureau director, Clarence Mitchell arrived in Mississippi to instruct branch NAACP leadership in direct

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<sup>104</sup> C.C. Bryant interview by Gladys Bryant Jackson. Tape Recording. McComb, Mississippi, March 23, 2004.

<sup>105</sup> Reports by Medgar Ever 14 November and 11 , December 1957, Records III C246.

lobbying. C.C. Bryant recalled, “We learned how the Senators voted on issues. We voted for legislation to end the Lynch bill and Jim Crow laws, House bills and Senate bills.”<sup>106</sup> The NAACP was preparing leadership to understand and follow Congressional voting records on issues that affected the welfare of African American communities. It was not enough to register African Americans to vote but to know and understand the issues they were voting on. The national office of the NAACP left the responsibility of voter registration and education to the responsibility of local branches. Lasting only a few weeks, voter registration drives created waves of community support and excitement as long as the threat of violent repression was relatively low.<sup>107</sup> The registration drives attracted NAACP members who were eager to engage in practical work but had limited time and resources and branches lacked the skills and training to successfully plan and conduct campaigns, according to historian Manfred Berg.<sup>108</sup> The NAACP produced a manual to instruct branches on planning voter registration campaigns as well as information on addressing political questions. Branches were expected to establish a voting committee to coordinate activities; leaflets, mass meetings, concerts, radio announcements and black press were part of the marketing campaigns. Community outreach through door-to-door canvassing became essential in making contact with community members. Buy in at the community level through partnerships with churches, schools and fraternal organizations provided space for voter registration schools. Many of these tactics worked well in northern cities, but in the rural South, word of mouth was the best endorsement where folks may not have transportation, telephones or access to black radio stations or the press. Networks of community people involved in church work and benevolent associations

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<sup>106</sup> C.C. Bryant interview by Gladys Bryant Jackson. Tape Recording. McComb, Mississippi, March 23, 2004

<sup>107</sup> Manfred Berg interview with Mr. W. C. Patton, Birmingham, Alabama, October 20, 1944.

<sup>108</sup> Manfred Berg, “Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 143.

were the lifelines to communities.<sup>109</sup> Regional offices had established paid field secretaries to provide support and coordinate efforts between the national headquarters and branches.

Medgar Evers became the Mississippi NAACP field secretary on November 24, 1954, with an office in Jackson, Mississippi.<sup>110</sup> Evers worked closely with Bryant to build up branch support. Evers frequented the Bryant home often enjoying a meal at the Bryant dinner table or staying as an overnight guest if it was too late to drive the 90 miles back to Jackson.

In addition to the voter registration drives, Bryant, along with Mississippi branch presidents, launched letter writing campaigns to senators such as John C. Stennis, advocating for Civil Rights legislation, acknowledging the right to vote for the state's 497,000 eligible voting black population, as well as protesting the brutal and unjustified killings and sentencing of Mississippi blacks.<sup>111</sup> One such case involved the kidnapping and lynching of Mack Charles Parker, a Negro accused of the rape of a white woman in Pearl River County. Before Parker could stand trial, he was taken from his jail cell by a mob, beaten, shot and his body dumped in the Pearl River.<sup>112</sup> In a letter to Senator John C. Stennis from Mississippi State Conference NAACP president Charles R. Darden stated that no one was ever brought to justice. Despite an investigation conducted by FBI agents, state and county officials dismissed the evidence as "Hear Say".<sup>113</sup>

Change did come to Mississippi in the summer of 1960 when a young math teacher named Robert Parris Moses from New York visited the Mississippi Delta. Compelled by the images of the non-violent sit-in demonstrations by students in the south, Moses headed to Newport News, Virginia, to participate in the activism. While in Newport News, Moses made his

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 160.

<sup>111</sup> C.S. Darden MS NAACP State Conference President Letter to Senator John C. Stennis, February 18, 1960. NAACP Branch Notes, Library of Congress.

<sup>112</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mack\\_Charles\\_Parker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mack_Charles_Parker), Retrieved November 17, 2010.

<sup>113</sup> Letter to Senator John C. Stennis from C.R. Darden, Mississippi NAACP State Conference President.

first contact with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and worked throughout the summer as a staff member with fellow Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee member Jane Stembridge. Guided by the leadership of former NAACP staffer Ella Baker, SNCC was in the planning phase for a fall conference, bringing together leadership from the Deep South.

Prepared with a list of key contacts Moses agreed to make an exploratory trip to recruit potential attendees.<sup>114</sup> Moses first met NAACP Mississippi state president Aaron Henry in Clarksdale and Amzie Moore, branch president in Cleveland, Mississippi. Moore, a self-educated WWII veteran, worked for the post office and owned several successful businesses, including a restaurant, beauty salon and Amoco gas station on Highway 61 in Cleveland. Moore received economic reprisal and threats when he refused to put up “white” and “colored” signs segregating entrances and toilets. Whites mounted a boycott against Moore, who was certain that at any night he could expect white mob violence.<sup>115</sup>

During this first meeting, Moore expressed to Moses a deep frustration with the NAACP’s New York office’s commitment in Mississippi. Under Aaron Henry’s leadership the local Mississippi branches did launch voter registration initiatives. Working with the Justice Department, the Mississippi NAACP obtained voter registration information for every county in Mississippi. Moses had never known about the “Black Belt as such, or translated that into political terms in terms of what the number of Blacks and their percentage to whites meant in terms of say voting and electing people.”<sup>116</sup> Moses realized, “Amzie saw the students as a way out; I mean he really felt these students were going to do something...and he was ready to meet them on their own terms.... it was Amzie who saw the students as a wedge and a force, new force that he and other people should tap. And he broke with the established NAACP leadership and was clear about

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<sup>114</sup> Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionist* (Boston: Beacon1965), 63-64.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Moses and Charles Cobb, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 39.

<sup>116</sup> Robert Moses interviewed by Clayborne Carson, March 29, 1982, Cambridge, MA, 14.

that.”<sup>117</sup>

Amzie Moore attended the fall SNCC conference and a voter education project was agreed upon. Moore envisioned a movement that did not involve direct action and cafeteria sit-ins but rather access to the ballot for blacks as the political end to overthrow the terrorist regime in Mississippi. The understanding between Moore and the members of SNCC to launch a voter registration and education campaign became the key. Moses admitted, “He (Amzie Moore) actually went to that conference and the people there actually voted on the project, the SNCC group, voted on accepting that as a project for SNCC. Which is important in a sense that latter the issue came in that voting was a cop out, and that the real cutting edge was direct action.”<sup>118</sup> Moses had a year to go on a math teacher contract with the Ivy preparatory league, Horace Mann School in Riverdale, New York. Moses offered to come back the following year to Cleveland, Mississippi, for a voter registration campaign. The following summer of 1961, SNCC field secretary Bob Moses and Moore agreed to launch a campaign not focused on public accommodations but political access in a broader sense with the right to vote as the organizing tool.<sup>119</sup>

When Moses returned to Cleveland, Mississippi, in the summer of 1961, interracial “Freedom Riders” were detained in the maximum security Mississippi State Penitentiary known as Parchman Farm. Organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the “Freedom Riders” tested the Supreme Court ruling *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960) that declared segregation in interstate transportation via rail or bus unconstitutional.

Moore had tried to start a citizenship school in 1957 after the state legislature passed a new law requiring applicants for voter registration to interpret a section of the state constitution to

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>119</sup> Bob Moses, interview with Author, McComb, Mississippi, April 2005.

the satisfaction of the circuit clerk.<sup>120</sup> There was a black priest, Father John LaBauve, running voter registration workshops in Mound Bayou at the Catholic Church. Moore planned to work with Father LaBauve's operation as a starting point. When Moses returned in 1961, Father LaBauve had been transferred to another parish on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Moore did not have a place in Cleveland from which Moses could actually begin a voter registration drive. Moses realized, "He (Amzie) wasn't ready to start and basically I did what Amzie told me to do.... I mean we didn't sit down and plan. There was a steady stream of people in and out of his home.... a network basically for getting out information, and for bringing in information. And I guess Amzie worked with that network, in terms of feeling or deciding what to do, and when to do it."<sup>121</sup>

In McComb, Medgar Evers and Bryant continued to grow the McComb branch. Gladys Bryant Jackson recalls "Medgar Evers was no stranger in our house. He would come down from Jackson and meet with Daddy, have dinner, go to meetings and stay the night in our home."<sup>122</sup> On April 7, 1961 Mississippi NAACP leadership conferred with the national-office leadership in New York City to strategize a plan to breakdown racial discrimination in Mississippi. Frustrated with the low registration of eligible Negro voters permitted to register, "Operation Mississippi" was launched. The initiative described by NAACP executive, Roy Wilkins was an "all-out and continuous campaign" in all areas of activity with an emphasis to expand, press and increase Negro voter registration.<sup>123</sup> On a June 5, 1961 McComb mass meeting. Evers received eleven names for NAACP membership.<sup>124</sup> About the same time a brief article submitted by SNCC Secretary Edward King announcing the voter registration

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<sup>120</sup> Robert Moses and Charles Cobb, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 39.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Moses interviewed by Clayborne Carson, March 29, 1982, Cambridge, MA, 18

<sup>122</sup> Gladys Bryant Jackson, interview with Author, McComb, MS. Oct. 31, 2004.

<sup>123</sup> *The Crisis*. Along the NAACP Battlefront. May 1961

<sup>124</sup> NAACP Branch Records.

project appeared in a major black publication. Bryant read in Jet magazine that a SNCC worker named Bob Moses was about to launch a voter registration project in the Mississippi Delta. Eager to work with young adults, Bryant contacted Amzie Moore with an expressed interest in initiating a similar drive in McComb.<sup>125</sup> Amzie Moore and C.C. Bryant served as regional Vice Presidents of the NAACP. Bryant recalled, “Amzie Moore was a good friend of mine.”<sup>126</sup> On June 7, 1961 Bryant contacted college students to assist in campaigning for registering and voting. Bryant wrote, “Please advise when they will be able to come into our area...We are anxious to have them come whenever they can.”<sup>127</sup> With nowhere to start the voter registration project, Amzie Moore agreed to send Bob Moses to McComb. On July 10 1961, Moses arrived in McComb. Once Bryant received confirmation of the arrival of Bob Moses, he contacted Medgar Evers with the details. In a letter written on August 7, 1961 to Medgar Evers, Field Secretary for the NAACP, Bryant explained his interest and support of Moses:

Dear Medgar:

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of June I consulted Mr. Amzie Moore concerning the registration school that was to be conducted in Cleveland, Miss. As a result of our discussion a representative from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee arrived in McComb on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July to lay the foundation for a voter registration project here.

The project is of course being underwritten with the full support of the local NAACP group; however we feel that it would be injurious and unwise to say so publicly. We are telling the public that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is sponsoring the project. The Students are supplying the manpower and SCLC is helping some with the finances. –C.C. Bryant<sup>128</sup>

Upon his arrival to McComb, Moses contacted John Doar in the U.S. Justice Department regarding protection during the registration project. Doar requested Moses provide, “the exact date of arrival in Pike County as well as the names of the volunteers who

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<sup>125</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: the Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1995), 102.

