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AN AMERICAN PILGRIMAGE: THE 1968 POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN  
MULE TRAIN AS PROPHETIC SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Arch Dalrymple III Department of History  
The University of Mississippi

by

CHESTON M. BUSH

August 2021

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## ABSTRACT

In late spring of 1968, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) launched a nationwide demonstration known as the Poor People's Campaign in an effort to overcome poverty. Nine caravans representing people from around the country converged in the Capitol to petition Congress for programs that would broaden opportunities for poor Americans. This work examines the Mississippi contingent of the campaign, the Mule Train caravan, that consisted of roughly 150 people who traveled in 15 covered wagons pulled by about 40 mules. The Mule Train left Marks, Mississippi on May 13 and arrived in Washington, D.C. in time for a June 19 "Solidarity Day" celebration.

This dissertation documents the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train as a pilgrimage and focuses on the experiences of pilgrims who embarked on the five-week journey in pursuit of a transformed social condition. As a pilgrimage the Mule Train constituted a prophetic social performance. The Mule Train reflected the confessional alliance of the SCLC with traditions of faith calling entities, systems, and individuals to embody a vision of social harmony that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as the Beloved Community. Interpreting the Mule Train as a pilgrimage helps to frame pilgrims' exit from daily social space, their journey through a liminal phase of anti-structure, and their arrival to a locus of power before which they petitioned for economic change. Mule Train pilgrims engaged in a form of street theater that challenged conventional social structures on their way to appeal for an alternative social condition. This work ultimately links the journey of the Mule Train to a trend emerging in the late twentieth-century to establish sites significant to the civil rights tourism movement.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents Theresa Louise and Robert Lemuel Bush  
for their steadfast love and support.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

AME	African Methodist Episcopal
AP	Associated Press
BLAC	Black Liberation Action Council
COMINFIL	FBI File: “Communist Infiltration of the SCLC and J. Edgar Hoover’s Official and Confidential File on Martin Luther King, Jr.”
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CSA	Confederate States of America
DNC	Democratic National Convention
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FOR	Fellowship of Reconciliation
HUAC	House Committee on Un-American Activities
JCL	<i>Jackson Clarion Ledger</i>
MB	Missionary Baptist
MDAH	Mississippi Department of Archives and History
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
MIBURN	FBI File: “Mississippi Burning”
MT	Mule Train
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NCC	National Council of Churches
OEO	Office of Economic Opportunities

PPC	Poor People's Campaign
RNC	Republican National Convention
Q'TED	Quitman Tourism Economic Development
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
UPI	United Press International
USSC	United States Supreme Court
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I pause to recognize the many who have contributed to my academic journey I realize how difficult it is to sufficiently express my gratitude. Many names do not appear that probably should and some names that are listed once should appear multiple times for the numerous ways people have invested in me. I have attempted to stay brief, however, and opted to name individuals in the area where they made the greatest impact. Each of these impressed upon me the value that lies in this educational path and contributed to my journey along the way. Many more influenced me in classrooms, hallways, offices, or on walks across the beautiful campus where we are privileged to study. To all of these I owe my deepest appreciation.

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Thank you to dissertation committee members Anne Cafer, Chuck Ross, and Douglass Sullivan-Gonzalez, the latter of whom mentored me into the program and, now, faithfully mentors me out. It is impossible to offer sufficient thanks to my dissertation advisor Ted Ownby for his discernment and guidance in my research. Working with Ted has been a gift.

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I want to publicly thank my family for the ways they have fortified me in the journey. My parents Robert and Theresa Bush and my two brothers Cary Bush and Cort Bush never ceased to communicate their admiration for my educational pursuit. The support and encouragement of my wife Allie has meant more than the world to me. The inspiration to “pilgrim on” in search of new possibilities lies in my children Leah and Levi. They underwent their own transformations during my time in graduate school. As I studied, they matured into two wonderful adults, each with a penchant for intelligence, creativity, and zeal for life. I am blessed to walk this way with them. All of these and more have enriched my life and studies. For these I am truly grateful.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: REVERENCE, ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION, AND CIVIL RIGHTS TOURISM.....	26
CHAPTER 2: MAPPING AN AMERICAN PILGRIMAGE.....	53
CHAPTER 3: JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC VOICES OPPOSING THE POOR PEOPLE’S CAMPAIGN.....	109
CHAPTER 4: THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN PILGRIM PART ONE: ANNIE RANKIN AND THE LAWS OF CHANGEABLE JUSTICE.....	148
CHAPTER 5: THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN PILGRIM PART TWO: EDDIE LEE WEBSTER, JR. AND THE PROMISE FOR NEW OPPORTUNITY.....	178
CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF THE MULE TRAIN.....	205
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	219
VITA .....	233

## INTRODUCTION

On one of the final mass letters to be printed on Martin Luther King, Jr. letterhead, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) identified its latest project as a “last chance” effort to arouse the American conscience toward constructive democratic change. Apparently written by Dr. King before his assassination April 4<sup>th</sup> but distributed by the SCLC after his death, the letter lacked a complete date, listing only the month and year: April, 1968. At the bottom of the page a postscript soliciting contributions included a handwritten designee, “MLK, Jr. Foundation,” beneath a scratched-out designee, “SCL Foundation.” Though the exact context of the letter seems shrouded in ambiguity – whether it was drafted before or after Dr. King’s death and if after, by whom? – the SCLC sought to frame the strategy and goal of the Poor People’s Campaign (PPC) with great resolve: “A *pilgrimage of the poor* will gather in Washington from the slums and the rural starvation regions of the nation. We will go there, we will demand to be heard, and we will stay until America responds.”<sup>1</sup>

In late spring of 1968, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference launched a massive demonstration to combat poverty across the nation. Nine caravans representing geographical regions and people from around the country converged at the nation’s capital to petition Congress for programs that would broaden opportunities for Americans trapped in poverty. In large part, historians have regarded the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign as a colossal failure given the lack of government response to the demonstration. Unfortunately, historians have relegated

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<sup>1</sup> Letter on MLK, Jr. letterhead to “Friend” from MLK, Jr., April 1968. SCLC Papers. Folder 001563-002-0484. File: 2:20 Jan. 1968 – Aug. 1968.

the campaign to the occasional cursory reference that substantiated the decline and close of the civil rights movement following the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. Only a few historians have challenged the failure narrative by emphasizing the contributions of the PPC.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have mostly followed the paradigm that judges the effort a failure. Though it is true that Congress and much of the public responded negatively to the demonstration, accepting the idea that the Poor People's Campaign was a failure that signaled the conservative trend resisting civil rights legislation undermines the *prophetic* impact of the campaign. The declension narrative of the civil rights movement *silences* the Poor People's Campaign in unfortunate and unnecessary ways.<sup>3</sup>

This dissertation looks at the 1968 Poor People's Campaign not in terms of its results but in terms of its social performance. It focuses on the Mississippi-based contingent of the PPC, the Mule Train caravan that launched from Marks, Mississippi on May 13 and arrived to Washington, D.C. in time for a Juneteenth "Solidarity Day" celebration at Resurrection City. The Mule Train was long; it involved more than five weeks of travel. The Mule Train was slow; participants travelled in or walked alongside covered wagons pulled by mules. The Mule Train was arduous; participants weathered the elements of an inconveniently rainy spring. The Mule Train, however, was also inspiring. It drew attention, it garnered support and generated angst in

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<sup>2</sup> See Amy Nathan Wright, "The 1968 Poor People's Campaign, Marks, Mississippi, and the Mule Train: Fighting Poverty Locally, Representing Poverty Nationally," in *Civil Rights History From the Ground Up: Local Struggles, A National Movement*, edited by Emilye Crosby (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 109-146. Also, Gordon Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995). Trouillot argues that silences enter the process of historical production at four points: 1) Fact Creation, or *Sources*; 2) Fact Assembly, or *Archives*; 3) Fact Retrieval, or *Narratives*; and 4) Retrospective Significance, or *History in Final Instance*. Trouillot further asserts that any particular narrative holds a "bundle of silences." A close examination of the Mule Train prevents historians from centering the narrative of the Poor People's Campaign on negotiations with Congress and Capitol Hill's lack of response, and allows for one of the PPC's greatest performative messages to ring loud and clear.

the communities through which it passed, and it communicated messages about the social immobility of impoverished Americans. By focusing on the silence from American policy makers, historians have largely ignored the message performed by the campaign. I intend to correct this historiographical oversight by studying the Mule Train through the assertions participants performed step-by-step as they journeyed from “the poorest town in the poorest county in the poorest state in the nation,” as Dr. King referred to Marks, to the place PPC pilgrims regarded as the epicenter of American economic power: the U.S. Capitol.

This work will examine the Mule Train as a social performance by focusing on the departure, activity, behavior, and movements of the participants. Mule Train marchers willingly embarked on a lengthy five-week journey that could have more easily taken a day or two. They employed primitive transportation associated with animals of labor. They deepened their resolve and commitments by pausing at stations of respite – often connected with churches or cross-tradition communities of faith – for refreshment, inspiration, and renewal along the way. And marchers performed this journey in these ways in pursuit of a transformed social condition. Furthermore, this study examines the social performance of the Mule Train as *prophetic* in nature by recognizing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s confessional alliance with traditions of faith that call entities, systems, and individuals to embody a vision of *communitas*, social harmony, or, what the founding SCLC President Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Communitas” is a term used by anthropologist Victor Turner to express mass cooperation for a common goal. Richard Lischer traces a rhetorical shift in King’s language during the final years of his life that reflected a transition from “identification to rage;” King moved from “Beloved Community” talk to “Kingdom of God” language through which he announced the need for revolutionary reform. See Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

A case *can* be made for how the Southern Christian Leadership Conference *successfully portrayed* in Resurrection City the impact poverty had on many Americans in 1968. Poor infrastructure in the face of unrelenting natural elements (heavy rain and floods decimated the campground), the threat of theft and violence (reports of rogue gang members undermined the vision of a peaceable community the SCLC sought to portray), segregation into racial sectors in the camp (people tended to gravitate toward persons of similar racial and ethnic background in the face of community instability), and accusations from observers that the PPC posed a health hazard to the rest of the city, all characterized ways the American poor experienced stigmatization and alienation from the greater American capitalist experiment on a daily basis in large cities and small towns across the country. The failures so often attributed to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the Poor People's Campaign are, in fact, only ways the American economic system failed to accommodate social and economic change for those working to abandon a life mired in poverty. Thus, the success-failure question gets turned on its head when approached from the perspective of social performance by the poor as opposed to economic liberalism by the powerful.

The Mule Train demonstrates that a more meaningful and revealing narrative of the Poor People's Campaign is not one based on economic outcome though that did lay at the heart of the SCLC's goal. Instead, this study focuses on the journey several thousand poor Americans set out on in pursuit of a transformed social condition. Interpreting the Mule Train, in particular, as a *pilgrimage* offers a path for observing the autonomy, agency, and creativity poor pilgrims demonstrated amid a dearth of options. Pilgrimage recognizes the personal and collective aspirations and goals of pilgrims in ways that an economic outcome-based interpretation fails to recognize.

This approach to the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train builds on the work of historians who view the civil rights movement – specifically activity driven by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference – as religious activity grounded in a theologically-informed vision of a just society. Historians David L. Chappell, Charles Marsh, and Richard Lischer argue that though historians often cast the civil rights movement as a secular crusade that merely employed religion to further its cause, the movement itself was religious to the core. Activists drew from their Christian faith to articulate a vision for social transformation. Marsh interprets the movement as one engaged in “theological drama,” and says the plotline within which faith-driven activists were caught up transcended political or economic achievement.<sup>5</sup> Chappell argues the civil rights movement operated in solidarity with a prophetic tradition that stood fundamentally at odds with western liberalism. He asserts that Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders aligned themselves with voices in American history, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, who grounded their mission in the role of the Old Testament prophet, calling a wayward society to repent and reform. Western liberalism, says Chappell, interprets society in terms of progress, continually issuing calls for improvement, not reform.<sup>6</sup> Religious conviction, therefore, operates at a deeper level than mere rhetorical device; people of faith are motivated by ideas about redemption, renewal, and social transformation.

This study parts ways with the works of these historians, however, by focusing less on the theological vision for social transformation that movement leaders crafted and planned, and

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Marsh, “The Civil Rights as Theological Drama,” *Modern Theology*, 18:2 (April 2002), 236.

<sup>6</sup> David L. Chappell, Chapter One, “Niebuhrisms and Myrdaleries: The Intellectual Roots of the Civil Rights Movement Reconsidered,” in *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South*, edited by Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 3.

Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 2. Charles Marsh emphasizes how the Christian faith offered the civil rights movement a sustaining vision for social transformation. He sees “the beloved community as the realization of divine love in lived social relation.”



more on the performance of those who set out on this very public yet deeply personal journey with hopes, values, and aspirations of their own. Drawing inspiration from Robert Orsi's study of Harlem's Italian immigrant community in *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, this study seeks to understand the motivations and experiences of Mule Train participants by studying their journey. Orsi's examination of the ways immigrants from southern Italy expressed devotion to the Madonna of Mount Carmel led him to conclude that even to participate in the annual *festa* procession was to witness "sacred street theater."<sup>7</sup> "The streets became a stage," says Orsi, "and the people revealed themselves to themselves."<sup>8</sup> The *Madonna del Carmine* had, herself, undergone a grand pilgrimage across the Atlantic when she was brought from the town of Polla in the province of Salerno where many of Harlem's immigrant community shared origins. She was more than a stationary icon to which Catholic immigrants appealed for protection and safety, says Orsi. The Madonna represented a drama that supplicants acted out in ritual performance.<sup>9</sup> Just as the women, men, boys, and girls of Harlem paraded down a New York City street with the Madonna lifted high above their heads, activists performed to communicate a message in the Mule Train procession. The streets of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Washington, D.C. became a stage where members of the Poor People's Campaign dramatized poverty and performed an appeal for social transformation.