<sup>126</sup> C.C. Bryant, interview by Gladys Bryant Jackson. Tape recording. McComb, Mississippi, March 23, 2004.

<sup>127</sup> C. C. Bryant, personal correspondence to Amzie Moore, June 13, 1961.

<sup>128</sup> C.C. Bryant, letter to Medgar Evers, August 7, 1961.



will be in Pike County during the month of August.”<sup>129</sup> Moses remembered the small number of active NAACP leaders still in Mississippi during 1960. Violence, threats and murders had driven many of the NAACP leaders out of Mississippi. Moses recalls the condition of the Mississippi NAACP leadership: “If you looked at the state at that time, there was Amzie in Cleveland, there was Dr. Aaron Henry in Clarksdale, there was Medgar Evers of course who was the field secretary for the NAACP in Jackson, C.C. Bryant in McComb and EW Steptoe in Amite county... they weren’t all murdered but it became really a great risk to retain a public position as the head of the NAACP in any particular place in the state.”<sup>130</sup> Moses had never been in the South before. He said his ability to function and survive:

Really depended on people like Amzie and C.C. that lived here and had survived. And not just survived as black people but survived as black people who were publicly identified as working for their people--a race man is what they called them. The next thing that I think was important in terms of C.C. was that he opened up his home and took me in the same way that Amzie had done as part of his family and of course Amzie was single by that time and his marriage wasn’t really able to survive all of the stresses and pressures of being a flash point in Mississippi around this issue of blacks and their freedom.<sup>131</sup>

Moses quickly became part of the Bryant household. After graduating from Burgland High School in the spring of 1961, Bryant’s daughter Gladys had left McComb for a summer visit with family in Connecticut. Moses stayed in her room and developed a friendship with Curtis Bryant Jr. Emogene Bryant was delighted to have another young person in the house.

C.C. Bryant operated within a tight network of people who were organized around the NAACP, the union and the Masons. The Masons operated as a parallel organization that provided in-kind support to the Pike Count NAACP. It was much easier for the Masons to have a building than the NAACP in this part of Mississippi or any rural part of Mississippi. Bryant instructed fellow

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<sup>129</sup> Bob Moses, correspondence to SNCC staff, July 1961.

<sup>130</sup> Robert Moses, interview with Author, McComb, Mississippi, April 2005.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

Freemasons to allow Bob Moses to use the second floor of the Masonic Lodge located on 630 Warren Street in the Burgland section of McComb to operate as a voter registration school. Already trained in voter registration, NAACP Pike County chapter treasurer Web Owens worked with Moses over the summer introducing him to the McComb community. Bryant had spent many days and nights visiting folks at their homes providing information on the NAACP and talking about voter registration. Owens and Bryant prepared a list of names of people for Moses to approach. Moses recalled, “Web Owens did the actual legwork with me, of going around and setting up the project... we went to every black person of any kind of substance in the community and talked to them about the project. I described voting.... and he (Owens) would hit them for a contribution.”<sup>132</sup> A man of financial independent means and the Pike County NAACP treasurer, Owens had the trust of the black community. Moses and Owen canvassed the community until dinnertime. In the evenings a series of meetings began with the three men after Bryant finished his workday. Owens, Bryant and Moses conducted meetings at the Masonic lodge and at churches on Sundays to mobilize the community for the major registration drive. Moreover, Moses gained credibility within McComb, “Young kids would look at me and say there goes a freedom rider. They knew that I wasn’t from here. They knew I was connected with C.C. and the NAACP and so in their minds they knew I was a Freedom Rider and so that helped,” recalls Moses. The presence of Moses in McComb encouraged folks as well. The Freedom Riders’ actions in Mississippi bolstered support for the voter registration movement happening in McComb. It helped set a tone for meetings as people began to pay close attention that “there was something different a float here and maybe I need to perk up my ears and listen to what these folks are saying” recalled Moses.<sup>133</sup> SNCC organizer Chuck McDew

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<sup>132</sup> Robert Moses interviewed by Clayborne Carson, March 29, 1982, Cambridge, MA, 22

<sup>133</sup> Robert Moses, interview with Author, McComb, Mississippi, April 2005.

recollects the assistance he received in McComb “Mr. Bryant was very supportive from the beginning. He bought us in. It was Mr. Bryant and Web Owens, also known as Super Cool Daddy, and Mr. Nobles were railroad people.... When we organized we looked for railroad people. Once they had exposure to the outside world, they knew what could happen. What expectations you could have. And if Mississippi ever joined America or became like other American cities it was important.”<sup>134</sup>

To support the project, Moses communicated with the SCLC staff in Atlanta, Georgia, to assist with sponsorship and financial support for the volunteers in the McComb project. Additionally SNCC support came in the form of resource assistance by providing printed copies of the Constitution and mailing them to McComb while SNCC Secretary Edward King assisted with correspondences and press coverage.<sup>135</sup> Moses also informed John Doar of the Justice Department regarding the registration plans. In a response to Bob Moses, John Doar emphasizes that, “In the event there are any economic or other reprisals against citizens of Mississippi who attempt to register to vote or against citizens who peacefully aid or encourage others to register to vote, you should immediately report this to the nearest Federal Bureau of Investigation Office and call me at my office in Washington.... It would be helpful if you would let me know the exact date when your registration efforts in Pike County will begin, as well as the names of the volunteers who will be in Pike County during the month of August.”<sup>136</sup> Throughout the summer, 26- year- old Bob Moses continued knocking on doors throughout the blistering August, telling all those who would listen that he was C.C. Bryant’s voter registration man.<sup>137</sup>

In addition to C.C. Bryant, other McComb activists and NAACP members—such as Ernest

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<sup>134</sup> Chuck McDew, interview with Author, Oxford, Mississippi, March 29, 2005.

<sup>135</sup> Personal correspondence between Bob Moses and C.C. Bryant 1961.

<sup>136</sup> Personal Correspondence between John Doar and Bob Moses 1961.

<sup>137</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years*, (Touchstone Books: 1988) 492.

Nobles, Web Owens and Aylene Quinn assisted SNCC, giving them both financial and emotional support. The coalition canvassed neighborhoods, encouraging blacks to register to vote. It appeared that the voter registration project was secured and endorsed by the local people in McComb. The African American Masonic Temple meeting hall became a voter education and training center and Society Hill Missionary Baptist Church mimeographed copies of the voting form. On August 7, 1961, three instructors of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Bob Moses of New York, John Hardy of Nashville, Tennessee, and Reginald Robinson of Baltimore, Maryland, opened the voter registration school in the Masonic Temple with the sponsorship provided by the NAACP, SNCC, SCLC and the black McComb community. The classes were open to “every citizen of Pike County who is eligible to vote and every high school student who would like to practice filling out the registration form.” The SNCC workers managed to reach across class divides in McComb. Historian John Dittmer stated, “In the past, NAACP registration drives were directed primarily at the small black middle class. SNCC wanted to expand the base to include the entire community.”<sup>138</sup> A cross section of residents ranging from the young to elders attended the classes—twelve students attended with four taking the voter registration class and three passing by August 8, 1961. The students were familiarized with the sections of the constitution and a copy of the voter registration form.<sup>139</sup> According to an article in the Enterprise Journal news from August 8, 1961, about 200 Negroes were registered in Pike County of whom one -third or one-half voted, according to circuit clerk Wendell Holmes. However, Pike County had more than 6,900 eligible Negroes of voting age.<sup>140</sup> Holmes also declared that he administered tests impartially, passing those who answered the questions adequately and failing those who did not. If the test was passed satisfactorily, the voter had to pay

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<sup>138</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: Univ. of IL. Press, 1995), 105.

<sup>139</sup> *Enterprise Journal*, Tuesday, August 8, 1961.

<sup>140</sup> “Negro Vote Drive in Mississippi Set Back as Violence Erupts,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1961.

his \$2 poll tax and wait four months to be eligible to vote.<sup>141</sup>

The voter registration project familiarized black citizens with the twenty four-question registration form based on the state of Mississippi's constitution. Southern state and local governments enforced poll taxes and literacy tests to disenfranchise most southern blacks from participating in the voting process. Ridiculous questions like "How many bubbles are in a bar of soap?" denied even highly educated black citizens the right to vote.

By the end of the summer of 1961, SNCC's Mississippi voter registration project was under way. Additional SNCC members, including Marion Barry, Chuck McDew and Charles Sherrod, joined Moses in McComb. Chuck McDew remembers working and living among the people in McComb: "We ate at South of the Border cafe that was owned by Miss Aylene Quinn. On the left hand side of Summit was a pool hall and another little restaurant run by Mr. Holmes. Plevis Holmes was near the pool hall where we hustled the local lads. We figured we'd hustle the local lads and hustle them in pool. We figured that was one way to support the cause. We generally ate at Mr. Holmes restaurant. So we were fed at Mr. Holmes and Aylene Quin's South of the Border café restaurant. The bootleg liquor places were a source of information. The whites dealt with the black bootleggers too. So you could always find out what was going on in the white community by talking to the bootleggers. The cleaners, restaurants, barbershop were also sources of support for the SNCC workers."<sup>142</sup>

As voter registration classes continued in Pike County, classes expanded to include neighboring Walthall and Amite County with McComb serving as the voter registration headquarters. In mid- August John Hardy, accompanied by MacArthur Cotton, Jimmie Travis and George Lowe, left McComb to start a voter registration project in Walthall County. In

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<sup>141</sup> Enterprise-Journal, Tuesday August 18, 1961.

<sup>142</sup> Chuck McDew, interview with Author, Oxford, Mississippi, March 29, 2005.

neighboring Walthall County, only 2,490 voting age Negroes were registered to vote. Robert Bryant, the uncle of C.C. Bryant, assisted Hardy and the three students. Local farmer and Amite County NAACP branch president Mr. E.W. Steptoe wanted to see Negroes in Amite have the same opportunities to participate in the democratic process. The fifty-three year old Steptoe was a dairy and cotton farmer. After Steptoe organized the branch in 1954, he received constant threats and harassment from the police and white neighbors. Moses joined Steptoe and classes were organized in a local church. In a New York Times interview Mr. Steptoe said, "Every Negro I know in Amite County wants to register to vote, but they're just afraid."<sup>143</sup> The black population of Amite County made up more than half of the total population with 3,500 Negroes of voting age. Only one of them was registered and he had never voted in the county according to the Amite County sheriff E.L. Catson Jr.<sup>144</sup>

While the voter registration program expanded to neighboring Amite County, the NAACP of Pike County continued to support Moses. On August 17, 1961, a Mississippi highway patrolman charged Moses with intimidation. Moses drove three passengers to nearby Liberty in neighboring Amite County to take a voter registration test. Unable to pass the test, the travelers were in route back to McComb, when a highway patrolman accompanied by a Liberty town marshal, stopped them and began inspecting the driver's license of Moses. Justice of the Peace Ray A. Bardwell convicted Moses. Pending good behavior, the Justice of the Peace Ray A. Bardwell suspended the \$50 fine but a \$5 court cost still remained. Moses rejected the suspended sentence and refused to pay \$5 in justice of the peace court costs. Moses remained in jail until NAACP attorney Jack Young from Jackson, Mississippi, arranged for the payment of his fine. In lieu of a cash bond, real estate owned by Ben Hill and Jerry Gibson, both Pike

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<sup>143</sup>Negro Vote Drive in Mississippi Set Back as Violence Erupts, New York Times, October 24, 1961.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

County NAACP members, posted a \$150 appeal bond. Four FBI agents were investigating the case for possible civil rights violations.<sup>145</sup>

Attacks against Moses continued when he joined forces with another NAACP leader, Herbert Lee of Amite County. On August 22, 1961, Moses, accompanied by three Negroes who wanted to register to vote, was attacked and beaten just blocks from the courthouse. Moses received eight stitches to the head. The attacker, Billy Jack Catson, cousin to Amite County Sheriff E.L. Catson Jr., was acquitted of assault by an all-white jury.<sup>146</sup> Two weeks later in September of 1961, Bob Moses and fellow SNCC worker, twenty-seven year old Travis Britt of Brooklyn, New York fled Liberty, Mississippi, after being chased. Britt and Moses had accompanied four other Negroes to Liberty to take the voter registration test. A dozen or so angry white men approached and questioned the two SNCC workers who were waiting outside the courthouse. The men asked Britt where he was from and what he did. One told Moses that he should get down on his knees and pray for forgiveness. The attack left Britt beaten and bruised.<sup>147</sup> On September 25, 1961, State Representative and local farmer E. H. Hurst approached Herbert Lee and an argument ensued over an old debt. Lee jumped from the truck on the opposite side with a tire tool in his hand. Hurst, armed with a pistol, claimed to have walked around the truck to meet Lee. The representative then struck Lee on the head with his pistol, crushing his skull. Lee fell dead. Hurst claims that he must have “pulled the trigger unconsciously.” An all-white jury ruled the murder as a justifiable homicide. C.C. Bryant, NAACP president of the South-western Mississippi, believed Lee’s murder had this effect: “There has to be protection not just promised protections, because once a man’s life has been

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<sup>145</sup> Enterprise Journal, August 17, 1961.

<sup>146</sup> Negro Vote Drive in Mississippi Is Set Back As Violence Erupts, October 24, 1961.

<sup>147</sup> Voting Instructor is Beaten, McComb Enterprise Journal, Sept. 5, 1961.

taken, he can't restore it.”<sup>148</sup>

Moses continued voter registration and Marion Barry initiated direct-action workshops. Chuck McDew remembers the tension among the SNCC staff; “We in SNCC had broken into two groups. One was the direct action and the other was voter registration arm.... We thought about splitting the office. We had one room in this little office in Atlanta. I said we should put a partition down the middle of the room. One door we will have the direct action people. The direct action people were the nonviolent people too. And we'll have a dove with an olive branch in its little beak soaring in the blue sky. It would say SNCC non-violent. On the other door we'll have a male fist with a fiery sword swooping down out of the blue and that would be the voting arm voter registration. From the very beginning the argument was that we all started in direct action and to give up on direct action was to be getting away from what we were supposed to be doing. But on the question of direct action and voter registration we were split down the middle. So we broke the organization into two sections, direct action and voter registration. Mr. Bryant felt that we should just do the voter registration. We were mostly in agreement with that. And there was this constant struggle that played itself out in McComb.”<sup>149</sup>

Prior to the arrival of SNCC workers in McComb during the summer of 1961, reports of student- led non-violent demonstrations reached young people in McComb, when four freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technological College desegregated the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1960. On March 21, 1961, students active in the NAACP Tougaloo College chapter in Jackson, Mississippi participated in a sit-in demonstration. The nine students entered the “whites” only municipal

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<sup>148</sup> Negro Vote Drive in Mississippi Is Set Back As Violence Erupts, October 24, 1961

<sup>149</sup> Chuck McDew, interview with Author, Oxford, Mississippi, March 29, 2005



library and quietly read books that were unavailable in the “colored” library. Police arrested the students when they refused to leave. The Tougaloo Nine gained tremendous support from adult NAACP leaders. In a letter written to the national office following the arrest, Doretha Hawthorne expressed support, “We here in Mississippi, where it has been said that we are satisfied with present condition. The students is letting everybody know it is not true. We are not satisfied.”<sup>150</sup> The Pike County NAACP chapter also had an active youth council of which C.C. Bryant’s daughter Gladys and son Curtis were members. As the news of non-violent demonstrations ignited across southern cities, the senior class of 1961 at McComb’s Burgland High School for Negroes paid close attention. Gladys Bryant Jackson’s interview includes a shift in attitudes leading up to graduation, months before the arrival of Bob Moses and members of SNCC.

In preparation for graduation, the Burgland High School senior class of 1961 selected class rings. Mississippi NAACP state vice president Charles R. Darden worked professionally as a sales representative for a national jewelry company. Darden approached Burgland High School principal C.D. Higgins to show the jewelry line to the class. Higgins denied Darden the opportunity and supported the white jewelry representative. When students discovered this news, they challenged Principal Higgins. Several of the students were active members of the NAACP youth group and in act of solidarity and defiance, the students chose to purchase rings from Charles Darden. Gladys Bryant Jackson remembers, “We were all becoming aware of what segregation was really about. What racism was all about and we challenged the system... we didn’t do it in a forceful manner that we could bring about a change at that time.”<sup>151</sup>

However, the system had been challenged and the class of 1961 left Burgland High School

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<sup>150</sup> Correspondence from NAACP Branch Files, Library of Congress, Box C97.

<sup>151</sup> Gladys Bryant Jackson. Interview with Author, McComb, MS 2004.

with a greater awakening and acknowledgement of racial injustice. After high school graduation in the spring of 1961, Gladys Bryant left McComb for a vacation with family in Connecticut. Gladys Bryant agreed she left because, “The opportunity for employment was not something that you could look forward to in Mississippi for African Americans. If you really intended to have a career, you needed to go elsewhere. That’s why I did leave.”<sup>152</sup>

The direct action methods, introduced by SNCC, inspired local youth to organize the Pike County non-violent movement, led by Marion Barry, a veteran of the Nashville sit-ins and a strong proponent of direct action.<sup>153</sup> In August of 1961, five young people decided to sit at the lunch counters at the McComb Greyhound and Woolworth department store in protest of segregation. The five were arrested and one, Brenda Travis, 16, was treated as an adult and sentenced to eight months in jail.<sup>154</sup> Travis was eventually expelled from McComb School’s and sent a reform school. On August 26, Curtis Elmer Hayes and Hollis Watkins of Summit sat in at the F.W. Woolworth Co. lunch counter. On August 30, 1961, McComb police arrested Ike Lewis and Robert Talbert Jr. for purchasing tickets and sitting in the white’s only waiting room area of the McComb Greyhound bus station. NAACP lawyer Jack Young of Jackson presented appeals bonds for the five defendants. Among the money presented was a \$2,000 check drawn from an Atlanta bank and signed by M.L. King Jr. as well as a Western Union money order in the amount of \$2,500 from Connecticut.<sup>155</sup>

When Brenda Travis, a minor at that time, tried to be readmitted to school, black principal, Commodore Dewey Higgins denied her return. Under pressure by the white school Board of Education Higgins, could not meet Brenda’s request. Approximately 700 students attended school at Burgland High, black McComb’s middle school grade seven to high school classes.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995), 107.

<sup>154</sup> Mississippi: Contributing to Delinquency (Time, October 1961).

<sup>155</sup><sup>155</sup> Sovereignty Commission files dated Oct. 11, 1961.

Upset and angered by Higgins' decision, 116 students from Burgland high school formed a walkout in protest on October 4, 1961. Bryant's son Curtis Jr., a student at Burgland, phoned his father of the proposed student walkout. Bryant told him to remain at school. The students united at the Masonic Temple where the SNCC workers prepared the students to march to the steps of McComb's City Hall. The students ranged from twelve to eighteen years old. SNCC organizer Chuck McDew recalls, "There was always a group of kids that hung around the SNCC office. Some of our people, Marion Berry, Diane Nash, who were members of the direct action group were teaching them how to hold demonstrations. The other voter registration people were teaching people how to vote and canvass. It finally came to a head when the kids walked out of Burgland high school in a direct action demonstration."<sup>156</sup>

SNCC activists Charlie Jones and Robert Zellner had come to McComb to help coordinate and publicize a mass demonstration event. A black owned butcher shop operated on the ground level of the Masonic Temple building. In an interview given by Bob Moses to Carson Clayborne, Moses asserts, "Jones put on an apron, and set himself up as a butcher and was getting the news out over the phone.... this was an actual planned demonstration. And it was, I guess, SNCC's first big direct action project in the Deep South."<sup>157</sup> The students made way to city hall two abreast where they assembled in prayer on city hall's steps singing "We Shall Overcome" and carrying homemade placards reading "Let Justice Roll Down as Waters and Righteousness as a Mighty Stream, Go Tell It On The Mountain, Vote, Thy Kingdom Come."<sup>158</sup> Angry crowds of over 100 whites gathered as the Burgland student activists were arrested. The only white S.N.C.C. activist Robert Zellner, twenty-two of Atlanta, reluctantly participated in the demonstration. During the demonstration, attackers beat and kicked Zellner in the face while law

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<sup>156</sup> Chuck McDew, interview by Author, Oxford, Mississippi, March 29, 2005.

<sup>157</sup> Carson interview with Moses, 15.

<sup>158</sup> Sovereignty Commission Report November, 1, 1964.

enforcement looked on. No arrests were made of Zellner's attackers; according to Chief of Police George Guy: "I didn't see who they were."<sup>159</sup> When police arrested the non-violent demonstrators, recalls Chuck McDew, "they arrested them too, those 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. People were coming down saying, "get my child out of there. I don't want my baby in jail."<sup>160</sup> When the walkout happened at Burgland High school, the community people were very upset that it happened but remained supportive. According to McDew, " They brought food and got information back and forth to us about what was happening and what was about to go down."<sup>161</sup>

On October 6, 1961, the next morning, McComb police came to the Illinois Central railroad yards to arrest C.C. Bryant. They also arrested SNCC worker Cordell Reagan of Nashville, Tennessee. An affidavit signed by Chief of Police George Guy stated the "two were behind some of this racial trouble."<sup>162</sup> Thrown into jail on a charge of contributing to the delinquency of a minor, Bryant neither planned nor participated in the students' march. Bryant was present and gave a speech at a meeting that preceded the student walkout. Determined to implicate Bryant in the walkout, chief of police Guy confesses in Time magazine "We're trying to rook Bryant on the whole thing."<sup>163</sup> According to the Sovereignty Commission file, "Curtis Bryant, c/m (colored male) was placed under \$200.00 bond and his trial is set for October 23<sup>rd</sup>. ... Bryant had a notebook on his person containing telephone numbers of Jack Young and Medgar Evers of Jackson and John Doar of the Justice Department in Washington."<sup>164</sup> Local law enforcement and the State's sovereignty commission continued to keep Bryant under surveillance.