While this study grounds the Mule Train, therefore, in a historiographical trend that identifies the fundamental role theology plays in the movement, I recognize with Orsi that performance itself communicates belief or conviction. In her study of Clarence Jordan and his project to form an interracial agriculture community in pursuit of racial equity called Koinonia

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<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985 & [2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.] 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, xlvii.

<sup>9</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, 163.

Farm in Americus, Georgia, Ansley Quiros helps distinguish between Marsh's Project on Lived Theology and a project like Orsi's that focuses on performed religion. "Simply put, lived religion examines action to understand belief while lived theology examines belief to understand action," wrote Quiros.<sup>10</sup> The Mule Train represents a coming together of both of these ideas: lived theology and lived religion. SCLC officials crafted the campaign but people on the ground performed it, often with reasons of their own. This juncture – a path carved by administrative, albeit theological, minds but traversed by autonomous souls – reinforces why *pilgrimage* serves as a particularly incisive vehicle for understanding the Mule Train journey regardless if pilgrims ever uttered, or even understood, its theological basis.<sup>11</sup>

By interpreting the Poor People's Campaign as a pilgrimage, historians gain tools for recognizing the aspirations of PPC participants with greater clarity. The concept of pilgrimage helps to frame PPC pilgrims' exit from daily social space, their entering into a liminal phase of anti-structure, and their journey to a locus of power before which they petitioned for social change. The Mule Train, in particular, offered pilgrims an alternative route and travel experience that both *prefigured* the message of transformation heralded in Resurrection City and *performed* the hopes of individual participants. PPC Mule Train pilgrims intentionally engaged in a unique form of social performance in route to the national demonstration in Washington, D.C. that demanded more time, effort, and attention from pilgrims as each focused on her and his personal goals. Mule Train pilgrims willingly entered a period of time and employed a means of transportation that not only removed them from conventional social structures, but challenged

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<sup>10</sup> Ansley L. Quiros, *God With Us: Lived Theology and the Freedom Struggle in Americus, Georgia, 1942-1976* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Anthropologist Victor Turner reminds that in the study of ritual symbology and pilgrimage, "the focus of study is [about] meaningful performance, rather than underlying competence." Victor Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, (New Delhi, India: Naurang Raj Concept Publishing Company, 1979), Appendix, 143.

those structures while appealing for an alternative social condition. An anthropological analysis of pilgrimage for understanding the PPC Mule Train offers not just a religious perspective of an American episode; it explores the fundamental human processes that inform social change in both pre- and post-industrialized societies.

Understanding the PPC Mule Train as a pilgrimage opens historians to interpret all manner of demonstrations, within the civil rights movement and beyond, as a liminal phase that challenges the prevailing cultural and economic system. This approach, furthermore, discourages interpreting an event in terms defined by cultural centers of power – in this case, success or failure tends to be defined more often by congressional action – and encourages interpreting the movement from the perspective of those envisioning change, the pilgrims. Pilgrimage, therefore, changes the nature of the success question; the question is not whether supplicants received their petition, but how faithful they were to perform the pilgrimage. Thus, one woman living at Resurrection City donned a t-shirt for the occasion expressing these sentiments on her back: “How can we lose when we’re so sincere?”<sup>12</sup>

This *is not* to say that it doesn’t matter that the PPC did not acquire the kinds of programs they sought. It *does* matter and Congress should have responded. It *is* to say, however, that the fact that the PPC did not secure economic reform for all Americans *is not* a sufficient reason to stop talking about the campaign and its vision for social transformation. The PPC and the Mule Train live on in American memory as *incubators of poetic imagination*.<sup>13</sup>

Confronting our tendency to value social movements on the basis of their success rather than the power of their vision, Robin D.G. Kelley suggests the impact of social movements lies

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<sup>12</sup> Jill Goodman, *Old News: Resurrection City*, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1970), 59.

<sup>13</sup> “Incubators” is a word Robin D.G. Kelley uses for talking about social movements. “Poetic Imagination” is a phrase inspired by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann in *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

in their ability to produce alternative dreams and visions that inspire future generations to continue to struggle for change.<sup>14</sup> If we only measure the importance of a movement for its immediate results, argues Kelley, we are forced to admit that “virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact.”<sup>15</sup> But as incubators of new knowledge, says Kelley, progressive social movements do what poetry does. They have the power to transport us to another place where we are enabled to imagine a new society. He calls what these movements offer, “poetic knowledge.”<sup>16</sup>

Kelley’s approach to social movements inspired Brian Purnell’s study of the mass “stall-in” that the Brooklyn chapter of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) planned for the 1964 World’s Fair. CORE organized volunteer drivers to purposely run out of gas, thereby forcing Fair-goers to exit congested highways and reroute their vehicles through urban streets where they would observe the poverty reinforced by the institutional racism of New York. Though the plan failed to fully materialize, mere rumors of the operation unleashed anxiety in city and fair planners who feared the demonstration would lead to violence. Purnell argues that the very *undoing* of CORE’s plan revealed its impact on society and he claims the episode is “indicative of one of history’s silent successes” for the vision it generated, even though contested by city leaders.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), Preface, ix. \*Kelley is Distinguished Professor and Gary B. Nash Endowed Chair in U.S. History at UCLA’s Department of History.

<sup>15</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), Preface, ix.

<sup>16</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Purnell, “‘Drive Awhile for Freedom’: Brooklyn CORE’s 1964 Stall-In and Public Discourses on Protest Violence,” ch. 2 in *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 66. “Roy Wilkins of the NAACP dismissed the stall-in and marginalized its organizers as “strictly Brooklynese,” and James Farmer, national director of CORE, suspended the Brooklyn chapter for its plans to go through with the stall-in.” p. 63. Labeling the stall-in as inherently “violent” automatically placed it outside conventional methods of direct-action protest, which allowed citizens, politicians, and editorialists to ignore its call to end all forms of racial exploitation. p. 68.

The Poor People's Campaign Mule Train successfully portrayed poetic imagination for the country by rerouting poverty, itself, through the South and to the Capitol. By studying the passage as a pilgrimage, we see ways the demonstration was intimately connected to contexts already invested in a movement for social reform. Marks, Mississippi was where Martin Luther King, Jr. was riveted by the sight of hungry children. He had gone there to preach the funeral of Armstead Phipps, a man who died of a heart attack while participating in James Meredith's "March Against Fear."<sup>18</sup> Grenada, Mississippi, is the place the SCLC launched a movement among the young to desegregate public schools in 1967. The only fully-staffed SCLC office outside of Atlanta operated in Grenada's historic Belle Flower Missionary Baptist Church. Birmingham, Alabama was where four young girls were killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Grappling with death on the journey – King had been killed a month earlier and Robert Kennedy was shot while the Mule Train camped in Birmingham – Mule Train pilgrims held a memorial service in that same church. Atlanta, Georgia was where small-business owner Lester Maddox won political support from white Georgians when he refused to abide by federal orders that would integrate his diner. While Governor in 1968, Maddox promptly had the pilgrims arrested for operating non-motorized vehicles on Interstate 20 as soon as they crossed the Georgia state line. Each place contextualized the passage of the Mule Train, giving shape to the vision of social transformation the pilgrims performed. Collectively, these sites and the path that linked them became the liminal passage through which pilgrims *generated* meaning that challenged established cultural sub-systems.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hilliard Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train: Marks, Mississippi – Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Origin of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign Mule Train Journey* (Xlibris LLC, 2014), 81.

<sup>19</sup> Victor Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, (New Delhi, India: Naurang Raj Concept Publishing Company, 1979), 37.

Pilgrimage studies are surprisingly underdeveloped in the field of History and fairly young in the field of Anthropology. The religious, spiritual, or mystical motivations pilgrims attach to pilgrimage have, perhaps, discouraged researchers across the disciplines from giving the subject serious attention. Anthropologist Victor Turner – to whom new interest in pilgrimage studies has been credited – lamented in a book of essays published in 1992 that though hundreds of millions of people enter pilgrimage each year and though the practice shares ancient roots across cultures, religions, and traditions around the world, the subject has suffered neglect and near rejection as a legitimate object of study by anthropologists, historians, sociologists, historians of religion, and social psychologists.<sup>20</sup> An anthropological study of pilgrimage, however, moves beyond the religious framework in which pilgrimage is often embedded to explore matters fundamental to the human condition. Pilgrimage studies enters “a conversation about life, suffering, and the pursuit of ideals and salvation.”<sup>21</sup>

Turner defines pilgrimage as a path from one social space to another by building on anthropologist Arnold van Gennep’s work on *rites of passage*. The three phases involved in rites of passage – separation, transition, and incorporation – are often performed in physical, geographical movement even as they represent transformation in social condition.<sup>22</sup> Building on Turner’s thesis, Alan Morini interprets pilgrims’ aspiration to enter pilgrimage as “the desire for resolution to problems of all kinds that arise within the human situation. The belief,” says Morini, “is that somewhere beyond the known world [or, at least, beyond one’s immediate environment] there exists a power that can make right the difficulties that appear so insoluble

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<sup>20</sup> Victor Turner, “Foreword” in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, edited by Alan Morinis (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), vii. This work was published nine years after Turner’s death in 1983.

<sup>21</sup> Alan Morinis, “Preface,” in *Sacred Journeys*, x.

<sup>22</sup> Victor Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*, 17.

and intractable here and now. All one must do is journey.”<sup>23</sup> The pilgrim, therefore, departs from her or his social world, embarks on a voyage free of daily social constraints – a step in the process Turner refers to as “anti-structure” – and petitions power for a changed social condition.

The journey of pilgrimage, itself, represents an “extended liminal phase” representing the middle of van Gennep’s rites of passage [separation, *transition*, incorporation].<sup>24</sup> Van Gennep uses *limen* – Latin for “threshold” – to identify the period of in-between-ness that exists for persons undergoing or aspiring social transformation.<sup>25</sup> An extended liminal phase represents a kind of protracted threshold, or “tunnel,” through which agents both navigate and generate meaning at the interfaces of established cultural systems.<sup>26</sup> Fraught with ritual symbols and representing an inversion of normal reality, this portion of the passage reflects pilgrims’ (or “novices,” in keeping with van Gennep’s premise about rites of passage as the middle element in identity conversion) temporarily undefined social state. Unrestrained by structural obligations, novices often *play* with their liminal social status, identifying with nonsocial or a-social powers over life and death by expressing close connection with animals, the dead or ghosts, and ancestors.<sup>27</sup> Liminality is, therefore, both more creative and destructive than the structural norm, empowering those in pilgrimage to imagine new iterations of themselves and society while challenging current social systems.<sup>28</sup>

Pilgrims on the Mule Train embraced this liminal, anti-structural phase in creative street performance. They examined and explored society through a-social powers that characterized

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<sup>23</sup> Alan Morinis, “Introduction,” in *Sacred Journeys*, 1. Words in brackets are mine.

<sup>24</sup> Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Turner identifies differences between pre-industrialized and industrialized societies, recognizing that a communal social imperative is at work in pre-industrialized or tribal society whereas individual choice and social initiative lie at the heart of social transformation in industrialized society.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*, 44.

novitiates' liminality. Pilgrims' affiliation with animals of labor, the forty or so mules in rotation for pulling fifteen covered wagons, quite literally served as the primary vehicle through which pilgrims enacted their otherworldliness. They also expressed sensitivity about death and the dead's impact on the living. One pilgrim recounted fifty years later that he remembered Dr. King visited with them during the journey.<sup>29</sup> Some may argue that the Mule Train, itself, reflected an extended procession that began with the wagon bearing King's casket from the funeral to the grave.<sup>30</sup> Even travelling to a place called "Resurrection City" was bound to impress the imaginations of travelers. As was the case in many civil rights demonstrations, death and its potential never loomed far from participants' minds.

The ancestors with whom pilgrims chose to identify, however, are those commonly associated with Frederick Jackson Turner-esque notions of the American frontier.<sup>31</sup> Wagon master Willie Bolden said he and marchers reflected on the lives of American pioneers who pursued a new life west. They felt a kinship with these early pilgrims and concluded the pioneer means of travel by mule train was very similar to the PPC march.<sup>32</sup> Though limited by pop-culture American historical mythology, Mule Train pilgrims articulated their march in solidarity with pioneering forebears by turning *east* in search of a radically different frontier or social

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. by the author. Webster's account is explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>30</sup> Hilliard Lackey, *Marks, Martin and the Mule Train*, 22. "This was the wiping of Martin's tears, albeit posthumously." Lackey continues on page 34, "In Marks, Dr. King became bigger in death than he was in life. In his name, may God rest his soul, blacks were emotionally ready to rise up and continue his cause."

<sup>31</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner first presented his paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" for the American Historical Association that met in Chicago during the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Turner's Frontier Thesis, as it has come to be known, came to shape ideas about American pursuits and development following the closing of the continental frontier. Turner argued that Americans must find "new frontiers" in the form of ideas, technology, and industry to continue developing as a people and a nation. For more on Turner's Frontier Thesis see *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays*, with commentary by John Mack Faragher, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Press, 1998), 44. "Willie J. Bolden, Reflections on Georgia Politics," Willie Bolden Interviewed by Bob Short, October 7, 2009. Russell Library Oral History. Published on April 19, 2012. ROGP 088. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuCKT-vO4Eo>. Accessed July 10, 2018.



world, perhaps gesturing toward a reversal of *manifest destiny* expansion and the ideology that informed it.

This study is not the first to champion the Mule Train as social performance or to suggest that it and other social movements embody a liminal quality. In her account of the Poor People's Campaign, Amy Nathan Wright describes the Mule Train as "a moving political theater, displaying southern poverty for all in its path."<sup>33</sup> She augmented her 2007 dissertation at the University of Texas, "Civil Rights' 'Unfinished Business': Poverty, Race, and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign," with numerous interviews conducted with Mule Train participants.<sup>34</sup> Wright challenges the failure narrative, arguing that participants enjoyed unique success at both displaying the plight and condition of the rural poor and fostering a sense of community along the way. She credits an integrated workforce mobilized within physically and emotionally challenging conditions for sending a message to the nation that the rural poor, though left behind, were doing their part to move forward. The Mule Train successfully confronted American capitalism, says Wright, in ways Resurrection City failed to accomplish.

Though this emphasis on the Mule Train as social performance is similar to the one articulated by Wright, my analysis of the Mule Train through the lens of pilgrimage provides important insight for understanding the impassible threshold poor Americans encountered when seeking to change their social and economic condition. Rooted in the study of *rites of passage*, pilgrimage offers a path for understanding the journey from the perspective of the pilgrims who fully believed that a single power complex held the keys to their transformation. Victor Turner

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<sup>33</sup> Amy Nathan Wright, "The 1968 Poor People's Campaign," *Civil Rights History From the Ground Up: Local Struggles, A National Movement*, edited by Emylee Crosby, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 112. Amy Nathan Wright, "Civil Rights 'Unfinished Business': Poverty, Race, and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign," (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2007). Wright's dissertation contains one chapter on the Mule Train.

<sup>34</sup> Wright interviewed participants Irene Collins, Samuel McCray, Bertha Burres Johnson, Doris Shaw Baker, & Augusta Denson. Footnotes in Crosby's edition.

identifies how pilgrimages in industrialized societies share a sense of process for social transformation with non-industrialized societies' initiations. Whereas initiation in non-industrialized society, however, is often a culturally-mandated, irreversible, one-way process that transforms the status of the initiand, "pilgrimage is part of a life-long drama of salvation or damnation, hinging on individual choice" whereby the pilgrim may accept or reject the graces or gifts offered by a deity or center of power.<sup>35</sup> Pilgrimage reckons with the capacity for pilgrims to petition a cultural center for change, contest the very cultural system that supports it, and search for alternative symbols of meaning along the way.

Wright also explored the liminality of the PPC in a 2008 article published in the sociology journal, *Leisure Studies*. By framing the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 within a broader set of social events that mixed aspects of labor and leisure – such as the 1967 "Summer of Love" in San Francisco and the Woodstock Music Festival of 1969 – Wright argues the PPC blurred the lines between labor and leisure to create a liminal space for individuals to enjoy increased autonomy, the freedom of self-expression, and the opportunity to do so without assuming the financial burden that middle-class and elite leisure activities demanded.<sup>36</sup> Wright further argues that the PPC released participants from a stigma of laziness that elite classes often attached to the leisure activities of the poor when they rested on porches or gathered on corner stoops.<sup>37</sup>

To reiterate, the study of the Mule Train as pilgrimage provides a broader framework through which to understand liminal phases. Yes, labor and leisure lose rigid polarity in transitional process, however this dynamic belongs to a more nuanced notion of liminal anti-

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<sup>35</sup> Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> Amy Nathan Wright, "Labour, Leisure, Poverty and Protest: the 1968 Poor People's Campaign as a Case Study," *Leisure Studies* Vol. 27 (Oct. 14, 2008): 443-458.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, "Labour, Leisure, Poverty," 447.

structure. Pilgrimage also links process to place in ways that the social events Wright gestures toward lack. For Woodstock or the Summer of Love the importance of place is limited to destination, whereas for the PPC pilgrimage, place figures prominently throughout the journey offering Duck Hill, Mississippi equal consideration to Washington, D.C. My research will build on Wright's intervention to the historiography by exploring the daily passages of this moving community and paying close attention to the communities through which this caravan travelled.

Questions important for researching the Mule Train as pilgrimage address participant motivations, experiences, and behaviors. What compelled members of the Mule Train to embark on such an arduous journey while other paths to D.C. promised less sacrifice in time and effort? Their hard work and investment fly in the face of a critique of the poor as lazy and shiftless. What social status did PPC Mule Train participants seek to discard and what social status did they seek to acquire? What vision of society did the Poor People's Campaign and, specifically, the Mule Train set out to perform? What happened along the way? What does this pilgrimage look like in the daily plodding along, the conversations, the struggles, the work, the challenges, the irritations, the coming-to-terms with oneself and others?

This approach also provides the space to analyze pilgrims' notions of family, gender, sexuality, and race within the travelling community. How did sex and gender factor into the motivations and experiences of pilgrims on the Mule Train? Families, including both dual- and single-parent family units, participated in the demonstration with small children, some still wearing diapers and drinking formula. What did parents hope to accomplish and how did they navigate a sense of family in the journey? Did race factor into the Mule Train experience in ways similar or different from the broader interracial component associated with the PPC in Resurrection City? Did the racial constitution of the pilgrimage *communitas* change over the

course of the journey, or take on different characteristics in the various communities where the Mule Train stayed?

An important part of this study examines how various cities and towns served as pilgrimage stations in the journey. What was happening in these places and how did it prepare the community, positively or negatively, to receive the caravan? How did sites of respite reinforce participants' liminal social status as pilgrims and, thus, performers for social change? How did the public – community members, the press, observers – interpret the efforts of the Mule Train pilgrims? What happened on stops in the new and different cities? Were the communities familiar to some participants and not to others? How did individuals experience these stops?

A fundamental question that undergirds all of this study is how a demonstration of this magnitude could, for the most part, fall from the historical narrative. A social performance of this scale with a vision for social transformation that marries democratic and economic reform with religious fervor surely merits consideration in U.S. History survey courses beyond a nod to the decline of the SCLC following King's death. The PPC Mule Train offers iconic images and storytelling that demonstrate the heart and mission of pilgrims in pursuit of a transformed social condition. If it is remembered with precision and sensitivity for context, the Mule Train can persist as a "pilgrimage of the poor" with the power to overshadow existing American pilgrim narratives.

### **Mule Train as Media**

The Mule Train expressed alternative media for Americans to witness activists forging unconventional passages for pilgrims pursuing change, critiquing culture, and exhibiting a more

equitable way of living in community. Historian Amy Nathan Wright has recognized the dramatic political theater the Mule Train displayed in its mission to amplify the voice of the poor.<sup>38</sup> This research contemplates ways Mule Train street theater exhibited the cause of the Poor People's Campaign as art. As twentieth-century philosopher of Media Theory Marshall McLuhan argued, art gives society new awareness of itself through an intensification of its sensory life.<sup>39</sup> The Poor People's Campaign displayed art in motion when pilgrims employed animals of labor to pull primitive vehicles on contemporary interstate roadways.

As the Mule Train neared Atlanta, Georgia and Resurrection City campers prepared for its largest rally to date at the June 19 Solidarity Day celebration, *TV Guide* published its June 8-14 issue to keep Americans informed of their entertainment options. In contrast to images of pop culture icons that typically laced the front cover of the weekly magazine, this issue portrayed an original Salvador Dali painting. In the painting two thumbs emerged from a barren ground, depicting TV screens in place of thumbnails. "TV is a tactile mode of perception," McLuhan argued in reference to the Dali painting. "Touch is the space of the *interval*, not of visual connection."<sup>40</sup> Offering commentary for a culture coming to experience and shape itself through the growing popularity of television, McLuhan challenged the public to understand TV as a medium with a message of its own and to consider its power to reorganize peoples' lives. How could television be tactile? he asked. "The *effects* of new media on our sensory lives are similar to the effects of new poetry," McLuhan answered himself. "They change not our thoughts but the structure of our world."<sup>41</sup> McLuhan understood that the technological medium was an extension

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<sup>38</sup> Amy Nathan Wright, "The 1968 Poor People's Campaign, Marks, Mississippi, and the Mule Train: Fighting Poverty Locally, Representing Poverty Nationally," in *Civil Rights History From the Ground Up: Local Struggles, A National Movement*, edited by Emilye Crosby, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 112.

<sup>39</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "Foreword," in *The Interior Landscape: The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan, 1943-1962*, edited by Eugene McNamara, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1969), xiv.

<sup>40</sup> McLuhan, "Foreword," *The Interior Landscape*, xiv.

<sup>41</sup> McLuhan, "Foreword," *The Interior Landscape*, xiv.

of humanity, not a perception by humanity, and he argued for new awareness that technology provides alternative landscapes for social interaction.

In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan further examines technology as an extension of human agency. When he argues that the medium *is* the message, McLuhan asserts that new technology creates social consequences for rescaling human interaction – that is, as tools extend human reach and scope they fundamentally change how humans relate to one another, not just how humans relate to the tool. For instance, says McLuhan, “the railroad did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society.” These tools were present in various iterations of human mobility. What the railroad did, however, was to accelerate and enlarge “the *scale* of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure.”<sup>42</sup> The medium of technology alters human sociability, political and economic realities, and public consumption.

As a medium for communicating the message of The Poor People’s Campaign, the Mule Train made a statement using transportation technology to critique the vast inequity present in the American economy. Pairing nonmotorized vehicles with roadways designed for high-speed traffic was one way the Mule Train portrayed dissonance in its theatrical message. Employing animals associated with labor to pull those nonmotorized vehicles driven on roads built for high-speed traffic offered additional messaging. The country continued to leave behind elements of the American population who associated themselves with a labor force, outdated though that force was, which supported economic wealth for much of the country. Similar to ways the mule was becoming employed less for essential services performed on a farm, poor southerners –

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<sup>42</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), 8. Italics mine.

particularly southern blacks – found employment unavailable or insufficient for overcoming impoverishment.

As a medium for communicating the message of the Poor People's Campaign, the Mule Train invited witnesses to behold the economic gap separating southern blacks from wealth-building associated with a new-technology agricultural industry. The Mule Train expressed this message through a retro-tech apparatus: pilgrims employing mule-drawn wagons to travel American highways in pursuit of economic transformation. The *cool medium* communicating this critique of American society, however, required audiences to also, in some way, participate in the poetry that was the Mule Train. Witnesses interpreted what they saw and experienced in the southern PPC caravan, often applying rationale for the economic gap poor Americans suffered that, as Chapter Three will show, contradicted the message of the campaign. The Mule Train, therefore, was both a tool that pilgrims used to reach their destination, Washington, D.C., and a medium through which pilgrims *and* audiences came to understand the pilgrims' mission as they traveled.

To get at a more nuanced understanding of the implications accompanying this device of retro-technology, it is important to consider again the ways Marshall McLuhan examines the influence of media on culture. McLuhan recognized a spectrum of media as *hot* or *cold* in its capacity to communicate messaging. Mediums fit into this hot-cold spectrum according to the level of participation they require from their audience. Hot mediums, or media, require low participation from audiences. The hot medium does the work for the person using the technology, such as a movie or radio. Users of these media render themselves passive agents to the influence of that particular technology. Cold media, however, invite higher participation from users of the technology, such as the telephone. Participants employ the tool whereby they send

and receive additional messages, engaging at a higher level than those observing a story in film. McLuhan also attributes the hot-cold spectrum to messages within media technology. A cartoon in a newspaper, therefore, offers a cool medium that invites readers to interpret and apply its meaning, whereas an article in the same newspaper provides the writer's interpretation and application within the column. McLuhan argues that media have different effects on users depending on the level of participation required.<sup>43</sup>

The dynamic impact the Mule Train offered culture appeared in the way pilgrims brought historical artifact to bear upon contemporary 1968 in an effort to cast a vision for change in the twentieth century. McLuhan created a diagram he called the Tetrad that examined all new technology in the context of its relationship to that which preceded it. Media forms, argued McLuhan, intensify aspects of culture while making obsolete other aspects. Media forms also retrieve historical factors of culture even as they undergo certain modifications or reversals. According to McLuhan, humans' use of technology says something about both the past and the future. Since "all media and technologies have a fundamentally linguistic structure," we see that the Mule Train sought to communicate critical truths about pilgrims' experiences in everyday life by the way they used mule and wagon technology to petition Congress in 1968.<sup>44</sup>

McLuhan used an observation by Australian economist Robert Theobald to demonstrate how new technologies enhance, make obsolete, retrieve, and modify culture with their appearance.<sup>45</sup> As Christian missionaries encountered indigenous Australians, Theobald recounted, they discovered that the stone axe, though primitive in their estimation, served as a valuable commodity for the community. The tool was ancient, scarce and lay at the heart of

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<sup>43</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), x.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Theobald, *The Rich and the Poor: A Study on the Economics of Rising Expectations*, 1959.



native Australian society as both a form of technology and a medium for social organization. When missionaries provided copious amounts of sharp steel axes to women and children, Aborigine men experienced a crisis in their social importance. The stone axe was tied to ways men understood their role in the community and as this symbolic tool faded in relevance, McLuhan observed, the power structures associated with indigenous culture collapsed with it.<sup>46</sup>

The Mule Train argued that American culture continued to adopt new technology – devices that advantage users – in ways that perpetually disadvantaged vulnerable Americans and subjected them to inescapable impoverishment. By presenting the American public with a seemingly dissonant retro-tech vehicle – animal-drawn wagons traveling roadways equipped for motorized automobiles – the campaign critiqued the entire apparatus of American social mobility: the cities, the roads, the machines that travel them, the job market, and the ways communities organized commercial space that prevented some Americans, particularly African Americans living in the South, from escaping poverty. For this reason, I argue that the Poor People’s Campaign Mule Train demonstrated for the American public a form of prophetic social performance in the way pilgrims traveled to petition the country’s power complex for economic change that would transform their social situations.

What set the Poor People’s Campaign Mule Train apart from other demonstrations was not its commitment to time, nonviolence, or even its mission to confront poverty. Many demonstrations had lasted several consecutive weeks, pledged loyalty to nonviolent doctrine, and addressed economic inequity. Even the PPC’s target on Capitol Hill as a center of power was not unique among SCLC-led and Black-Freedom coalition-directed efforts. The PPC Mule Train set

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<sup>46</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 24.

itself apart as a public prophetic performance by the way it tethered all of these elements together into one act: the pilgrimage.