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Chuck McDew, interview by Author, Oxford, Mississippi, March 29, 2005.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Sovereignty Commission Report October 11, 1961

<sup>163</sup> Sit in at Burgland High School (Time, October 1961).

<sup>164</sup> Sovereignty Commission Report November, 1, 1964.

Bryant supported the voter registration efforts of SNCC, however he found himself at odds with their direct action strategies. Bryant, like Amzie Moore, thought the direct action strategy detracted from the voter registration activities. Chuck McDew recalls, “He (Mr. Bryant) thought that would bring us more trouble and more problems, more than anything else would beyond just registering voters. And he was right. When it went off into sitting in and that sort of thing, Mr. Bryant was not in concert with that. He didn’t support that.”<sup>165</sup> In the aftermath of the demonstration and arrest, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers could not defend the activities of SNCC in McComb. Evers believed SNCC ignored the prior groundwork of the NAACP’s voter registration efforts and came to McComb without his knowledge.<sup>166</sup> Initially frustrated with the orchestration of this event and the connection to the Pike County Branch, NAACP National director, Roy Wilkins criticized SNCC: “If we are expected to pay the bills, we must be in on the planning and launching, otherwise the bills will have to be paid by those who plan and launch.”<sup>167</sup> The national office of the NAACP provided legal counsel through Jackson, Mississippi attorney Jack Young and bond assistance through the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Privately, Bryant had to deal with the pressure from the SNCC activities and his relationship to Moses. Moses remembers Bryant got a “little shook when the sit-ins broke out. And so I had to leave, ‘cause I was actually staying with him...and he began to get too much pressure on the job...and he wanted us out...and he wanted us out of town actually.”<sup>168</sup> Bryant was also dealing with the financial strain in supporting his daughter Gladys away at college in Connecticut. On November 8, 1961, Ruby Hurley contacted Gloster Current for financial assistance from the Hartford, Connecticut, NAACP branch, ‘Do we have

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<sup>165</sup> Chuck McDew, interview by Author, Oxford, Mississippi, March 29, 2005

<sup>166</sup> Myrlie Evers-Williams & Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero’s Life and Legacy Revealed through His Writings, Letters and Speeches* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005) 237.

<sup>167</sup> Manfred Berg, “Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 176.

<sup>168</sup> Clayborne Carson interview with Bob Moses, 19.

any contacts in Hartford or there about whom help can be given to Mr. Bryant's daughter? I tried to encourage him at the State conference.'<sup>169</sup> By the end of October, Bryant expressed the same sentiment to the state NAACP executive committee asking the board to "condemn the SNCC operation and have it moved out."

As a result of the student walkout, 114 demonstrators including ninety-five students faced court sentencing by Judge Robert W. Brumfield on charges of disturbing the peace. About a fourth of the 95 students involved in the walkout demonstration had returned back to school. Joe N. Piggott presented the state's case: "When 114 persons parade without authorization and block city sidewalks and conduct meetings on City Hall property without permission that is conduct calculated to breach the peace." Three demonstrators pleaded guilty and paid fines. Eleven of the group received \$200 fines and were ordered to serve four months in county jail. This included SNCC organizers Robert Moses, Chuck McDew, Stephen Ashley, John Robert Zellner, James Wells, Ivory Diggs Jr., Lee Chester Vick, Myrtis Bennet, Lee Otis Eubanks, Harold Robinson, and Janie Campbell. Curtis Elmer Hayes, Ike Lewis, Hollis Watkins, and Robert Talbert were each given a stiffer penalty of six months of jail time and \$500 fine for their prior sit-in participation. The experience from McComb in 1961 between SNCC and the NAACP's voter registration and the direct action activities thwarted the success of the NAACP. In 1961, the combined SNCC and NAACP initiative yielded a total of eighteen new registered voters and \$15,000 in paid fines, bail and legal fees. NAACP national director, Roy Wilkins reported, "That is a high cost per name on a voter registration list." Medgar Evers also complained that SNCC activists deliberately kept local NAACP out of the picture and only adopted a cooperative posture when they needed legal and financial support.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Correspondence from NAACP Branch Files, Library of Congress, Box C97.

<sup>170</sup> NAACP Records II A 476.

Weeks following the walk-out, the Masonic Temple Lodge, Worshipful Master Eureka Lodge #5, located at 630 Warren Street had been condemned by the City of McComb. Bryant, a member of the Temple had designated the site for voter registration classes. On October 25, 1961 a letter from the office of the mayor read as follows: “city authorities have no objections to this building being used as a class room or for lodge meeting purposes, but it must be made safe from a fire hazard standpoint.”<sup>171</sup> In Atlanta, Dr. Martin Luther King responded to the treatment of SNCC workers by McComb police authorities. A wire sent to U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, from King, requested a probe into “police brutality and beatings [that have] created an apparent reign of terror” against Negroes in this area.<sup>172</sup> Mayor C.H. Douglas sent an open invitation to the Attorney General; he is “perfectly willing for Kennedy to come down here himself” justifying that King’s charges were “absolutely groundless.”<sup>173</sup>

Racial tensions continued to escalate when on December 1, 1961 when the interracial group of Freedom Riders made their way to McComb to test the desegregation laws by integrating the Trailways bus terminal. The riders sought police protection inside the terminal while an angry white mob of more than 500, tipped off by law enforcement, assembled outside.

The Burgland High School students’ arrests strained Bryant’s relationship with SNCC, especially Bob Moses. Moses and several of the SNCC organizers left McComb after their release from jail. Unable to be readmitted to McComb schools Brenda Travis remained at the Oakley reformatory.<sup>174</sup> The student demonstrators were expelled from Burgland High School. Campbell College located in Jackson, Mississippi, agreed to arrange classes and provide housing for the students. To a younger generation of student activists, Bryant represented the

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<sup>171</sup> Correspondence from the City of McComb to Clifton Reid, cc, C.C. Bryant, October, 25, 1961.

<sup>172</sup> Jackson Daily News, October 6, 1961.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1995), 114.

old guard of the NAACP that refused to participate in direct action but rather fight battles through the legal system. In the summer of 1962 Amzie Moore was ready to launch a voter registration drive in the Delta. SNCC and Moses redirected into the Mississippi Delta, canvassing and teaching voter registration. Bob Moses and members of SNCC would later use the knowledge and the relationships formed in McComb to organize the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964.



### CHAPTER III: THE VOTER REGISTRATION MOVEMENT IN McCOMB

“If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” –Luke 19:40  
New International Version

Following the students’ expulsion from Burgland High School in the fall of 1961, Bryant and the Pike County NAACP continued local voter registration activity without involvement from Bob Moses and the direct action approach from members of SNCC. The NAACP’s objective to secure the rights of African Americans as citizens and at the ballot box never faltered. Clarence Mitchell in the NAACP Washington, D.C., bureau office had been instrumental in working with branch leadership in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. In April of 1962, the national office of the NAACP scheduled a three- day rally in Washington D.C. for branch presidents, state conference leaders and youth and college units, to lobby representatives in Washington D.C. with the issues affecting future Civil Rights legislation. The event began with a briefing about the legislation, strategy and tactics and how to proceed to appointments with Senators and Congressmen. Delegates met with their perspective congressmen followed by a rally with participants from both the House and Senate that heard firsthand accounts of the importance of the need for expanded civil rights legislation.

While the NAACP continued to lobby for civil rights support the Kennedy administration prepared to support voter registration drives. Largely in response to the physical assaults and attacks on the interracial CORE “Freedom Riders,” the Kennedy administration launched a non-partisan, voter registration fund called the Voter Education Project (VEP) in April of 1962. Funded with private and public money, the VEP aimed to move energy from the direct

action activities to bolstering voter registration efforts already underway across southern states. The funding, coordinated by the Southern Regional Council (SRC), provided financial support in the form of grants to the major civil rights organizations. In Mississippi, the coalition of civil rights organization that emerged as the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) realized the VEP funding could galvanize their efforts. Among the organizers of the first meeting were members of the NAACP, SNCC, SCLC, and CORE. The coalition initially organized to meet Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett to demand the release of the “Freedom Riders” in the spring of 1961. Considering the lessons learned in McComb and the Mississippi Delta,

Bob Moses knew “discrimination in Mississippi would only yield to an all-out unified attack by as strong a force as possible.”<sup>175</sup> In January of 1962, Bob Moses represented SNCC, Dave Dennis represented CORE, Rev. James Bevel represented SCLC, and Medgar Evers represented the national office of the NAACP to revitalize COFO. Although the national office of the NAACP never officially joined COFO, Mississippi state conference NAACP president Aaron Henry worked with interested branches informing them of COFO meetings and communications.

The national NAACP office funded target areas to conduct VEP initiatives, leaving branches independent to run their own voter registration drives. The NAACP’s national director of voter education, W. C. Patton, complained that organizationally COFO lacked structure. He advised Mississippi NAACP branches not to align themselves with the work of COFO but to continue independent campaigns rather than wait for VEP funds. Quite often both the NAACP and COFO ran parallel campaigns within the same community.<sup>176</sup> In McComb the local NAACP continued its voter registration drives under the leadership of C.C. Bryant. While Moses

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<sup>175</sup> Council of Federated Organizations: COFO what it is, what it does. (Dec. 10, 1964)

<sup>176</sup> Patton’s report, 30 March 1963, NAACP Records III; Patton to Branton, 21 October 1963 NAACP Records VII3.

continued organizing SNCC and COFO from the Delta, COFO organizer McArthur Cotton reactivated SNCC's presence in McComb in 1963 in preparation for a major voter registration project in the summer of 1964<sup>177</sup>. Moses and C.C. Bryant only occasionally saw each other during this period.

In 1963, the former SNCC supporters in McComb included the 1961 Burgland High School demonstrators, Pike County NAACP members and local people. Freedom Summer in Mississippi would become an interracial, interfaith and intergenerational movement built on the experiences gleaned from the organizing techniques and relationships with members of the NAACP leadership in McComb. Bryant and his Pike County NAACP cohorts were hard working well-established members of the community. Many had fought in WWII and returned to the South with a new preparedness to challenge the political system. Economically, they maintained businesses, churches and homes within their communities. Socially, they created tight community networks that supported the movement for political access. The younger members epitomized by SNCC had the restless energy and the time.