Mule Train pilgrims expressed a unique commitment to seek a transformed social condition by their crossing of geographical distance over a period of time to appeal to a center of power for this new identity or status in American society. The Mule Train pilgrimage was a liminal phase marked by social detachment whereby members removed themselves from the daily routine of life, identified with a sense of untamed wilderness through their primitive travel and kinship with animals of labor, and interpreted their mission within a narrative of the dead. This group of pilgrims became a traveling community unto itself, narrating in the journey a story of hope and transformation.

This work begins by examining a notion of pilgrimage entertained by leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that married ideas about sacred journey with economic revitalization. Chapter One focuses on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s understanding of pilgrimage and the correspondence he shared with the Jerusalem tourism industry one year prior to the PPC. SCLC officers hoped to take a group of American activists on a Holy Land tour with designs for reinforcing the important work they performed on the home front. King cancelled the pilgrimage due to internal conflict in Palestine, but the philosophical underpinnings for thinking about the connections between pilgrimage and economic tourism lays the groundwork for considering ways the Mule Train ushered in an era of civil rights tourism. Chapter One closes with a nod to the challenges associated with a national mythologization of the civil rights movement.

Chapters Two and Three offer a closer look at the daily journey and challenges pilgrims faced while on the Mule Train. Chapter Two examines ways PPC leadership, particularly King's

successor Ralph Abernathy, employed mule and wagon symbology to establish Mule Train identity and mission. This chapter maps the route of the journey by focusing on march launches [plural] and observing the traveling community as they plodded from town to town. It also considers the makeup of the Mule Train and how members understood and organized themselves for the journey. Chapter Three recognizes the public voices that created adversity for pilgrims as they moved through communities. In addition to national syndicates that created biased accounts toward protest movements, religious and populist voices reinforced fears that the PPC Mule Train threatened disorder and social unrest for southern communities and the country. Radio personality Paul Harvey, known for charming audiences with stories romanticizing conservative Americana, launched a full-scale assault against PPC leader Ralph Abernathy as a way to discredit PPC petitions. Both chapters consider the experiences of pilgrims on the journey and the rhetoric about the campaign they endured in light of events occurring at the epicenter of PPC activity in Washington, D.C. at Resurrection City.

Chapters Four and Five examine the Mule Train experience from the perspectives of two pilgrims who joined the march early in the campaign. Annie Rankin detailed her account of the Mule Train in three written records that she wrote during her travel and in the year after the campaign. As a wife and mother already engaged in the Mississippi Black Freedom movement, Rankin's accounts offer additional insight into ways she used her liminal, anti-structural phase as a pilgrim to define herself for others. Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. joined the march as a teenage adolescent from Quitman County, Mississippi. Webster's oral account recorded nearly fifty years later also provides valuable material for exploring memory studies in association with the PPC Mule Train. Chapters Four and Five appear as two parts of a common theme studying the "Making of an American Pilgrim."

The conclusion looks at the ways SCLC President Ralph Abernathy chose to employ mules and wagons for subsequent demonstrations and argues that a truer legacy of the PPC Mule Train lies not in its association with the symbols of transportation but in the pilgrims who journeyed in pursuit of change. The dissertation, therefore, closes by returning to the idea that marchers in the Mule Train ushered in a new era of activism marked by tourism built around civil rights memory. Pilgrims linked key sites in a circuit of travel to feed and strengthen their own resolve even as they paid homage to episodes they believed belonged to a larger narrative of American freedom and justice.

## CHAPTER ONE

### REVERENCE, ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION, AND CIVIL RIGHTS TOURISM

This chapter looks at ways Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed the idea of pilgrimage and examines the intersection of reverence and economic tourism that joins pilgrims in pursuit of transformation with geographical sites linked together in a circuit of travel. Traces of King's concept of pilgrimage can be found in his writings, in sermons, and in plans for a Southern Christian Leadership Conference pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Poor People's Campaign followed a circuit of stops in the Mule Train caravan that not only fed and nourished the story of the Black Freedom struggle for demonstrators in 1968, but offered a model for paying homage to civil rights memory that continued through the rest of the twentieth century and gained momentum into the twenty-first century.

A pilgrimage unites geographical spaces in ways that can create new narratives or offer shape and clarity to existing ones. Tours of the South built around museums and federal historic sites fuel civil rights mythologization that grounds political interest in geographic spaces, unites those spaces in a master narrative, and offers supporters paths to commemorate martyrs in the struggle, to educate themselves in the historical narrative, and to deepen their commitment to the pursuit of human rights. By examining King's use of the idea of pilgrimage and ways the Jerusalem tourism industry sought to garner his support, and by analyzing these in relation to a path of remembrance created in the Poor People's Campaign, I hope to further establish that the Mule Train helped to usher in an era of civil rights tourism by linking sites in a circuit of reflection and inspiration.

## A Philosophical Journey

King employed the term “pilgrimage” in a variety of contexts and at pivotal moments during his leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to convey ideas about personal discovery, struggle, and social transformation. In his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, King used the word “pilgrimage” to describe his intellectual arrival to an understanding of nonviolent resistance. In an Easter sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the minister used the term to describe a personal visit to Jerusalem in which he wove threads of his trip, his faith, and his activism into a single fabric of mission to overcome injustice against Black Americans and to encourage others in the struggle. In correspondence about a proposed 1967 Holy Land pilgrimage, a vision of mobility, transformation, and economic welfare emerges to frame an understanding of pilgrimage as a measure for working to overcome economic depression experienced in areas routed by commercial devastation. I argue that when studied together, King’s processing of the idea of pilgrimage in his own writings and speeches and his interactions with tourism agencies helps to clarify for us what he meant when he called on the public to support a “pilgrimage of the poor” in the Poor People’s Campaign. For King, the journey, the means of travel, and the message of economic uplift became inseparable components of the Poor People’s Campaign mission to eliminate poverty in America.

In his first book chronicling Black Montgomery’s fight against racial discrimination in the public transit system, King examined his own intellectual journey for developing the idea of nonviolent resistance that became the hallmark of activism in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King wrote and published *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* in 1958, two years after the 1956 United States Supreme Court affirmation declared laws requiring

segregation on Alabama buses were unconstitutional.<sup>47</sup> King credited Black Montgomery's embrace of his philosophy of nonviolent resistance with helping the city overcome discrimination on the city transit system.<sup>48</sup>

King titled chapter six of *Stride Toward Freedom* "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" to emphasize that arriving to his philosophy of nonviolence involved a journey of discovery. Navigating a unique path for action amidst the belief systems of various thinkers and activists, King credited Henry David Thoreau, Walter Rauschenbusch, Karl Marx, Reinhold Niebuhr, Gandhi, and Boston University professors with influencing his journey to understand nonviolence as a method for fighting racial injustice. Central to King's understanding of intellectual pilgrimage lies the premise that his very thinking underwent a formative experience.

King grounded his journey to achieve a philosophy and method for fighting injustice in the awareness that economic inequity lay at the root of racial oppression. He wrote in "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" that although he grew up in a home of relative economic security, "I had...learned that the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice."<sup>49</sup> In his journey to determine the best way to confront injustice, King bore in mind the struggle to confront an economic environment disadvantaging Black Americans. Efforts to dissect King's life mission or to categorize the Poor People's Campaign as a uniquely economic-based mission in contrast to previous endeavors neglect to recognize the tenor of King's consistent message. The economic goals of the Montgomery Improvement Association and of the SCLC motivated activists to challenge unjust busing policies that marginalized black laborers, to confront

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), 160. The US Supreme Court affirmed the declaration of a special three-judge U.S. District Court without listening to any argument on November 13, 1956.

<sup>48</sup> "This is not a drama with only one actor. More precisely it is the chronicle of 50,000 Negroes who took to heart the principles of nonviolence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love, and who, in the process, acquired a new estimate of their own human worth." MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 90.

segregated public education that disadvantaged black children in preparation for the job market, and to denounce the lack of grocery options available to rural black communities. From the beginning of his public life until his death, King persisted in proclaiming that economic inequality lay at the root of racial injustice.

King adopted key themes in the teachings of several thinkers while rejecting aspects of their philosophy to arrive at his personal understanding of nonviolent resistance. During his undergraduate years at Morehouse College in Atlanta, King first read Henry David Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*. The idea of *refusing to cooperate with an evil system* fascinated King, but it wasn't until entering Crozer Theological Seminary in 1948 that he began to contemplate methods for actually *eliminating social evil*.<sup>50</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, said King, offered him a theological basis for confronting systemic evil, though he parted ways with Rauschenbusch for his adherence to what King called the "cult of inevitable progress."<sup>51</sup>

Continuing to find his own path by avoiding certain features of a thinker's ideology, King wrestled with Marxism. While he rejected Marx's emphasis on materialistic and secular communism, he appreciated Marx's emphasis on social justice. King concluded, however, that Marx overlooked individual initiative in the same way capitalists overlooked systemic social determinations. "Nineteenth century capitalism failed to see that life is social and Marxism failed and still fails to see that life is individual and personal," wrote King.<sup>52</sup> He desired a strategy that confronted social inequity and addressed individual autonomy to initiate change.

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<sup>50</sup> MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 91.

<sup>51</sup> MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 91.

<sup>52</sup> MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 92.



King witnessed his vision of nonviolent refusal to cooperate with an unjust economic system come to life as he familiarized himself with Mohandas Gandhi's campaign against British colonialism. Moved by Gandhi's 1930 Salt March to the Sea and the activist's dedication to fasting as a form of protest, King found Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha* to be a powerful philosophy for facing injustice. By fusing two words – *satya*, truth which equals love, and *agraha*, force – Gandhi fashioned a concept that expressed confidence in truth and love as a force for change. King found in Gandhi's nonviolent activism the means to synthesize his personal faith with strategies to combat unjust laws, even attributing to the Indian activist the character exhibited in the central figure of King's faith. "Gandhi was probably the first person in history to live the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale," wrote King. "Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation."<sup>53</sup> The Gandhian way offered King the fusion of love, nonviolence, and reform he had been searching for to combat racial injustice in America.

Additional voices helped King clarify his position on nonviolent resistance as a force for social transformation. When theologian and social activist Reinhold Niebuhr rejected the idea of pacifism in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, King concluded that the author's notion of pacifism expressed a kind of "passive nonresistance to evil." King had in mind, however, an activism more akin to the "nonviolent resistance to evil" displayed by Gandhi.<sup>54</sup> Rather than *avoid* the system of tyranny, King sought to *engage and confront* the oppressive system by resisting it *through nonviolent means*.

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<sup>53</sup> MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 97.

<sup>54</sup> MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 98.

A final leg of King's "intellectual pilgrimage" came under the tutelage of the Philosophy and Theology professors at Boston University where he studied for a PhD. Two professors in particular, Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf, introduced him to Personalistic Philosophy that asserts the ultimate meaning of reality is found in personality. Personalism, as it is also referred to, provided support for King's faith in a personal God and underscored his belief in the inherent dignity and worth of all persons.<sup>55</sup> Crucial to his philosophy of resistance was a commitment to see the humanity in both the victim and the oppressor within an evil system. With the completion of his terminal degree in 1954, King had managed to fashion a solid intellectual base for articulating his philosophy of nonviolent resistance. He entered Montgomery armed, in his words, with "the conviction that nonviolent resistance was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their quest for social justice."<sup>56</sup>

Though nonviolent philosophy persisted as an abiding principle for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as the organization promoted and carried out the Poor People's Campaign, the point of this particular exploration of King's philosophy lies not in its nonviolence but in how King characterized his intellectual path for arriving at this philosophy. By referring to the way the idea matured within him as a pilgrimage, we may conclude that a fundamental feature of King's understanding of pilgrimage includes the idea of inner transformation or growth that encompasses intellectual development as well as physical readiness. That the method for implementing King's philosophy – marching or journeying – may

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<sup>55</sup> MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 100.

<sup>56</sup> MLK, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 101. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Martin Luther King, Jr. claimed his path for arriving at a philosophy of nonviolent civil resistance is the one way to arrive at the idea. This summary of King's thought journey demonstrates the route he took to fully appreciate the concept as a method for confronting injustice. As the Poor People's Campaign demonstrates, there are many paths for traveling to Washington though they all share the same destination.

For more on this, consider Nelson Mandela's embrace of nonviolent noncooperation when confronting South African apartheid. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, (New York & Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995), 127-128.

also resemble a common definition for pilgrimage is as much a coincidence as the title of the book in which “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” appears: *Stride Toward Freedom*. The journey for change, according to King, included a path for personal development as well as social transformation.

### **Mapping A Circuitry of Space**

King demonstrated his understanding of pilgrimage as a path through which individual persons struggle to transform their social condition by describing his own experiences in pilgrimage to sites he considered sacred. The activist toured geographical locations known for preserving the memory of historic events, particularly those areas associated with the lives of Gandhi and Jesus. As he visited the places where these figures led revolutionary movements, King underscored the importance that commemorating geographical sites would have on his movement’s effort to preserve a narrative of change in the pursuit of justice. In 1959, King described his experiences as he followed tour guides who narrated the story of struggle-to-transformation. Sacred site tour guides linked place and story for King by leading followers on a path that communicated a sequence of events.

One year after the publication of his first book, King and his wife Coretta travelled to Jerusalem to tour sites within the Old City that had become associated with historic events in the Kings’ faith. He described this “pilgrimage” of Jerusalem in an Easter sermon King delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where he pastored in Montgomery.<sup>57</sup> The minister began his message by noting how divided the city was due to Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because many of

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<sup>57</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Walk Through the Holy Land,” An Easter Sunday Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, March 29, 1959. A digital audio recording available at The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute of Stanford University. Website: [kinginstitute.stanford.edu](http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu). Accessed September 21, 2020.

the holy sites of Christianity lay in Eastern Jerusalem, the Kings spent their time in parts of the city belonging to Jordan in 1959. After lamenting that humanity had failed to resolve social conflict as evidenced in the divided city, King described his stay at a YMCA hotel where he and Coretta enjoyed meeting and interacting with travelers from around the world. He launched into a brief exhortation on the merits of international travel before mapping his spiritual journey, commending to young people the educational value inherent in travel abroad. Meeting people of all races and cultures, preached King, helps lift people above provincialism, chauvinism and ethnocentrism to appreciate a sense of human solidarity. He called international travel “the greatest education” and suggested that if white southerners traveled more often many of the racial problems in the South would be overcome.<sup>58</sup>

King proceeded to map his and Coretta’s pilgrimage by telling the story of Christianity associated with each site they visited.<sup>59</sup> King referenced a biblical story each time he named a location, first identifying outlying areas beyond old Jerusalem. He told of Hebron where Abraham once stood, Bethlehem where the little inn crowded out a baby Jesus, Samaria where the Samaritans had built a Temple on Mt. Gerizim and continued to display an ancient edition of the Pentateuch. He told of Jericho, Joshua’s march that broke down its walls, and the winding road from Jerusalem that led to the city. King noted visits to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, then centered his message more specifically on sites associated with the days and hours leading up to the public execution of Jesus of Nazareth, narrating the sites as he recounted their walk down the streets of Jerusalem. The guided pilgrimage ended at the Church of the Holy

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<sup>58</sup> King, “A Walk Through the Holy Land,” Easter Sermon, 1959.

<sup>59</sup> King, “A Walk Through the Holy Land,” Easter Sermon, 1959. “The next morning we rose early because we knew that this was the day that we would start our *pilgrimage* around this holy city and this was the day that we would tour Jerusalem itself.”

Sepulcher, the site where Jesus died, King said as he expressed hope that God would remember the one person who helped Jesus carry his cross to Golgotha was a black man.<sup>60</sup>

At the close of the guided tour, King told his listeners, he retraced his steps alone back to the hotel to think about the sufferings Jesus endured in Jerusalem. He described how he was gripped with emotion as he reflected on “the length to which God is willing to go to restore a broken community.”<sup>61</sup> King encouraged the Easter congregation to greatness as they imitated Jesus, the object of their faith, who was obedient to what King called the “unenforceable obligation”: the obedience beyond what is required in order to bring about peace, reconciliation, and justice.<sup>62</sup>

The previous Sunday, Palm Sunday, King had returned from his international travel eager to share what he had learned and experienced. Prior to his Jerusalem visit, the Kings had spent four weeks in India. The minister described the works and actions of Gandhi in the Palm Sunday sermon, lauding the Indian freedom fighter as “the greatest Christian of the twentieth century [who] was not a member of the Christian church.”<sup>63</sup> Enthralled by the example Gandhi modeled as a social revolutionary committed to the ethic of nonviolence and love, King committed nearly

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<sup>60</sup> King, “A Walk Through the Holy Land,” Easter Sermon, 1959. This episode can be found in the three synoptic gospels: Mark 15.21-22, Matthew 27.32, and Luke 23.26. King mentioned in the sermon that he first heard this from friend Archibald Carey who was pastor of the Quinn Chapel AME Church in Chicago. King was referring, here, to Simon of Cyrene who, according to the biblical narrative, was conscripted by Roman soldiers to help Jesus carry the cross they would use to crucify him. Cyrene, modern-day Shahat, Libya, sat on the north African coast of the Mediterranean Sea. *Atlas of the Bible Lands*, edited by Harry Thomas Frank, (Maplewood, New Jersey: Hammond Incorporated, 1990, 1984, 1977), p. 18. Adopting twentieth century notions of race, King located an African in the biblical narrative to speak to the existing racial discord in America and to encourage his black listeners to see themselves as assisting God in the ways they exercised their faith in the public sphere. Given the proximity of this north African city to Jerusalem and the fact that Cyrene actually lies north of Jerusalem on the latitudinal scale, it is doubtful Simon’s skin color would have differed greatly from Jesus’ skin color or the skin color of other indigenous Palestinians. King’s reference to an African in the biblical account, however, resonated with the congregation who understood in the narrative of American history their African origins as African Americans.

<sup>61</sup> King, “A Walk Through the Holy Land,” Easter Sermon, 1959.

<sup>62</sup> King, “A Walk Through the Holy Land,” Easter Sermon, 1959.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi,” delivered March 22, 1959 at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, website: kinginstitute.stanford.edu. Digital transcription accessed September 23, 2020.

his entire Palm Sunday sermon to championing Gandhi's efforts at winning India's independence. When he described Gandhi's assassination, he likened the martyr to Jesus and to Abraham Lincoln.<sup>64</sup>

During the Easter sermon, however, King limited his talk of India to a description of his visit to the southernmost part of the country. There the party travelled to Cape Comorin on the coast where, King said, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal meet. King described an evening on the Indian coast when he, Coretta, and friend, Lawrence D. Reddick, watched the sun disappear into the ocean to the west but marveled that the moon emerged within moments in the east.<sup>65</sup> He was encouraged by the "two lights" and exhorted his parishioners to take courage when darkness comes, for God has provided a second light. Turning to the theme of Resurrection and offering a social interpretation of the crucifixion, King tied together his experiences in India and Jerusalem as he drew the sermon to a close:

They put the light out on Good Friday, but God brought it back on Easter morning. They've put the light out so many times in history. I've seen empires and kings and rulers put it out. But God has another light.... This is our hope. This is what the Resurrection tells us. This is what Easter tells us. And this is what I found as I walked around that holy land and stood around that cross.<sup>66</sup>

While King spoke to his experience of intellectual discovery in "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," the minister married personal devotion to a faith narrative and geographical tourism to inspire and animate the Dexter congregation on Easter Sunday in 1959. King's trip to India and his visit in Jerusalem nurtured his philosophy for nonviolent activism in pursuit of social change in identical ways. His circuit of travel included sites connected to a historical narrative that King found inspiring and formative for overcoming evil systems. He demonstrated

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<sup>64</sup> King, "Palm Sunday Sermon," March 22, 1959.

<sup>65</sup> Lawrence Dunbar Reddick was a History Professor at Alabama State College and King's biographer.

<sup>66</sup> King, "A Walk Through the Holy Land," Easter Sermon, 1959.

commitment to the narrative by visiting locations that had come to be associated with the original event. Indian museums, Christian relics, and historic sites, often linked together in a circuit of commemoration by the tourism industry, offered paths for King to pay homage and to better position himself for understanding his battle against American racism that produced ongoing economic inequity.

The circuit of stops built around opportunities to pay homage and deepen commitment function as a critical component of the pilgrimage experience. The story of conflict and change is rooted in geographical space, offering the visitor the ability to locate him or herself in the narrative that inspires transformation. King demonstrated the importance that the circuitry of local spaces held for his visit in Jerusalem and his tour of India. The minister was inclined, therefore, to characterize his walk down the *Via Dolorosa* as a pilgrimage as well as his visit to the Trivandrum Road in India, also known as “Gandhi’s Road.” Upon arriving in India Feb. 3, 1959, King spoke with members of the press at the Janpath Hotel in New Delhi, assuring the Indian public, “To other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a *pilgrim*.”<sup>67</sup>

The Poor People’s Campaign offered a particular circuitry of space for the Mule Train as the caravan journeyed from Marks, Mississippi to Washington, D.C. Calling on local communities and the institutions within them, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference linked pilgrimage stations that would simultaneously offer reprieve for weary travelers and inspiration for continuing the mission. Mapping the recent history of civil rights struggle in their journey to seek economic policy reform, the Mule Train forged a path of commemoration that continually reminded the pilgrims why they had committed to such an arduous journey. The

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<sup>67</sup> “Account by Lawrence Dunbar Reddick of Press Conference in New Delhi on 10 February 1959,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, website: [kinginstitute.stanford.edu](http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu). Digital archive accessed September 25, 2020. Italics mine.

march on Washington, therefore, took on new meaning when united with stops in Grenada, MS, and Selma and Montgomery, AL. Sites such as the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham preserved a narrative of the struggle, if not relics, that allowed pilgrims the ability to touch and feel elements of the story. The pilgrims of the Mule Train not only traveled a path to seek transformation for them and their family's social and economic welfare, they journeyed in the spirit of Bloody Sunday marchers who pressed for voting rights, in the fervor of University of Mississippi integrationist James Meredith and his March for Freedom, and in the innocence of four young girls who merely sought to attend Sunday School. Creating a circuit of travel was imperative for the Mule Train pilgrimage and when the SCLC summoned its network of churches and homes in towns throughout the South to meet the need of the Mule Train they also were establishing a circuit of commemoration. Each community preserved its own stories and by linking these in succession on the road to Washington, the Mule Train forged a path for reflection that shaped marchers along the way.

Proof that King had not forgotten the impact this Jerusalem visit played on his imagination for engaging in social reform appears in the final speech of his life on April 3, 1968. Speaking at the Mason Temple in Memphis, TN before a large crowd drawn in support of the sanitation workers' strike, King related his experiences on the Jericho Road to the need for supporting city laborers. He recalled Jesus' parable about the man robbed, beaten and left to die on the path between Jerusalem and Jericho.<sup>68</sup> "You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road," bellowed King as he recalled the conversation he and Coretta shared while driving a rented car down the "winding, meandering" way. "It's really conducive for ambushing," King had told his

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<sup>68</sup> This story is found in the Gospel of Luke chapter 10, verses 25 through 37.



wife. Speaking to the crowd gathered in Memphis that stormy night, King reminded his listeners that this road in Jesus' day was known as the "Bloody Pass," and surmised that fear must have gripped those who refused to help the man lying on the side of the road. King likened the compassion of the Good Samaritan to supporters of the sanitation workers, encouraging them not to ask "What might happen to me if I stop and help?" but to ask, "If I do not stop... what will happen to *them*?"<sup>69</sup> Sacred journey aided King in narrating the story of the civil rights struggle until the day he, himself, became a martyr for the cause.

### **The 1967 Pilgrimage to Jerusalem**

Martin Luther King, Jr. provided evidence of his notion of pilgrimage in his writings, sermons, and speeches. King's interaction with tourism agencies in the year leading up to the Poor People's Campaign also help to clarify for us what he meant when he called on the public to support a "pilgrimage of the poor." In correspondence about a 1967 Holy Land pilgrimage led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a vision of mobility, transformation, and economic welfare emerges to frame an understanding of pilgrimage as a measure for working to overcome economic depression experienced in areas routed by commercial devastation. King and SCLC leaders constructed the Poor People's Campaign with aspirations to dramatize the plight of the poor before America and to demand that politicians pass legislation to eliminate poverty, but they also built into the PPC operation a particular kind of experience for the American poor. Events leading up to the 1968 PPC – specifically race-centered riots in urban areas around the nation and a Holy Land tour the SCLC cancelled late in 1967 – informed how

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<sup>69</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle, 1954-1990*, General Editor, Clayborne Carson, et al., (New York: Viking, 1991), 415-417.

the SCLC imagined and, thus, articulated the plan to get poor people to Washington and how these poor people might experience the journey. King, in particular, understood the PPC as a pilgrimage and drew on this concept to emphasize the nature of the poor people caravans that converged in the nation's capital.

In early 1967 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference explored options and expressed the desire to make a pilgrimage to the "Holy Land," Jerusalem and areas central to significant episodes in the Christian Bible. While it is unclear if King initially used the term "pilgrimage" for enquiring about a Holy Land tour, tourism agencies with whom the SCLC initiated contact latched onto and emphasized the concept of pilgrimage to encourage Dr. King and his associates to carry through with the plan. Shortly after entering discussion on the logistics of the trip, Jerusalem became the site of a brutal conflict between Israeli and Arab forces known as the Six-Day War.<sup>70</sup> Following a cease-fire agreement between Israel and Arab states, tourism agencies not only encouraged Dr. King to follow through with the plan to make a Holy Land pilgrimage, they implored him to consider the economic welfare of the region that had been decimated by the conflict. Representatives from tour companies transitioned from an initial appeal to make a Holy Land Pilgrimage based on the communal benefits that come with traveling as a group to meaningful sites and began to argue for economic revitalization, therein helping to marry concepts of religious pilgrimage and economic welfare in the hearts and minds of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In a letter dated May 15, 1967, Nicholas Bingham Wheeler of the New Rochelle Travel Service, Inc. of New Rochelle, New York described for Dr. King the benefits and advantages that young people and teenagers experience when they make a Holy Land pilgrimage. "There are

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<sup>70</sup> Six-Day War, June 5-10, 1967.

few more effective ways of bringing about understanding and unity than traveling,” Wheeler wrote. The travel agent gestured toward the camaraderie one might enjoy in King’s concept of a beloved community, emphasizing relationship-building and regard for others. “On a pilgrimage you also experience the happy fellowship which will abound in our group, and ample time is left for leisure activities with your friends,” wrote Wheeler. He included a brochure and a potential itinerary with the letter, and hoped for a response from the SCLC chair.<sup>71</sup>

Based on subsequent letters, the SCLC began to make plans for organization leaders, interested ministers, and associates to make the trip to Jerusalem in pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They had confirmed interest with two tourism companies, one in Jerusalem and one in New York who collaborated to ensure that the event functioned smoothly. The tentative date for the pilgrimage was set for November 1967, six months from the initial appeal King received from Wheeler. In a little over two weeks, however, on June 5, 1968, Jerusalem became the site of a bitter conflict as the Israeli Army performed a series of airstrikes to reject obstructions to trade installed by neighboring states of the United Arab Republic, Jordan and Syria, following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The conflict was fierce but one sided with Israel gaining possession of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Within six days leaders from Israel and Arab states had entered ceasefire agreements that took effect by June 11, 1968.<sup>72</sup>

Ten days after the ceasefire an Arab businessman named Mr. Sami Sawalha sent a message to Rev. Andrew Young assuring the SCLC officer that the area was becoming “near normal” again following the conflict earlier in the month. Though traffic was minimal, local

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<sup>71</sup>Letter from Nicholas Bingham Wheeler of the New Rochelle Travel Service, Inc. of New Rochelle, New York to Martin Luther King, Jr., May 15, 1967, SCLC Papers Folder 001563-017-0328.