With the VEP underway, President John K. Kennedy, gave a rousing televised speech appealing to white Americans to denounce racism on the evening of June 11, 1963. Frustrated with southern white law enforcement aggression against non-violent demonstrators and the refusal of black admittance to public universities, President Kennedy gave a televised report to the American People on Civil Rights. In his report, President Kennedy proposed to Congress a civil rights bill requesting legislation, protecting all American's voting rights, legal standing, educational opportunities and access to public facilities. Field Secretary Medgar Evers met with Bryant along with other NAACP leaders in the Jackson. Later that

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<sup>177</sup> Council of Federated Organizations: COFO what it is, what it does. (Dec. 10, 1964)

night Medgar Evers was slain in front of his home in Jackson, Mississippi.

Frustrated with the lack of progress in Mississippi, COFO held Freedom registration and elections as alternatives to the fall 1963 gubernatorial race. The Freedom elections were geared to engage black participation and give voice to a wider awareness that blacks were interested in the political process. By October of 1963, the VEP withdrew its funds from COFO because the organization engaged in “political programs” not allowable under the VEP grant.<sup>178</sup> The Freedom Summer voter registration project of 1964 launched a contingent of workers attracting hundreds of young people both black and white from across the United States to Mississippi and to McComb. In addition to voter registration programs for voting age adults, COFO started Freedom Schools as a means of combating the educational deficiency among rural black students in the segregated south.

Following the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) under the direction of COFO encouraged blacks to register as an independent party. Publicly, the NAACP supported the initiative however it created conflict with Mississippi NAACP’s voter registration drives directed by local branches leadership. The mock elections created confusion among the newly registered black Mississippians whom John Brooks believed many thought they were actually dually registered.<sup>179</sup>

The impact of Freedom Summer on the Civil Rights movement played a significant role in drawing the nation’s attention to the overt racism in the South. In direct retaliation to the voter registration efforts of both the NAACP and COFO, white supremacist Ku Klux Klan (KKK) targeted homes, businesses and churches of local activist with fire bombings and cross burnings. In anticipation of the arrival of COFO workers and the voter registration initiative,

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> NAACP Records IIIA 232; reports by John Brooks, 14 July 1964.

the Klan organized a public rally in McComb that attracted more than eight hundred white citizens, in May 1964 where Imperial Wizard, Robert M. Shelton, addressed the crowd.

Klansmen became part of an auxiliary police force prepared for Freedom Summer by targeting blacks involved in the movement as well as white sympathizers creating further tensions among whites. McComb Enterprise- Journal editor, Oliver Emmerich, expressed the fear in McComb: “Nobody could have gotten through to the people of McComb during the summer...Almost everybody was hysterically afraid.”<sup>180</sup>

On January 25, 1964, between 25 and 50 crosses were burned throughout Pike County, including one on the Bryant’s front lawn. Bryant notified the police department of the cross burning. “The police department did not come. We carried the cross to the courthouse and showed the cross to the police, the night clerk, or the sergeant at the police department... no one came on the scene, no official of the law,” recounted Bryant.<sup>181</sup> The incidents were reported to the local officials but no arrests were made.<sup>182</sup> The night of April, 29, 1964, a firebomb was thrown into the barbershop owned by C.C. Bryant. The building was unoccupied at the time of the incident but it destroyed a chair and caused interior damage. Bryant’s wife Emogene was staying with son Curtis Jr. in Jackson, Mississippi, at the time of the blast. Curtis Jr. was recovering from a football injury and was a patient in the Jackson hospital. Bryant, home alone, heard a loud explosion: “it really frightened me.... even though I had many hostilities. I did not feel that this could happen and would happen,” recounted Bryant. Neighborhood kids alerted Bryant that the barbershop had been bombed. Bryant and neighbors extinguished the flames and called the police department. Bryant notified the Justice

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<sup>180</sup> Enterprise-Journal, September 25, 1964, 1.

<sup>181</sup> C.C. Bryant Testimony to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Jackson, Mississippi (1965)

<sup>182</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, Hearing Held in Jackson, MS February 16-20, 1965, Vol. II: Administration of Justice (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), Exhibit 11 Staff Report of Investigation of Incidents of Racial Violence, Pike County, Miss., 1964

Department's Mr. John Doar and informed him of the bombing.<sup>183</sup> On June 22, 1964, Curtis Bryant Jr. witnessed a truck pass the Bryant house several times before a bomb was tossed and exploded on the front lawn. Because of the numerous bombings and threats, Curtis Jr. was on watch that evening.<sup>184</sup> Police Chief George Guy conducted the investigation surrounding the dynamite explosion of the three NAACP members' homes on Monday night June 22, 1964. The homes of NAACP members, Fred Bates, C. C. Bryant and Corine Andrews were targeted. Chief Guy stated he interrogated dozens of suspects regarding the bombings and was unable to come up with any direct connections involving any individuals responsible for the bombings. Guy further stated that the organization known as the Ku Klux Klan had some members, in his opinion, who were very radical and they had expressed themselves by taking the law into their own hands. Guy went on to further say: "Any fanatic minded person could have carried out this mission...possibly some fanatic that was seeking excitement could have done this." Deputy Sheriff Stanley Boyd confirmed he did not know of anyone connected or having anything to do with the bombing. However, Boyd would not be surprised "if it was planned by the Negroes there in McComb for publicity purposes."<sup>185</sup>

On July 24, 1964, four shots were fired from a passing car at the Bryant home. No damage was done to the house or the family. C.C. Bryant provided a vehicle description to police but no arrests were made.<sup>186</sup> Following the bombings, the Baertown community protected the Bryant home day and night. Adults and teenagers laid low in the tall grass and stayed in the trees to write down license plate numbers. Armed men stood watch day and night. Emogene Bryant also stood night watch. Neighborhood kids dug a tunnel to keep Bryant safe just in case he needed an escape route. Gladys Jackson recalls "My dad had to go to work so my

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Investigation of Dynamite Bombings of Negro Homes in McComb, MS Report by: Virgil Downing, June 24, 1964.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

mother would stay up all night; she would wear her coveralls and his railroad hat and sit outside the house all night to watch over my father. Other people could come over and drink coffee and prepare food. Men would always be around carrying shot guns.”<sup>187</sup> NAACP official Clarence Mitchell reported speaking to Bryant on the phone after the bombing in which Bryant said,“ I can’t talk long because my wife is on guard and I have to take her place.”<sup>188</sup> NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins affectionately named Emogene Bryant Shotgun Annie. When Bryant traveled away from home to work and meetings, community armed security drivers followed by escort vehicles transported Bryant back and forth; taking different travel routes to through off any chance of ambush.

On July 26, 1964, C.C. Bryant’s brother Charley Bryant, a member of the NAACP Pike county branch for over two years, also received retaliation for his activism in the McComb movement. His wife Ora “Miss Dago” Bryant, also a native of McComb, also participated in the movement. Charley Bryant earned a living as a barber and carpenter and Ora Bryant was a housewife. The night of July 26, 1964, Ora “Dago” Bryant, awoke from a restless sleep. After noticing white men in a car parked in front of their home she retrieved a shotgun to ensure her safety. The lights from a passing car lit up the parked vehicle. Two minutes later the driver of the car drove off only to return 15 minutes later. The car stopped in front of the house and Ora Bryant took aim and fired shots. Something was thrown from the vehicle and landed in the front yard. She fired back and the car sped away. Ora Bryant woke her husband Charley Bryant from his sleep in the back bedroom to alert him of the attack. They both heard a popping sound and Charley Bryant grabbed the gun from his wife and headed out the back of the house in pursuit of the attackers. Ora Bryant proceeded to open the kitchen door with her

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<sup>187</sup> C.C. Bryant, interview by Gladys Bryant Jackson. Tape recording. McComb, Mississippi, March 23, 2004.

<sup>188</sup> Clarence Mitchell, “Spotlight on Political Conventions”, Crisis Magazine, October 1968.

rifle. A loud explosion occurred near the home. Dynamite landed 12 feet from the house. Severe damage occurred to the house. Front windows were blown out from the explosion; it tore the asbestos siding off the house, and ripped screens. The power from the blast destroyed the front yard, uprooting the shrubbery around the home. Following the explosion, the couple kept watches every night over the house.<sup>189</sup> According to the Bryant family story, “Aunt Dago actually shot and wounded one of the attackers. I think the man died...that’s why they left McComb to protect Aunt Dago from any retaliation.” In late September Charley and Ora “Dago” Bryant moved to California. Arrests were made in this case.<sup>190</sup>

On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination and racial segregation in schools, workplaces and accommodations available to the general public. The Civil Rights Act 1964 provided equal protection under the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment and protected the voting rights of all citizens regardless of race, color or condition of prior servitude under the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment.<sup>191</sup>

On the night of September 20, 1964, a bomb destroyed the entire structure of Society Hill Missionary Baptist Church where C.C. and Emogene Bryant served as active members. Emogene Bryant recalls the explosion as being so strong, “ I was at home taking a bath and it blew me out of the tub. That’s how strong the blast was. They blew Society Hill apart.”<sup>192</sup> Established in 1910, Society Hill Missionary Baptist Church had hosted weekly voter-registration classes and mass meetings of the NAACP. The church was rebuilt with money from an insurance policy valued at \$11,000 along with contributions received from the Northern

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<sup>189</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, Hearing Held in Jackson, MS February 16-20, 1965, Vol. II: Administration of Justice (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), Exhibit 11 Staff Report of Investigation of Incidents of Racial Violence, Pike County, Miss. , 1964

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> NAACP Rally Correspondence March 19, 1962.

<sup>192</sup> Emogene Bryant video interview with Judith Roberts, October 2004.



supporters.<sup>193</sup>

The night of September 20, 1964 a bomb destroyed the home of NAACP member Aylene Quin. Bill Wilson, a co-worker with C.C. Bryant as an employee of the Illinois Central Railroad machinist and a new inductee to the Klavern #700, bombed the home of Aylene Quin. Wilson threw the bomb on Quin's front porch. The blast left Quin's 4-year-old son Anthony pinned to his bed by fallen cement. Jacqueline Quin, 9 years old, suffered hearing loss. Aylene Quin told a news conference that FBI agents are in McComb "but they work with the local police...and not one person has been arrested."<sup>194</sup> Frustrated with the lack of support by local law enforcement,, Aylene Quin, Ora "Dago" Bryant and Willie J. Dillon, whose home was bombed on August 28, 1964, took matters into their hands to seek protection. On September 24, 1964 Civil Rights groups flew the three women to Washington for a meeting with President Lyndon Johnson. President Johnson expressed deep concern with the bombing of Negro homes and churches and other buildings in McComb and issued a prompt investigation by the Justice Department.<sup>195</sup> Threatened by the possibility of federal intervention, McComb Police Chief George Guy stated his twenty man force "could handle any situation that might develop and we don't need any federal help."<sup>196</sup> However, in a statement by Ora "Dago" Bryant, "From what we see, the city police are on the spot before the smoke is settled from the bombings. They must know where the bombings are going to be."<sup>197</sup>

On the very same day the three McComb women met with President Lyndon Johnson on September 24, 1964, C. C. Bryant and Reverend Ned Taylor of Society Hill Missionary Baptist

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<sup>193</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, Hearing Held in Jackson, MS February 16-20, 1965, Vol. II: Administration of Justice (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), Exhibit 11 Staff Report of Investigation of Incidents of Racial Violence, Pike County, Miss. , 1964

<sup>194</sup> Newspaper articles from Laurel Leader Call, Sept. 23, 1964 Tupelo Journal, Corinth Corinthian, September 25, 1964.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Laurel Leader-Call, September 23, 1964.

Church were arrested for questioning in relation to the bombings; they were administered lie detector tests and released. In an attempt to discredit the meeting between Quin, Bryant and Dillon with President Lyndon Johnson regarding the racial attacks, Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson, attacked the character of the women in the press, “No city would send to Washington as a representative any woman whose criminal record is as long as the Illinois Central railroad”, said the governor.<sup>198</sup> It is unclear who exactly the Governor was referring to in his remark. However, any involvement in Mississippi civil rights activity could have led to multiple arrest records. It might have been very likely any one of the three women from McComb had a lengthy arrest record.

Throughout the summer of 1964, the Klan operated with impunity in McComb. Klan member and wealthy Mississippi oil man J. E. Thornhill disassociated himself with the Klan on June 25, 1964 objecting to such activities as church burnings and house bombings. Thornhill, considered the top representative of the Klan in Mississippi, believed the Klan had lost control of its hoodlum rebels. Three initial arrests were made in the bombings by Pike County sheriff’s office followed by eight others arrested by the FBI; out of the eight, six were employees with Bryant at the I.C. Railroad.<sup>199</sup>

By the fall of 1964, moderate whites silent during the bombings realized news coverage of the events reached an international audience and began to assert responsibility. McComb’s bombing reputation and terrorist attacks hurt Main street retail as well. In protest, black consumers traveled south of the state border to shop in Louisiana.<sup>200</sup> The NAACP preferred boycotts to sit-in demonstrations as a way to inform white businesses of black buying power.

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<sup>198</sup> Governor Paul Johnson, Clarion- Ledger, Jackson, MS, October 1, 1964.

<sup>199</sup> Tupelo Journal, July 20, 1964, Starkville News, Oct. 6, 1964, Clarksdale Press Register, Oct 1, 1964.

<sup>200</sup> Joseph H. Crespino, In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 123.

The organization's 1961 annual convention had stressed the effectiveness of this strategy at the local branch level throughout the South. Negative press reports out of McComb also hurt the prospects in attracting new industries to the area and the state. On November 17, 1964, McComb "Citizens for Progress" a local group of moderates headed by attorney Robert Brumfield, issued a public Statement of Principles advocating a responsible approach to race relations. More than 600 signatures supported the document. The statement called for "peace, tranquility and progress"<sup>201</sup> in McComb. It included order and respect for law, removal of any economic threats against black or whites, improved communication between both races, increased participation in public affairs.<sup>202</sup> On the following day, November 18, 1964, local law enforcement, FBI agents and state patrolmen accompanied local members of the NAACP Pike County Branch and NAACP state leader Charles Evers with a delegation of twenty people who desegregated the Holiday Inn, The Palace Theater, The Woolworth's lunch counter and the bus station. In an interview, C. C. Bryant enjoyed a cup of gumbo at the Continental Hotel where the white waitress thanked them for coming and "even asked us to come back."<sup>203</sup> By late 1964 COFO had collapsed and with the VEP grant fund period over, the NAACP was free to continue their own registration efforts without the competition of other organizations.

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 had created a bi-partisan U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to monitor acts of deprivation of voting rights and discrimination practices in the administration of literacy and comprehension test and other acts of disenfranchisement. The Civil Rights Commission staff attorneys conducted investigations and reported cases of racial violence attributed to voting in and around Pike County during the period of 1964-1965. Bryant recounted the incidents of racial violence he experienced as testimony before the United States

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<sup>201</sup> McComb Enterprise-Journal, "Over 600 Sign Here", November 17, 1964.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> NAACP News Release, "NAACP Desegregates McComb, Mississippi", November 20, 1964.

Commission on Civil Rights, in Jackson, Mississippi from February 16-20, 1965. Bryant, along with other NAACP members testified at great risk to their own personal safety. The report concluded that African Americans in Mississippi had been denied access to the right to vote through official government action, fraud and violence. The Commission report submitted to congress along with the President Lyndon Johnson's voting rights bill was influential in the passage of the Voting Rights Act 1965.

A second VEP launched in 1965 under the Johnson administration after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Johnson sought support from the NAACP to build a base of black voters across the South. The campaign ran from 1965-1967. Grant support provided to local branches came upon the approval of Brooks and Patton. In 1965 the NAACP launched their version of the Freedom Summer project that recruited 260 volunteers to canvass communities during July and August. Members of SNCC and COFO had received the reputation as "scruffy-looking college students" a turnoff by both black and white southern standards. The NAACP volunteers were familiar with the organizations programs and mature enough to know this was not a direct action campaign. The NAACP extended the campaign and its resources. In McComb, the Pike County NAACP received grant support in the form of stipends for workers. Bryant's daughter Gladys Jackson assisted with the campaign by driving eligible voters to the office of the registrar.<sup>204</sup>

During the fall of 1965, Bryant and the Pike County branch continued integrating public places and expanding branch membership in Pike County. In a report to the Mississippi NAACP state office, Bryant detailed recent branch activities from September 25, 1965, "We tested all of the business places we could find, including the theater motel, drive-ins and

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<sup>204</sup> Library of Congress, NAACP Records Box III A, 266.

restaurants, without any incidents.”<sup>205</sup> In February, 1965, Robert Blow, Mississippi youth field director, reported fifty-five new members in the Pike County branch in two weeks. The Medgar Evers Pike County Youth Council, named for the slain leader, was assisting the adult NAACP branch in the field of employment, voter registration, school desegregation and testing of the public accommodations section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act<sup>206</sup>. Throughout 1965, Bryant continued to have considerable challenges with members of the Freedom Democratic Party and Delta ministry leadership in “carrying out some of the same critical activities...encountered with COFO group.”<sup>207</sup> For the national organization, the work of Bryant was considered invaluable to growing the NAACP against competing organizations. In a July 21, 1965 letter from Gloster B. Current to Bryant, he expressed, “Our most vulnerable point is the youth. We must not permit the total destruction of our youth program.”<sup>208</sup>

By May 1966, capital improvement elections in McComb saw a boost in black voters as a direct result of the 1965 campaign for Negro registrations. During the 1962 regular city election, McComb had a total of 3,300 voters, with an aggregate of 2,456 or some 74.3 percent of them casting ballots in the first primary. In one year the total increased by 54.2 percent to a total of 5,067 with an emphasis given to the qualifying Negroes voters as well as the legislative changes in the voting laws.<sup>209</sup> The concentrated Negro precincts, including Burgland and adjacent areas became the city’s biggest voting district. The improvement campaign included improvements on street repair, construction of a new city police station and jail, conversion of City Hall as well as construction of a new bridge. In an Enterprise Journal editorial: “There is little doubt that the enlarged distribution of votes will alter the customary means of political campaign in McComb.

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<sup>205</sup> C.C. Bryant, Pike County Branch Report, October 18, 1965.

<sup>206</sup> The Crisis. Freedom News. February, 1965.

<sup>207</sup> Gloster B. Current, Memorandum to Mr. Roy Wilkins and Dr. John Morsel, June 15, 1965.

<sup>208</sup> Gloster B. Current, personal correspondent to C.C. Bryant, July 21, 1965.

<sup>209</sup> McComb Electorate up 52.4 Percent This Year, McComb Enterprise Journal, May 17, 1966.

Heretofore there has been much emphasis placed upon racial matters. But with both white and colored people qualified to vote the proposition of race inevitably will be emphasized.... It is hoped that all people will vote not as area or racial blocks but citizens.”<sup>210</sup>

Throughout 1956-1967 the NAACP made significant contributions in mobilizing 1,569,455 new black voters to the ballot box done with the aid of local branches, leadership development, paid national staff and volunteers. By the time VEP funding ended in 1967 the oldest civil rights organization acknowledged its contribution and commitment from branch support. W.C. Patton delighted that; “The NAACP branches are striving day by day to help the Negro win a place in the sun not with fire bombs, bricks and bottles but by ever increasing our political strength.”<sup>211</sup> A 1968 report released by the SRC, a private biracial search agency, concluded that nearly a million newly registered voters in eleven Southern States would determine the outcome of the presidential race—almost a fifty percent increase since the 1964 election. The greatest surge came in Mississippi, with eight times as many Negro voters as 1964. The number rose from 28,500 in 1964 to 251,000 in 1968. A 1964 study suggested that the election of President Johnson was due primarily from the Negro support in the southern states of Florida, Tennessee, Arkansas and Virginia.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> NAACP Records IV A 64; Patton’s speech, October 5, 1967.

<sup>212</sup> NAACP Records III A, 266.

#### CHAPTER IV: C.C. BRYANT ET AL. VS. ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD

"But let justice roll down like waters And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Amos 5:24 (NASB)

The railroads played a major role in transporting people and products across the country. Across southern states, the railroads provided access to major northern cities Like Chicago and New York, far away from the menial jobs of domestic service and the backbreaking agricultural jobs in the Jim Crow South. In McComb, Mississippi, a Railroad town, the Illinois Central Railroad Company was the largest single employer. The lawsuit *C.C. Bryant et al. vs. Illinois Central Railroad*, proved to be a successful test case at the local level that had a national impact in reducing racial discrimination in the workplace. As a local union railroad chairman and a NAACP branch leader, Bryant worked within his sphere of influence through his union, the NAACP and the assistance from the federal government, to advocate for wider employment opportunities, better wages for black railroad employees and the desegregation of workers washroom facilities. Bryant's career with the Illinois Central Railroad Company began in 1942 until his retirement in 1979. Bryant also represented employees of the Illinois Central Railroad Company union Victory Lodge 1733, an organization of the Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks as the local chairman. The Victory Lodge 1733 was one of thirteen unions representing employees of the Illinois Central Railroad Company in Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Kentucky and Missouri. Regular craft employees of Illinois Central Railroad Company were subject to joining and paying union dues. If an employee working regularly in a

craft failed to join the union within sixty days as a new hire, The Illinois Central faced the necessity of “taking that employee out of service, the union insists upon such action.”<sup>213</sup> As a result, thorough records were kept of union membership, participation and dues.