<sup>72</sup> Israel entered ceasefire agreements with Jordan, Egypt, and Syria on June 7, 8, and 9, respectively. Peter L. Hahn, “The Cold War and the Six Day War: US Policy Towards the Arab-Israeli Crisis of June 1967,” *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967-73*, edited by Nigel J. Ashton, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 26.

merchants were beginning to reopen their doors and were eager to resume business. “So I feel, and I should say, strongly feel,” coaxed Sawalha, “that the pilgrimage should continue as it was planned.”<sup>73</sup> Several had been killed, but he assured Young these were soldiers who had died, not civilians. Though Arab, himself, Sawalha had already made friends with the new Israelis who had moved into the area and vouched for them, as well as the Israeli Army, that they were good, understanding people. Some windows remained broken, he admitted, but the streets could be traveled and locals were able to acquire essential items. There were plenty of open hotels. Visitors to the area were sure to be welcomed, and more, could be confident that a trip within the month was appropriate. “Jerusalem is always Jerusalem and the Holy Land is the Holy Land,” Sawalha wrote, and closed with a transliteration of an Arabic farewell: “Marsalama!”<sup>74</sup>

That same day, June 21, 1967, Mr. Hanna Nazzal, the President of the Terra Sancta Tourist Company in Jerusalem and Jordan sent a message to King and Young. Nazzal reiterated the positive experience a pilgrimage to the Holy Land would make for the participants and confirmed that SCLC reservations remained intact. “So please do not cancel,” the president implored, “whatever the number, it will be a prestige for the Holy Land to have the visit of Dr. Martin Luther King and his people as a Peace Pilgrimage visiting the Holy Places.” While Nazzal avoided making an argument based on the need for economic stimulation, he emphasized the morale-building impact King’s visit would have on the region. “Thank you and I hope to see you soon,” Nazzal closed hopefully.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Transcript of Mr. Sami Sawalha to Rev. Andrew Young, June 21, 1967. File 4:6, “Holy Land Pilgrimage, Jun. 1967 – Sept. 1967.” SCLC Papers. Electronic Folder: 001563-003-0072.

<sup>74</sup> Transcript of Mr. Sami Sawalha to Rev. Andrew Young, June 21, 1967. File 4:6, “Holy Land Pilgrimage, Jun. 1967 – Sept. 1967.” SCLC Papers. Electronic Folder: 001563-003-0072.

<sup>75</sup> Transcript of Tape Recording of Mr. Hanna Nazzal, President of Terra Sancta Tourist Co., Jerusalem, Jordan to Dr. MLK, Jr. and Rev Andrew Young on June 21, 1967. File 4:6, “Holy Land Pilgrimage, Jun. 1967 – Sept. 1967.” SCLC Papers. Electronic Folder: 001563-003-0072.

SCLC silence about the trip worried tourism companies who had collaborated to make the event happen, so they worked together to build a case for continuing the pilgrimage. Emily Fortsen, Director of Tours for Concreta Tours in Brooklyn, New York, secured recorded testimonials from prominent civic leaders in Israel that might exhort King and associates to move forward with the planned pilgrimage. In one recording Mr. Reuven Turner of the Ministry of Tourism Office in Israel ensured the stability of the area. “We have in a week and a half after the hostilities here been able to put back Israel and all the interesting areas for pilgrims on the map of tourism,” said Turner. He saw no reason why King’s proposed trip in November should be postponed and verified that key sites, particularly Bethlehem and the Old City, were open for visits.<sup>76</sup>

Fortsen then traveled to the office of “His Excellency, Mayor Teddy Kollek,” whom she called “the first mayor of the complete City of Jerusalem.” The two discussed King’s proposed pilgrimage specifically and in a message addressed directly to Rev. King, Mayor Kollek communicated that the city was more accessible for tourists than it had been before the war. “The Holy Places are extremely well guarded and they are completely free to everyone and it is quiet and peaceful throughout the land. We are very much looking forward to your visit,” the mayor directed to King, “and we are looking forward to derive a great deal of inspiration from meeting with you personally...SHALOM from Jerusalem.”<sup>77</sup>

Still lacking a response from the SCLC, Concreta Tours President Sandy Ray and Director of Tours Emily Fortsen whisked off two more letters the following month emphasizing the urgency for securing reservations on the pilgrimage. On July 17, 1967, Ray sent a letter

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<sup>76</sup> Transcript of Tape Recording made with Mr. Reuven Turner, Ministry of Tourism Office. Undated. File 4:6, “Holy Land Pilgrimage, Jun. 1967 – Sept. 1967.” SCLC Papers. Electronic Folder: 001563-003-0072.

<sup>77</sup> Transcript of Tape Recording made with Mayor Teddy Kolleck – The First Mayor of the Entire City of Jerusalem. File 4:6, “Holy Land Pilgrimage, Jun. 1967 – Sept. 1967.” SCLC Papers. Electronic Folder: 001563-003-0072.

soliciting commitments from those who would travel with King reminding them that a fifty-dollar deposit must be received by September 15 to ensure participation in the pilgrimage. Ray revisited the importance that King's visit would have on the economic revitalization of Israel. "Tourism has always been the main source of income in the Holy Land," Ray wrote while reassuring recipients of the goodwill in the region. "In Jerusalem and Bethlehem it was a thrilling sight to see the Jews and Arabs together for the first time in 20 years.... Uppermost in everyone's mind is the desire for PEACE."<sup>78</sup> The tourism industry interpreted the June conflict as the means for overcoming a divided city, and, thus, communicated to the SCLC how its journey to Jerusalem could benefit from, as well as underscore, such an interpretation.

One day later, however, Fortsen wrote a letter to Andrew Young expressing her exasperation with the SCLC officer's failure to return her phone calls. "In order to make the Pilgrimage a complete success, time is now of the utmost essence," Fortsen wrote. "We desperately need a new Press Release from Dr. King reaffirming the Pilgrimage plans. I also need a personal letter to key ministers and laymen throughout the country."<sup>79</sup> The latter request may have been intended to reinforce the appeal Sandy Ray had made to ministers and community leaders the day before. A word from Dr. King would have carried more weight and cast a clearer vision for how participants should plan for the pilgrimage.

The silence of the SCLC leader left state officials and the tourism industry ambiguous about SCLC intentions for traveling to Israel. Nearly two months after Fortsen's final appeal Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote personally to Mr. Ben Ari, President of El Al Airline in Tel Aviv

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<sup>78</sup> Letter from Concreta Tours, Brooklyn, N.Y. on the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holy Land Pilgrimage, July 17, 1967. File 4:6, "Holy Land Pilgrimage, Jun. 1967 – Sept. 1967." SCLC Papers. Electronic Folder: 001563-003-0072.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Concreta Tours, Emily Ann Fortsen, to Andrew Young on Pilgrimage to Holy Land, July 18, 1967. File 4:6, "Holy Land Pilgrimage, Jun. 1967 – Sept. 1967." SCLC Papers. Electronic Folder: 001563-003-0072.

and forwarded copies of the letter to Fortsen and other concerned parties. King began his letter, “It is with deepest regret that I cancel my proposed pilgrimage to the Holy Land for this year....” He communicated his apprehensions about conducting a religious pilgrimage and the political overtones such a trip may suggest given the current turmoil. In addition to naming his concern for the wellbeing of the Americans who may have joined him on the pilgrimage, King mentioned the need to stay vigilant as the leader of a non-violent movement that sought to confront social disruption in “our own cities.” He complimented the services of the airline and expressed hope for Israel’s future, but remained resolute in his decision. King closed by voicing the potential to realize a similar endeavor in the coming months: “I look forward to the possibility of resuming our plans and pursuing this pilgrimage in the coming year.”<sup>80</sup>

This lengthy sequence of interactions serves to illustrate the impact that the concept of pilgrimage had on King’s plans at the close of 1967 and for the coming year. While those most affected by the change of plans were those directly invested in the planning and preparation stage, their persistence to commend the pilgrimage to King offered a narrative that paired the idea of religious pilgrimage with economic revitalization. Had King never again mentioned the idea of pilgrimage, we may assume the plans for the PPC were unaffected by the failed Holy Land experiment. Given King’s tendency to refer to the 1968 demonstration on Washington as a pilgrimage rather than a march, we may infer that this concept which bound a notion of religious communal experience with tourism and economic renewal helps to clarify ways King hoped the Poor People’s Campaign would influence the marchers and the nation.

During the months of planning the Poor People’s Campaign, King used language and references compatible with a notion of pilgrimage for communicating the significance of the

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<sup>80</sup> Letter from Martin Luther King, Jr. to El Al Airline President, Ben Ari, Sept 22, 1967. File 4:6, “Holy Land Pilgrimage, Jun. 1967 – Sept. 1967.” SCLC Papers. Electronic Folder: 001563-003-0072.

event. King invited participants and supporters to understand the Poor People's cause in terms of mission and transformation. In a speech King presented at a Ministers' Leadership Training event in Miami, Florida in February, 1968, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference director identified the reasons why it was so important that the SCLC and Poor People should go to Washington. The reasons King advocated for this demonstration constituted two sides of the same coin. He said that on the one hand it is to provide an alternative to pervasive rioting in the nation, and on the other it is to bolster timid supplications for justice. "[We must] find a way to transmute the inchoate rage of the ghetto into a creative and constructive force.... [We've] got to give an outlet," he exhorted.<sup>81</sup> King also expressed, however, that the country refused to move on issues of civil rights until it was made to move through pressure – a common theme in his approach to marching. King's understanding of justice-demanding demonstrations in early 1968 reflected ideas compatible with the formative aspects he believed pilgrimages offered: transformation through journey. When he closed his address to the ministers he challenged them by appealing to their understanding of community in action: "I don't mind saying to you today, that we want you to leave here committed to this church. SCLC is a church, the church in action."<sup>82</sup>

Though King did not use the word pilgrimage with the ministers in middle February of 1968, the SCLC had already begun to employ the term for corresponding with SCLC supporters, and by the end of that month the term had taken root in the language of people interested in supporting the event. On February 29, 1968 Martha D. Kennedy wrote a letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. explaining the increase in her contribution for the "pilgrimage" to \$500. Kennedy wrote

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<sup>81</sup> MLK "Pre-Washington Speech" at Ministers' Leadership Training in Miami, FL Sheraton Fores Ambassador Hotel, Feb 23, 1968. SCLC Papers. Folder 001563-021-0195. File 28:52.

<sup>82</sup> MLK "Pre-Washington Speech" at Ministers' Leadership Training in Miami, FL Sheraton Fores Ambassador Hotel, Feb 23, 1968. SCLC Papers. Folder 001563-021-0195. File 28:52.



that she hoped King would encourage the participants to exercise the “same discipline as the National Guard and police on hand to maintain order at the sites of confrontation.”<sup>83</sup> King responded with a kind and appreciative form letter.

The SCLC provided an explicit description of the Poor People’s Campaign as a pilgrimage in a mass letter addressed to SCLC supporters. The letter was addressed to “Friend,” was written on Martin Luther King, Jr. letterhead, and included King’s handwritten signature in the closing. The date lacked a day, simply reading “April 1968.” At the bottom of the page a postscript soliciting contributions included a handwritten designee of the “MLK, Jr. Foundation” beneath a scratched out designee “SCL Foundation.”<sup>84</sup> Framed as a response to riots across the nation and federal inaction toward economic inequalities, the letter resonated with King’s rhetorical style. Apparently written by King before his assassination on April 4<sup>th</sup> but distributed by the SCLC after his death, the letter called this a “last chance” project for arousing the American conscience toward constructive democratic change. “We intend to channelize the smoldering rage of the Negro and white poor in an effective militant movement in Washington and elsewhere. **A pilgrimage of the poor** will gather in Washington from the slums and the rural starvation regions of the nation. We will go there, we will demand to be heard, and we will stay until America responds.”<sup>85</sup> The letter proceeded to promise a confrontation that was unique in drama with the power “to wrest from government fundamental measures to end the long agony

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<sup>83</sup> Letter from Martha D. Kennedy to Martin Luther King, Jr., February 29, 1968. SCLC Papers. Folder 001563-021-0245.

<sup>84</sup> Letter on MLK, Jr. letterhead to “Friend” from MLK, Jr., April 1968. SCLC Papers. Folder 001563-002-0484. File: 2:20 Jan. 1968 – Aug. 1968

<sup>85</sup> Letter on MLK, Jr. letterhead to “Friend” from MLK, Jr., April 1968. SCLC Papers. Folder 001563-002-0484. File: 2:20 Jan. 1968 – Aug. 1968. Bold effect added.

of the hard core poor.” The goal of the pilgrimage, cited the letter, was “to avoid a national disaster and to create a new spirit of harmony.”<sup>86</sup>

The southeastern caravan to Washington, known as the Mule Train, embodied the notion of pilgrimage in unique ways within the Poor People’s Campaign. The passage was slow, relegated to the pace of mules, and provided travelers with a close encounter with their environment free of more modern technologies and conveniences. The passage offered travelers time for introspection, but also interaction. Many of the participants chose to walk alongside the wagons rather than to ride in them. The journey was marked by engagement with one’s surroundings and by relationship building. Due to the lengthy nature of the trip, stations for rest and renewal had to be built into the experience. These stops were often conducted at religious sites along the way and fashioned in the manner of religious services.