Through the Railroad union affiliation, Bryant was a member of American Federation of Labor- Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) the largest Federation of Unions in the United States. The AFL-CIO mirrored the work of the NAACP in organizing and mobilizing members on state and national political policies. The AFL-CIO hosted leadership conferences on organizing. They published monthly newspaper reports following the congregational voting records and endorsed pro-labor candidates. AFL-CIO also lobbied for the passage of Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, 1964 and 1965. As a union member Bryant participated in the August 1963 March on Washington, aligning agendas with union workers and the civil rights campaign. Author Robert H. Zieger of *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865*, asserts that over 200,000 Americans of all ethnic and racial backgrounds participated in the March on Washington with at least one-fifth of those present represented labor unions. As much as the AFL-CIO openly supported the civil rights campaign, white southern union members joined the anti-integration White Citizens Councils.<sup>214</sup> In McComb, many of Bryant’s white AFL-CIO union members and Illinois Central Railroad coworkers were active members of the Ku Klux Klan. Bryant experienced personal attacks with the bombing of his home, church and barbershop. He also experienced overt acts of verbal harassment and racism on the job including a figure of him hung in effigy.<sup>215</sup> Following the bombings attacks during the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, Bryant continued to apply pressure in McComb for blacks to register to vote. For union men,

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<sup>213</sup>The Union Shop pamphlet of the Illinois Central Railroad Company, February 16, 1953.

<sup>214</sup> Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor In America Since 1865*, Lexington: Univ. Press of KY, 2007), 164.

<sup>215</sup> C.C. Bryant, interview by Gladys Bryant Jackson. Tape recording. McComb, Mississippi, March 23, 2004.



endorsing political candidates in support of labor was a vote for civil rights. In 1961 Martin Luther King addressed the AFL-CIO convention encouraging support of the black southern vote to gain the liberal agenda. Blacks, King urged, “will vote liberal and [with] labor because they need the same liberal legislation labor needs.”<sup>216</sup>

In 1946, President Harry S. Truman had appointed a special committee on the status of civil rights. The committee submitted its findings, followed by recommendations to improve conditions for people of color. The written report, “To Secure These Rights: the Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights,” called for an anti-lynching law, the abolition of the poll tax and laws to end racial barriers in education, housing, health care, desegregation of the military and the creation of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). On June 29, 1947, President Harry Truman addressed the NAACP 38th Annual Convention audience, the first president ever to do so. He declared in a speech broadcast nationally by radio that the federal government must take the lead in guaranteeing the civil rights of all Americans.<sup>217</sup>

A major victory for the NAACP came with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that prohibited discrimination based on race, color or national origin in employment policy and practices. Although the act made such discrimination illegal, enforcement of the law presented a greater challenge, especially for southern blacks. In response to the lack of enforcement to the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) investigated charges of discrimination in the workplace. Local NAACP leadership often took the responsibility of reporting, documenting and filing the complaints of discrimination to the

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>217</sup> [http://myloc.gov?Exhibitions/naacp/worldwarii/ExhibitObjects/TrumanSpeechoAnnualConference.aspx\(accessedJune 7, 2012\).](http://myloc.gov?Exhibitions/naacp/worldwarii/ExhibitObjects/TrumanSpeechoAnnualConference.aspx(accessedJune 7, 2012).)

EEOC. Contractors, corporations and businesses working with the government were to comply under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. In 1972 the amendments made to the Civil Rights Act expanded the work of the EEOC to include monitoring, hiring, and promotion practices of agencies receiving federal funds. Leading up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the John F. Kennedy administration (1961-1963) took a reserved approach in addressing matters of Civil Rights. Mainstream media coverage of violent racial attacks, pressure from civil rights groups and national public figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, forced Kennedy's administration to move forward on major civil rights legislation. The President's committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, chaired by then Vice President Lyndon Johnson under Executive Order 10925, established the committee to require all contractors doing business with the federal government to take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed and employees are treated fairly without regard to their race, creed, color or national origin.<sup>218</sup>

Throughout the late nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies cases supported by the NAACP and other civil rights groups, in conjunction with the EEOC, challenged the recruitment, job progression and promotion of the black workers. Racial discrimination in the workplace in the form of standardized and unrelated employment aptitude test, educational qualifications and seniority lists created unfair working conditions for blacks. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act expanded protection for employees and applicants for employment from discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex and national origin. Under Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act, the members of the NAACP, EEOC, Justice Department and Civil Rights lawyers in a concerted effort, filed class action lawsuits. The EEOC supported the legal suits as "friends of the court" (*amicus curiae*) and provided technical assistance to the complainants on

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<sup>218</sup> Terry H. Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action*, ( New York: Oxford Universities Press, 2004),60.

navigating through the legal channels.<sup>219</sup> As a strategy, NAACP local branches were expected to test cases on the rights of Negro citizens before the courts, where great injustices were done due to race or color prejudice.<sup>220</sup> The 1968 test case *C.C. Bryant et. al vs. Illinois Central Rail Road* applied the leadership model of the NAACP to remove legalized racial segregation and discrimination in the workplace. Up until this point, individuals wishing to file complaints of discrimination experienced lengthy and expensive legal or quasi-legal proceedings that, even when successful, typically resulted only in modest restitution.<sup>221</sup> Robert H. Zieger asserts in *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865*, historically, African Americans toiled in the hardest and most dangerous and least compensated occupations in the nonagricultural industries.<sup>222</sup> On the railroads, whites worked as conductors and engineers while blacks were relegated to back breaking work of laying, repairing and maintaining tracks. For African American workers inside of the railroad repair shops, whites blocked them from advancing to skilled craft positions like metal workers and denied access to white skilled trade unions.<sup>223</sup> For southern blacks, if employment discrimination were to be eliminated, any redress would not come through state and local government. As of the early nineteen sixties none of the southern states had adopted fair-employment measures; they demonstrated strident hostility toward any civil rights claims on the part of their largely disfranchised African American citizens.<sup>224</sup>

In the nineteen forties, the Illinois Central Rail Road hosted a series of community forums to

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<sup>219</sup> Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor In America Since 1865*, Lexington: Univ. Press of KY, 2007), 177.

<sup>220</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944) p. 822 Cf. also Ralph Bunch, "The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organization," "Research Memorandum Book No. 1, prepared for the Carnegie Myrdal Study, p.45

<sup>221</sup> Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor In America Since 1865*, Lexington: Univ. Press of KY, 2007), 151.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

discuss ways of improving relations with the black railroad workers. McComb Enterprise Journal newspaper editor, J. O. Emmerich, facilitated such discussions. However, after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was adopted, African American employees of the Illinois Central Railroad began to document discrimination in the workplace. The NAACP local chapter also formed an equal employment opportunity committee, educated on the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy and prepared to take action on racial discrimination. Illinois Central Railroad employee, Thomas J. Marshall, served with Bryant as an active member of the McComb Pike County NAACP as the vice president of the branch's equal employment opportunity committee. Early on, Bryant had engaged local Illinois Central Railroad staff regarding hiring black employees in accordance with the EEO policy. In September, 1963, Bryant was assured by the Illinois Central Railroad Trainmaster's secretary that hiring would be done in accordance with EEO opportunity policy. To inform employees and workers of their protected rights, the EEO produced posters on fair hiring practices. According to Bryant's sworn statement, in October, 1963, "I saw some EEO posters displayed on the Illinois Central premises in McComb, but for only a short time." According to the statement of Thomas J. Marshall, "IC [Illinois Central] shops posted on bulletin boards, entrances and exits, Equal Employment posters. Within 24 hours after they were posted I did not see them anymore."<sup>225</sup> As the local NAACP president it was Bryant's responsibility to investigate discrimination in the workplace. Bryant reported findings in discriminatory hiring, promoting and apprenticeship, segregated washrooms and the refusal of white labor unions to integrate. The NAACP's Director of Labor Herbert Hill was known for publicly criticizing racial discrimination by unions. In a 1959 *New York Post* article, Hill declared: "The real corruption

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<sup>225</sup> Affidavit of Thomas J. Marshall. February, 24, 1964.

of the American labor movement is not the fast-buck boys or the racketeers who have wormed their way in. The real corruption is moral. It's when unions say they're against discrimination and then go right on keeping Negroes out of membership and out of jobs. There's your real dry rot.”<sup>226</sup> In 1963 Bryant recorded incidents of racial discrimination at the Illinois Central Railroad. African Americans were denied opportunities to apply for the Illinois Central apprenticeship training program, a program that was subsidized by the Federal government. Bryant heard that “assistance was given to white applicants when taking the IC tests, whereas no assistance was given to Negro applicants.”<sup>227</sup> Hugh Miller, vice president of Local No. 975, the all Negro International Brotherhood of Fireman and Oilers, Roundhouse and Shop Laborers stated, “Since I have been a laborer there have been several white employee hired as laborers and upgraded to higher paid positions of helpers.”<sup>228</sup> Although the segregated signs of “white only” and “Black only” were no longer present, black employees complained of racially segregated washrooms and drinking fountains. Hugh Miller reported, “Those [washrooms and fountains] used by white employees are better than those used by Negro employees.”<sup>229</sup> In a statement by Thomas J. Marshall, “At the drinking fountains and rest rooms, the restrictive racial signs were obliterated by painting over with black paint where the “Colored” signs had been, and white paint where the “white” signs had been. The employees still use the same drinking fountains and rest rooms.”<sup>230</sup> There were also reports of unfair treatment of blacks by white labor foreman. In his testimony, Ben Washington reported “It has been my observation that the foreman make the Negro employees work harder than the white employees.” There

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<sup>226</sup> Steven Greenhouse, Herbert Hill, a Voice Against Discrimination, Dies at 80, New York Times, August 21, 2004.

<sup>227</sup> U.S. Postal Inspector, Affidavit of C.C. Bryant, McComb, Mississippi, February 24, 1964. NAACP Records, Part V: 1141, Bryant V. Illinois, Library of Congress.