Crucial to the success of the Mule Train was the way the SCLC linked local communities in a circuit of travel for completing the journey. By mapping the route from Marks, Mississippi to Washington, D.C. as a southern tour that included impoverished communities of the Black Belt and metropolitan spaces of prominent cities known for their battles in the Black Freedom movement, the SCLC created a path for communicating the mission, collecting additional pilgrims, and commemorating a narrative of hope for transformation through nonviolent confrontation with power. The remainder of this chapter considers a fusion of tourism and reverence that informs my reading of the Poor People’s Campaign Mule Train as a sacred passage that allowed travelers to simultaneously fulfill roles as respectful observers and animated activists. Indeed, the Mule Train knitted together this fusion between observation and action, or

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<sup>86</sup> Letter on MLK, Jr. letterhead to “Friend” from MLK, Jr., April 1968. SCLC Papers. Folder 001563-002-0484. File: 2:20 Jan. 1968 – Aug. 1968

commemoration and mission, in such a way that it prefigured and ushered in a late-twentieth century movement to honor sites through private- and state-funded tourism of civil rights museums and historic landmarks. Such pilgrimages serve to educate and shape a generation of adherents through a notion of sacred tourism that, ironically, also fuels the national mythologizing of the civil rights movement through a process possessing the potential to silence historical actors.

### **Sacred Tourism**

In *Pilgrimages in the Secular Age: From El Camino to Anime*, Japanese sociologist OKAMOTO Ryosuke joins the recent attention the fusion of religion and tourism has received since the turn of the twenty-first century. OKAMOTO points to an increase in attendance upon sacred sites as evidence that modernization has not led to wholesale release from religion as advanced in the secularization theory introduced in the 1960s. Rather, says OKAMOTO, the privatization of religion has launched new forms of observance from persons unaffiliated with organized religion. Committed to a post-secularization theory, OKAMOTO argues that religion and religious practice have not experienced a decline in interest but have undergone transformation as both faith-centered and nonfaith-motivated travelers persist in collecting around sacred sites.<sup>87</sup> OKAMOTO resists separating devout pilgrims from secular tourists for the very reason divisions between religious pilgrimage and tourism have begun to disintegrate. By identifying sacred sites as receptacles of historical memory that preserve and express local

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<sup>87</sup> OKAMOTO Ryosuke, *Pilgrimages in the Secular Age: From El Camino to Anime*, translated by IWABUCHI Deborah, ENDA Kazuko, (Tokyo, Japan: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2019 [Japanese edition © 2015]), 17.

values, OKAMOTO points to ways spaces offer inspiration to visitors but resists attaching labels of organized religion to travelers seeking an experience connected to a geographic site.<sup>88</sup>

Religious historian Robert Orsi likewise, broadens the notion of religious experience by inviting people to understand religion as *a network of relationships* rather than a medium for explaining reality. Orsi includes place in his configuration of religious relationships by arguing for a sense of sacred presence encountering the imagination and experience of religious practitioners in particular location.<sup>89</sup> Like OKAMOTO, Orsi rejects the notion that religion has slowly disappeared with the secularization of society. Though the modern world has sought to train modern people's imaginations toward sacred absence, says Orsi, people have continued to negotiate relationships with saints, gods, demons, ancestors, etc. that are real in experience and practice.<sup>90</sup> OKAMOTO and Orsi lay a foundation for understanding the interplay at work between pilgrimage and tourism. By embracing a post-secularization approach to society and religious practice, these scholars move the discussion more toward the sacralization of tourism than the secularization of religious devotion.

In his examination of the Ozark Mountains' tourism industry, Aaron Ketchell likewise uncovers ways tourism feeds on and welcomes the sacralization of space. He argues that strong ties have bound faith and consumer culture throughout United States history.<sup>91</sup> In particular, Ketchell observes ways Branson, Missouri boosters have built attractions that integrate vague, nondenominational Christian principles and appreciation for the Ozark regional landscape to provide an experience that he refers to as "Christian placefulness."<sup>92</sup> Branson attractions

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<sup>88</sup> OKAMOTO, *Pilgrimages in the Secular Age*, 19-21.

<sup>89</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>90</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 18.

<sup>91</sup> Aaron K. Ketchell, *Holy Hills of the Ozarks: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), xix.

<sup>92</sup> Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, xx.

capitalize on recreations of biblical geography and material culture, marketing the experience of nature and its enjoyment as sharing divine communion. Marked by antimodern sentiment, promoters seize upon tourists' patriotism and deep-seated resistance to perceived secularization to glorify a sense of rural innocence. Ketchell notes that similar to other tourist attractions around the country, boosters have fine-tuned the construction of a somewhat imaginary character to represent the principles of Christian placefulness: the hillbilly.<sup>93</sup> Though often portrayed as a religious trickster figure, this caricature embodies for visitors the notion of an indigenous soul sharing harmony with nature. His humor, rural innocence, and appreciation for leisure demonstrate the hillbilly's wisdom as he uses these attributes to defy what he perceives as nonsensical constraints and responsibilities placed upon him by broader society.<sup>94</sup>

Ketchell aptly identifies the fusion of religion and tourism that has invigorated the Ozark economy since the mid-twentieth century. His analysis of Branson pilgrims and the experiences they seek provides important insight for perceiving the ways religious narratives may be attached to geography in an effort to invigorate local economy. Deep connections exist between pilgrimage and the tourism industry. The ideological worldviews that motivate people to travel to places they do are often fueled by the tourism industry who, in turn, capitalizes on those patrons. Failure to recognize the reciprocity that exists between pilgrimage and tourism lives in denial of the economic impact pilgrims offer society, even when the pilgrims' underlying goal may have been to change their own economic situation.

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<sup>93</sup> "Like Disney's properties, Branson attractions mediate a set of essential 'down home' values that attract 'pilgrims' to a set of sacred ideas." Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, xxiv.

<sup>94</sup> Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, xxiv.

### ***“A More Beautiful and Terrible History”***

Pilgrimage is the best and most accurate way to understand an undertaking like the Mule Train or the Poor People’s Campaign, and failure to identify such a campaign as a pilgrimage – with its religious- and geographic-centered capacities for building narrative – compromises our ability to fully appreciate the event and its impact on culture. While the Poor People’s Campaign may not have succeeded in claiming the benefits it sought from Congress in 1968, it operated to produce a model that persisted in appealing to the very power complex that denied the campaign many of its original requests. The result of this persistence has garnered state support in the form of funding for memorial sites and an increase in attracting tourists who provide a boon to local economies.

The rise of civil rights memorials corresponds to the national mythologization Jeanne Theoharis examines in *A More Beautiful and Terrible History*.<sup>95</sup> Theoharis argues that by the turn of the twenty-first century, political leaders, pundits, and citizens had appropriated civil rights narrative to serve a national story that championed American democracy.<sup>96</sup> “While seemingly bestowing great honor on freedom fighters of old,” writes Theoharis, “this national mythologizing of the civil rights movement also took the movement away from everyday people, from community leaders and young activists and elder freedom fighters seeking to understand where the country was and how to build movements today.”<sup>97</sup> Theoharis sets out, therefore, to deconstruct such stories and memorials to provide a more robust and fuller history of the struggle.

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<sup>95</sup> Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

<sup>96</sup> Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History*, ix-xi.

<sup>97</sup> Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History*, xiv.

This examination of the Mule Train roots an understanding of the movement in the philosophy of activist Martin Luther King, Jr., who serves as an icon for the national mythologization project Theoharis gestures toward, but who in life impressed upon the public the importance of attending to local people and their struggles. This research recognizes that the Mule Train, therefore, displayed a local people phenomenon in its grassroots struggle for economic change. Understanding the Mule Train as a pilgrimage, regardless of economic outcomes, provides the path for regarding Poor People's Campaign activity as something other than the close to an era celebrated for the passage of civil rights legislation. It signals rather the changing nature of grassroots civil rights engagement as individuals and groups began to revisit sites associated with historic episodes in the freedom struggle, recount the historical narrative, and deepen their commitment to the pursuit of human rights. Though often overlooked for its impact on American history, the Mule Train demonstrated a move toward civil rights tourism that links sites in a circuit of reflection and inspiration.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MAPPING AN AMERICAN PILGRIMAGE

Similar to the broader Poor People's Campaign that gathered groups from various regions around the country, the Mule Train consisted of numerous launches, starts, and departures. By the end of April 1968, leaders within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference announced plans to ceremonially inaugurate the Poor People's Campaign in Memphis, Tennessee. Rev. Ralph Abernathy publicly identified the spot where King was assassinated as ground zero for the campaign.<sup>98</sup> He linked the start of the demonstration on Washington with King and his recent martyrdom rather than with the sanitation workers' activism that drew King to Memphis. Meanwhile, organizers worked to coordinate the details of the Mule Train in Marks, Mississippi where local residents had begun holding demonstrations in early May. Prior to the mule and wagon caravan's official sendoff in Marks, Abernathy made appearances with a team of mules in other communities to spotlight the starts of additional southern PPC components traveling to the Capitol. In addition, though the Mule Train's beginning has traditionally been associated with a formal departure from Marks, several residents joined the Mule Train when it came through their towns, contributing to the number of the traveling community and establishing alternative beginnings for each pilgrim. Because this research considers the experiences of southerners who, in seeking transformation, typified their journey with the presence of mules and wagons, this chapter begins by considering Mule Train launches outside of Marks. Additional mule-drawn-

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<sup>98</sup> "Poor People's Campaign March Route," *Milwaukee Star*, (27 April, 1968), Vol viii, Issue 20, page 9.



wagon appearances led by SCLC officers beyond the Marks-centered narrative help to shed light on ways pilgrims experienced their journey.

### **Memphis, Marks, Mount Beulah, and Montgomery**

Ralph Abernathy had only recently been named the successor to Martin Luther King, Jr. as Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when he and Coretta Scott King appeared together at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, Thursday, May 2, 1968, the day the Poor People's Campaign officially launched its effort to demand reform for impoverished Americans. If there was ever a question as to what kind of leader Mrs. King or Rev. Abernathy would make for the organization prior to Abernathy being named its new chairman, those questions were laid to rest by the way each presented her and himself the day the campaign began. King framed the cause of the campaign in terms of her late husband's legacy, vowing to continue his mission to provide uplift for the poor. Abernathy activated the Mule Train symbology immediately, leading several hundred marchers on foot behind a single wagon the first day.

Organizers of the opening ceremony memorialized King in the very location he collapsed from the sniper bullet less than one month earlier.<sup>99</sup> Nearly one thousand people gathered beneath the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel to participate in the ceremony. Mrs. King addressed the crowd from where her husband bled out only a few weeks previous, describing his death as a sacrifice he offered for the sake of the cause. "On this spot where my husband gave his

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<sup>99</sup> For more on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, see Taylor Branch's three-volume biography: *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (1988); *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (1998); *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (2006). See also Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2000); and David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986).

life,” King vowed, “I pledge eternal loyalty to the work which he so nobly began. His legacy will lead us to the point where all God’s children have shoes.”<sup>100</sup> SCLC officers laid a marble plaque on the floor of the balcony commemorating Dr. King and deployed about six hundred marchers into the streets of Memphis to inaugurate the journey to Washington, DC where demonstrators planned to camp near Capitol Hill at a site they called “Resurrection City.”

Campaign leaders first sacralized the location of King’s death as the inaugural site of the Poor People’s Campaign. Then, they linked that space to Marks, Mississippi, where many gathered to support and organize local efforts. A journalist snapped a photograph of Abernathy driving a farm wagon through Memphis following the memorial service and opening ceremony. Facing the camera, the new SCLC Director’s face appeared centered between two long-eared mule heads; he, now, held the reins of the campaign both figuratively and literally. Several smiling supporters surrounded Abernathy who led the marchers about 2½ miles before they boarded buses for the 75-mile trip to Marks.<sup>101</sup>

Three days prior to the Memphis launch, Abernathy led a group of the Poor People’s Campaign leaders known as the “Committee of 100” in a series of meetings with officials in Washington. Presenting themselves as an interracial coalition of activists, the Committee of 100 included leaders and representatives of African American, Native American, Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, and white Appalachian poor.<sup>102</sup> The Committee made appeals before a Senate antipoverty subcommittee, emphasizing the need for government-funded programs to

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<sup>100</sup> Henry P. Leifermann, “Marchers Ride to Marks,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 3 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, no. 213.

<sup>101</sup> Henry P. Leifermann, “Marchers Ride to Marks,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 3 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, no. 213. For more on the Poor People’s Campaign relationship to the sanitation worker strike and Memphis, see Christopher P. Lehman, *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement: A Fragile Coalition, 1967-1973* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014).

<sup>102</sup> See Gordon Mantler, *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974*; Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People’s Campaign* (1998).

offer uplift for impoverished Americans in various regions of the country. Abernathy stressed the urgency that motivated the Poor People's Campaign and promised Congress that masses of poor would return in ten days to stage an unprecedented militant, yet nonviolent, demonstration.<sup>103</sup>

When Memphis marchers arrived in Marks following the May 2 kick-off, they joined local efforts already underway to build the movement in Quitman County. The previous day, SCLC field leader in Marks, Willie Bolden, sought to rally support for the Poor People's Campaign from among students at the Quitman County Industrial High School. Bolden managed to gather a large group of students during the lunch hour, but when the students did not return to class following noon recess, school officials had Bolden arrested for trespassing on school property. Nearly three hundred students and about a half dozen teachers walked off the campus to protest Bolden's arrest. They marched 1½ mile to the county courthouse and staged a sit-in on the courthouse lawn outside the jail where Bolden was being detained. Police quickly confronted the crowd and issued a two-minute warning demanding everyone disperse. When no one moved, troopers arrested key associates of Bolden who had come to Marks in anticipation of the start of the campaign. These included Chester Thomas, Jr. of Canton, MS, Major Wright of Grenada, MS, Jimmy L. Wells of Atlanta, Marjorie Hyatt of Atlanta, Andrew Marrisett of Atlanta, and Doris S. Baker of Marks. Police issued additional warnings to break up the demonstration. When, still, none of the marchers moved from their seat on the lawn, troopers formed a wedge and pushed aggressively into the mass of students. The demonstrators scattered in response to the show of force, racing to return across the railroad tracks that divided the side of town where they lived and attended school from the white side of town that contained the courthouse and county jail. Several including a young teacher from the high school named Lydia McKinnon suffered

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<sup>103</sup> "Advance Guard Marches on Capitol Hill," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 30 April, 1968, Vol cxiii, no. 210.

injuries from the police.<sup>104</sup> The nearest hospital, twenty miles west in Clarksdale, treated a total of six marchers who complained of headaches and stomach pain. Though doctors there reported that no patients from the march appeared to be seriously hurt, five students filed a half-million-dollar federal lawsuit five days later against five police officers who they said used excessive force during the sit-in breakup.<sup>105</sup> By evening, May 1, a second march had organized to protest the police's mishandling of the first march. About 150 Wednesday churchgoers gathered at the Eudora AME Zion Church down the road from the high school, then walked to the courthouse and back under the watchful eye of state troopers, police, sheriff's deputies and FBI agents.<sup>106</sup> The Poor People's Campaign had found traction in Marks through an unplanned sit-in based on protest unaffiliated with the demands of the campaign.