<sup>228</sup> Statement by William Morgan, August 21, 196. Part V:11411, Bryant V. Illinois, Library of Congress.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> U.S. Postal Inspector, Affidavit of Thomas J. Marshall, February 24, 1964. NAACP Records, Part V:1141, Bryant V. Illinois, Library of Congress.

were reports of excluding black workers to maintain segregated unions, thus creating separate seniority lines by race. One worker's testimony reflected more than 10 years of experience in the wheel shop as a helper receiving a higher rate of pay but "was never placed on the helper's seniority list, I only held seniority on the laborer and material man lists." NAACP Labor Director, Herbert Hill criticized the role of the white unions in steering positions away from qualified blacks while promoting new positions to white relatives of union members. Ben Jackson another worker noted, "Most of the employees hired in the last six months have been white people. Some of them have been upgraded since they were hired." In another affidavit by black employee William Morgan stated, "The record will show that many of the [white] promoted Carmen helpers can hardly read or write."<sup>231</sup>

In a letter issued on February 15, 1965 to the Contract Compliance Examiner, Robert Q. Diver, Bryant advocated that Negroes employed by the Illinois Central Railroad be given equal and fair opportunities for promotion. All crafts be directed to accept Negroes within their ranking, files and membership and to encourage their promotion without regard to race, creed or color. Any craft or union guilty of continuous discrimination be denied their rights as a bargaining agency. All unions which support or endorse the apprenticeship program within their craft or on the railroad property be directed to implement an entrance program. Negro employees that carry hospitalization or traveler's insurance be given access to hospitalization and medical care on a non-discriminatory basis. All doctors who are employed by the railroad remove all signs designating race as a condition of discrimination against Negro employees come to a halt, or that all government contracts be cancelled forthwith. Bryant concluded, "These seven points that I have outlined in my humble opinion will give the Negro employee the needed assurance that he too has the status equal to that of any other employee and that it will encourage Negroes to strive

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<sup>231</sup> Statement by William Morgan, August 21, 1965. Part V:1141, Bryant V. Illinois, Library of Congress.

for greater advancement and greater incentives.”<sup>232</sup>

In August 20, 1965 in a letter to Herbert Hill, NAACP Director of Labor Program, affidavits of repeated discriminatory practices had been filed by C.C. Bryant. He appealed to NAACP Director of Labor Herbert Hill for assistance, “We call upon your office and the office of the legal department to exert every means at your command to halt these flagrant violations of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. We are further asking that no effort is spared in trying to see that Negro employees here at McComb and all of the Illinois Central Railroad shops be afforded their full rights as employees and American citizens.”<sup>233</sup>

On September 4, 1965, Bryant followed with correspondence to NAACP Clarence Mitchell in the Washington, national voting education director W.C. Patton, State Secretary and Field Administrator Charles Evers, “We shall continue to fight until victory is won. We stand behind you in your valiant fight for freedom for all.”<sup>234</sup> On behalf of the Illinois Central Railroad black employees’, the NAACP’s legal counsel and the EEOC met repeatedly regarding the acts in discrimination hiring, promoting, apprenticeship and the continued refusal of labor unions to integrate and the misrepresentation of Negro employees. By the fall of 1965, Bryant had received word from the Administrative Assistant, Contract Compliance Office in Washington, D.C. Arthur E. Czech that he “would cooperate with the EEOC to bring discrimination in McComb to an end.”<sup>235</sup>

In a November 11, 1965 letter to Herbert Hill NAACP National Director of Labor and Industry, C. C. Bryant wrote regarding complaints sent to NAACP national office against Illinois Central Railroad. The charges were forwarded for a thorough investigation, the Department of Justice

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<sup>232</sup> C.C. Bryant letter to Mr. Robert Q. Diver, February 15, 1965, NAACP Records, Part V:1141, Bryant V. Illinois, Library of Congress.

<sup>233</sup> C.C. Bryant, Letter to Herbert Hill Director of Labor Programs, August 20, 1965.

<sup>234</sup> C.C. Bryant, Letter to Charles Evers, September 4, 1965.

<sup>235</sup> C.C. Bryant, Letter to Charles Evers, October 18, 1965.

sent two attorneys to investigate the records and files of the employees of the Illinois Central Railroad. In a letter from the Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC), Director George L. Holland to C.C. Bryant on December 6, 1965, "We have received your communication alleging unlawful employment practices in violation of the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A field Representative from our office will contact you in the near future."<sup>236</sup>

A July 6, 1967 summary of the investigation charges based on racial discrimination revealed the Illinois Central Railroad Company restricted and refused black employees advanced job classifications. The company employment records indicated that prior to August 25, 1966, all Negro employees were classified as Laborers and Material men until conciliation efforts were initiated by the Federal government. The company refused to hire qualified black applicants. The report noted that after submitting an application, one such qualified applicant was severely beaten by a Klansman "who exercises a strong influence in the community of McComb, Mississippi."<sup>237</sup> A physical examination of the company grounds disclosed racially segregated sub-standard rest room facilities were still operational on company grounds. Black employees while the white employees occupy a building that is clean and in good repair. The report disclosed that the union did not fairly represent its African American members. In December of 1965 the previously all-black union 975 merged with the previously all white union Local 669. It was discovered the Local 669 refused to hold elections and meetings since the date of the merger. Union representative of Local 669 refused to provide any explanation for not holding meetings at the former site. Moreover, the investigation proved Local union 669 failed to

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<sup>236</sup> George L. Holland, Director of Compliance, Equal Employment Commission, Letter to C.C. Bryant, December 6, 1965.

<sup>237</sup> Equal Employment opportunity commission, Investigation and Summary of Charges in Bryant V. Illinois Central Railroad Company, July 6, 1967.



process any of its grievances of discrimination by black members.<sup>238</sup> In a July 17, 1967 letter to C.C. Bryant, the EEOC investigation found reasonable cause to believe “that unlawful employment practices with the meaning of Title VII of the Civil Rights ACT of 1964 had been committed.”<sup>239</sup> The EEOC attempted to eliminate the discriminatory practices through conciliation with the Illinois Central Railroad Company. Frustrated with the process of conciliation, Bryant made his complaints and concerns known all the way to the White House. On, November 28, 1967, Bryant received a letter from Vice President, Hubert H. Humphrey stating, “While I am not directly involved with the operations of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, I am still very interested in charges of discrimination and will be in touch with the Commission for a report regarding your case.”<sup>240</sup> Dissatisfied with the conciliation attempts with the Illinois Central Railroad Company regarding the charges of discrimination, the EEOC recommended Bryant pursue a civil action suit. In a letter to C.C. Bryant from the Acting Director of Compliance of the EEOC dated January 23, 1968 “This is to advise you that conciliation efforts in the above matter have failed to achieve voluntary compliance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, you are hereby notified that you may within 30 days of receipt of this letter institute a civil action in the appropriate Federal District Court.”<sup>241</sup> The NAACP was prepared to provide legal services for all of the plaintiffs desiring to file a suit against the Illinois Central Railroad on their behalf. As the charges developed into a legal suit, several of the initial complainants who had proven sworn affidavits of racial discrimination, refused the authorization of NAACP to file a class action civil suit on their behalf. Eventually, a Consent Decree was issued in *C. C. Bryant et al v. Illinois Central*

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Eric W. Springer, EEOC Director of Compliance, Letter to C.C. Bryant, July 17, 1967.

<sup>240</sup> Hubert H. Humphrey, Letter to C.C. Bryant, November 28, 1967.

<sup>241</sup> Office of the EEOC Acting Director, Letter to C.C. Bryant, January 23, 1968.

*Railroad*, Civil Action No. 4262.

In Bryant's December 20, 1970 state of address to the McComb Pike County Branch, he acknowledged a victory against the Illinois Central Railroad in an out of court settlement of \$2,000 in July, 1970. Bryant, NAACP attorneys and the Federal Government did win the battle and they continued to fight a war against the Illinois Central Railroad to enforce company policy on equal employment hiring practices and an end to segregated toilet facilities. In a June 2, 1971 letter to C.C. Bryant, personnel for the Illinois Central Railroad, claimed, "While locker and washrooms have been desegregated for years there was an unfortunate delay in our assigning lockers by lot."<sup>242</sup>

Throughout the nineteen seventies, McComb Pike County NAACP Branch continued to file complaints of Title VII violations against McComb based company's the Southern Wirebound Company and the Southwest Opportunity Incorporated. These strides made by efforts of local people like C.C. Bryant forced major corporations to comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, thus opening doors for employment and advancement for African Americans. Robert H. Zieger in *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865*, also asserts, "It soon became apparent that, however that the law's seemingly simple prohibition of racial discrimination was neither self-defining nor self-enforcing."<sup>243</sup>

Throughout the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies, The NAACP's national labor Director Herbert Hill continued to pressure labor unions to fully integrate and advocate for black members. The NAACP would file major racial discrimination complaints against, General Electric, Shell oil and Lockheed. Hill eventually resigned from the NAACP after a major Supreme Court ruling in favor of the Supreme Court ruling placed the responsibility of proving

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<sup>242</sup> McComb office Illinois Central Railroad Shop Superintendent, Dist. Material Superintendent and Master Mechanic, Letter to C.C. Bryant, Pike County Branch President, June 2, 1971.

<sup>243</sup> Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor In America Since 1865*, Lexington: Univ. Press of KY, 2007), 175.

discrimination on the plaintiff before the courts would view seniority systems in unions as discriminatory. Following the ruling, Hill said, “The AFL-CIO has used the Nixon court to get the heart out of Title VII.”<sup>244</sup>

Bryant remained employed by the Illinois Central Railroad until his retirement in 1979. As a Union man and NAACP president, Bryant would continue fighting and filing cases of discrimination and employment violations throughout his career. Although Bryant continued to pressure the Illinois Central Railroad for employment advancement for others, he never reached beyond the position of a crane operator.

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<sup>244</sup> Steven Greenhouse, Herbert Hill a Voice Against Discrimination, Dies at 80, New York Times, August 21, 2004.

## CONCLUSION

“Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

John 15:13 King James Version

The successful voting registration and education campaigns of the nineteen sixties created a strong black voting base in Mississippi. During the mid-nineteen seventies, white politicians interested in receiving the black vote, needed C.C. Bryant to vouch for their reputation. Longtime friend of Bryant Izeal Bennet, believed “Bryant lived as a, Christian man ...He didn’t see color as a barrier to get along. He saw it as a reason to go ahead and work together.”<sup>245</sup> Willing to work across racial lines, Bryant mentored political leaders both black and white. Former McComb Mayor and U.S. Representative Wayne Dowdy recalled Bryant as a peacemaker, “issues that otherwise might have been racially charged...I could always turn to Mr. C.C. Bryant as a calming influence so that both sides could come together and reach out to each other.”<sup>246</sup>

C.C. Bryant often quoted, “Use what language you will, you can never say anything but what you are.”<sup>247</sup> This quote by American poet, philosopher and transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, reflected Bryant’s lifelong commitment to undoing the injustices of racism. On December 10, 2007 C.C. Bryant exhaled his last breath; with his wife of 66 years Emogene by his side. In Bryant’s last family recorded interview in 2004 he spoke these words, “Despite losing those brave ones who gave their long years of untiring and devoted service to our cause, I continue to

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<sup>245</sup> Civil Rights Veteran C. C. Bryant Dead at 90, Picayune Item, December 11, 2007.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harvard Classics, Vol. 5, Essays & English Traits (New York: P.F. Collier & Son co., 1909-1914).

keep the faith, support the cause and run the race.”<sup>248</sup>

During his lifetime, Bryant maintained an extensive Civil Rights archive collection. On September 23, 2011 an arson fire, destroyed Bryant’s personal collection of his papers, reports, recordings, publications, awards and photos. One may never know exactly how much of this history has been lost but Bryant’s legacy continues to influence and shape movement history. McComb NAACP Pike County president, Anthony Witherspoon acknowledged whenever he traveled across the country doing civil rights work, “Mr. Bryant is known.”<sup>249</sup> This research presents a fraction of Bryant’s contribution to Civil Rights history. His story is still very much incomplete. Many voices were not included in this thesis project; however it is my desire to continue expanding this thesis through additional research and writing. It is my hope that his research will contribute to the existing Mississippi research movement history.

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<sup>248</sup> C.C. Bryant, interview with Gladys Bryant Jackson, March 23, 2004.

<sup>249</sup> Civil Rights Veteran C. C. Bryant Dead at 90, Picayune Item, December 11, 2007.

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