Memphis marchers who had attended the opening kickoff / memorial ceremony at the Lorraine Motel and walked more than two miles behind Abernathy's mule-drawn wagon rode buses 75 miles into Mississippi. They found Marks a ripe context for channeling their energies. Seven buses from Memphis rolled into Marks Thursday night, adding strength to the number of activists already at work there. A crowd nearing 3,000 gathered for a second night in a row at the Eudora AME Zion Church where PPC leaders strategized for a third march to the courthouse.

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<sup>104</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, edited by David B. Levine, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 30. This collection of Freeman's photographs comprised a touring exhibit commemorating the 30-year anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train.

<sup>105</sup> "Negro Girls File \$500,000 Lawsuit," (Clarksdale, A.P.) *The Clarion-Ledger*, 7 May, 1968. Myrtle Mae Brown (13), Robbie McAdory (16), Annie B. Henderson (17), Johnnie Mae Heags (16), Ruth Jamison (18), all of Quitman County, each asked for \$10,000 in actual damages and \$100,000 in punitive damages in a ruling against defendants Sheriff L.V. Harrison, Marks Police Officer L.C. Pride, Highway Patrol Inspector L.Y. Giffin, and "John Doe" and "Richard Roe," two highway patrolmen the students claimed to know by sight but not their names. Brown, McAdory, and Henderson claimed they were struck by the highway patrolmen. Heags claimed she was pregnant and had been kicked in the stomach by a highway patrolman. Jamison claimed she was kicked in the side by Pride.

<sup>106</sup> Richard Leggitt, "Marks Has Trouble," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 2 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, no. 212.

After retrieving Bolden and the others from the jail on \$500 bonds, SCLC officials collaborated on the best way to challenge abuses performed by the local police force while also turning public attention to the mission of the Poor People's Campaign.<sup>107</sup> While the plan included a march to the courthouse where a series of speeches would be given, much of the meeting at the Eudora Church Thursday night centered on the tone and message speakers sought to communicate. Bolden expressed interest in unsettling Marks residents and law enforcement. "We need to agitate these folks to death," he argued. Andrew Young from Georgia agreed that it would be good for locals to sweat under the strain of public pressure. Abernathy confessed his desire to make police officers feel small, but he reminded the group that the highway patrol was present to protect marchers even when their presence created tension. The SCLC Director entertained a scenario in which he might belittle patrol officers for refusing to lend him a bullhorn at the gathering.<sup>108</sup>

SCLC leaders focused on poverty issues for both whites and blacks living in the Marks area during their speeches on the county courthouse lawn in spite of the ways they imagined challenging Marks Law enforcement and residents at the pre-march meeting in the Eudora Church.<sup>109</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr.'s younger brother, Alfred Daniel King, spoke before the crowd of 1,000, introducing Abernathy as the successor to his brother's leadership. Abernathy turned supporters' attention to the march on Washington and then led marchers to an open field on the outskirts of town where the group ate and several camped for the night.<sup>110</sup> Whether in support of the Poor People's Campaign vision or in response to police aggression on the

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<sup>107</sup> Richard Leggitt, "Marks Has Trouble," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 2 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, no. 212.

<sup>108</sup> Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission report, May 2, 1968. (9-31-791) Digital archives, MDAH.

<sup>109</sup> Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission report, May 2, 1968. (9-31-791) Digital archives, MDAH.

<sup>110</sup> Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission report, May 2, 1968. (9-31-791) Digital archives, MDAH.

courthouse lawn, Marks Mayor C. Langford provided the campaign space to gather and camp on city property south of Marks.<sup>111</sup> The forty-four-acre site provided pasture for mules arriving for the caravan, a fenced-in area to corral the animals, and space big enough for three large circus-type tents the SCLC provided when demonstrators sought shelter from the elements.<sup>112</sup> The city also installed lights and provided potable water and outdoor toilets for participants.<sup>113</sup>

Dr. King's experiences in Quitman County in 1966 and Senator Robert F. Kennedy's visit to the Mississippi Delta in 1967 helped to center the area as a site of interest for the SCLC to launch the Poor People's Campaign. King traveled to Marks in June 1966 to speak at the funeral of Armistead Phipps who died of a heart attack while marching with James Meredith in his March Against Fear.<sup>114</sup> While visiting the area, King witnessed impoverishment that, according to associates, moved the seasoned activist to tears.<sup>115</sup> One such episode involved a school classroom where King saw a teacher divide four apples and a box of crackers she brought from home to feed her students at lunch.<sup>116</sup> The want and despair King observed in Quitman County youth planted seeds to initiate a broad-reaching antipoverty campaign and fomented the SCLC's attention on the area.

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<sup>111</sup> Macklyn Hubell, "Foreword," *Goldman's Gold: An Album of Photographs Taken in 1968 of the Marks' Mule Train*, Photographs by James Goldman, (2010), vi.

<sup>112</sup> "'Poor People' Prepare to Begin Capital Trek," (Marks, AP) *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, May 6, 1968, p1. Roland Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>113</sup> Macklyn Hubell, "Foreword," *Goldman's Gold: An Album of Photographs Taken in 1968 of the Marks' Mule Train*, Photographs by James Goldman, (2010), vi.

<sup>114</sup> "James Meredith had achieved international prominence for his courage while integrating the University of Mississippi in 1962. In 1966 he was a student at Columbia Law School in New York City. On June 5 he started walking south down Highway 51 from the Peabody Hotel in downtown Memphis. He stated two goals: to encourage black voter registration and to challenge white intimidation." Aram Goudsouzian, "March Against Fear," *The Mississippi Encyclopedia*. Edited by Ted Ownby and Charles Reagan Wilson. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017). online edition, <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/the-march-against-fear/>, accessed Nov 1, 2020.

<sup>115</sup> Henry P. Leifermann, "March Begins In Memphis" (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 2 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, no. 212.

<sup>116</sup> Hilliard Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin and the Mule Train: Marks, Mississippi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Origin of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign Mule Train*, (Xlibris, 2014), 14, 21.

While he did not travel directly into Quitman County, New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy began his tour of impoverished areas of the state in Greenville on Tuesday, April 11, 1967. Accompanied by Senator Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania, the two members of a Senate subcommittee studying poverty visited the homes of families who suffered extreme privation yet remained beyond the reach of government aid offered in President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. Clark and Kennedy's first visit included a home that Clarksdale journalist Curtis Wilkie referred to as a "wretched shack" and a "hovel." When the senators asked the young boy living there if he had breakfast that morning, the boy nodded. "Molasses," he answered. By the time Kennedy and Clark reached the final stop of their tour, a crowd of 1,000 supporters collected at the Neighborhood Center in Clarksdale to see off the Senators. Standing atop a car, Kennedy addressed the crowd. "The problems of poverty are problems of all United States Citizens," he shouted, pledging his support to reform economic aid for poor Mississippians.<sup>117</sup>

Upon returning to Washington, Kennedy remained deeply troubled by the hunger and need he witnessed in Mississippi. That summer Kennedy crossed paths with Marian Wright [Edelman], who was instrumental in organizing Kennedy's Delta tour earlier in the year. As Director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund in Jackson, Mississippi, Wright was an accomplished lawyer and activist in the state. When she indicated that she was on her way to Atlanta for a meeting with Dr. King, Kennedy asked her to convey a message to the SCLC Director. "Bring the poor people to Washington," Kennedy told Wright. The New York Senator felt it was imperative that the American people witness poor southerners' struggles, as he had. When Wright shared Kennedy's message with King, the SCLC Director not only agreed with the

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<sup>117</sup> Curtis Wilkie, "Wild Welcome Here Ends Kennedy-Clark Delta Tour," *Clarksdale Press Register*, April 12, 1967, 1. Curtis Wilkie Collection, Archives and Special Collections, JD Williams Library, Box 2. By the time folks gathered in Marks in early May the following year, Kennedy was engaged in a nation-wide campaign for the 1968 presidential election.

idea, he asked Wright to serve as counsel for the Poor People's Campaign in Washington.<sup>118</sup>

Though King's experiences in 1966 and Kennedy's visit in 1967 helped to center the area as a site of interest for the SCLC, Wright's importance for drawing together ideas and dialogue to create the Poor People's Campaign cannot be overstated, here. Wright offered a crucial link in centering the project in Mississippi.

While the Marks contingent of the Poor People's Campaign collected people and resources for two caravans to travel to Washington – one by bus and the other by mule-drawn wagons – another southern group gathered in Edwards, Mississippi and also employed mule and wagon symbology to represent their mission. On Saturday, May 4, a portion of those gathered in Marks traveled by chartered bus to Edwards, Mississippi where the National Council of Churches [NCC] operated an organizing project called The Delta Ministry. Launched by the NCC in 1964, the Delta Ministry offered programs for financial relief, community building, education and literacy, economic development, and racial reconciliation.<sup>119</sup> By 1965, the Delta Ministry occupied a conference center they leased from the Disciples of Christ denomination known as Mount Beulah. The campus contained several buildings equipped with administrative offices, classrooms, dormitories and recreational facilities.<sup>120</sup> The twelve-acre property provided ample space for members of the Memphis and Marks group to join PPC recruits from central Mississippi. Roughly 500 participants engaged in a weekend of meetings and preparations at Mount Beulah that included medical examinations for the trip to Washington.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ellen B. Meacham, *Delta Epiphany: Robert F. Kennedy in Mississippi* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 208-209.

<sup>119</sup> "Delta Ministry" Entry, *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, edited by Charles Reagan Wilson and Ted Ownby, digital edition, <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/delta-ministry/> accessed 10-31-20.

<sup>120</sup> "What is Mount Beulah," *The Delta Ministry: A Project of the National Council Churches in Mississippi*, Newsletter, Vol. 2, No. 2, Greenville, MS, October, 1965.

<sup>121</sup> "What is Mount Beulah," *The Delta Ministry: A Project of the National Council Churches in Mississippi*, Newsletter, Vol. 2, No. 2, Greenville, MS, October, 1965.

Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission report May 4 & 5, 1968. Digital archives, MDAH.



Informers working for the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission watched the Poor People's Campaign activity closely in both Marks and Mount Beulah. Attending meetings and marches as if they were participants, informers recorded their observations for state officials. They offered a general run-down of organizational activity and future plans and made special note of trends they found alarming, such as the interracial affection they witnessed between young people. Informers also kept a close eye on the activity of SCLC leaders, noting how Abernathy, Hosea Williams, and Andrew Young operated "at the center" of activity in Mount Beulah. Sovereignty Commission moles listened for incendiary rhetoric and searched for agitators of violence. They concluded after careful observation, however, that no such figures emerged at Mount Beulah. Leaders simply urged the people to march.<sup>122</sup>

On Monday morning, May 6, a little more than a hundred of the Mount Beulah group marched behind a single mule-drawn wagon for two miles through Edwards, Mississippi before boarding buses for Selma, Alabama almost 200 miles away. Abernathy led the procession away from the Delta Ministry campground reciting a line from the wagon that would gain traction with the press during the weeks the campaign approached Washington. "We're bringing all our rats, our lice and our roaches and we're going to dump all of them in Congress's front yard and wait until Congress decides to do something about them," Abernathy promised.<sup>123</sup> When 136 marchers boarded four privately-owned buses in Edwards, Sovereignty Commission informers reported that Abernathy and Hosea Williams caught a plane in Jackson for Birmingham.<sup>124</sup> Regardless the discrepancy in their routes, Williams rejoined the 136 marchers in Selma and led the southern caravan of the PPC across the Edmund Pettus Bridge just as he had helped SCLC

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<sup>122</sup> Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission report May 4 & 5, 1968. Digital archives, MDAH.

<sup>123</sup> Henry P. Leifermann, "Po' Mule Left Behind; Marchers Go in Style," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 6 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, No. 214.

<sup>124</sup> Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Memorandum, 6 May, 1968, CC'd Honorable Herman Glazier.

officers lead the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March. This time, however, Williams led marchers in a wagon pulled by mules. Thirty state troopers stood nearby, once again donning riot gear as they had three years earlier. Though police came prepared for battle, they made no advances on the caravan.<sup>125</sup>

Abernathy rejoined marchers when they traveled from Selma to Montgomery Tuesday, May 7, also appearing with the symbolic mules and wagon that characterized the mission of the southern campaign. When press reporters asked Abernathy about the mules in Montgomery, the SCLC Director shared the names he had given them. One mule he named “George Wallace,” after the staunch segregationist and former Alabama Governor who was currently campaigning for the presidential election.<sup>126</sup> Wallace served the highest administrative office of the state from 1963 to 1967, after which Alabama voters elected his wife, Lurleen, as Governor due to the state prohibition, at that time, against consecutive terms. Governor Lurleen Wallace had received a diagnosis of cancer during George’s term, however, and after battling the disease for three years, she died in the early morning hours on the day the PPC approached Montgomery. Given the tragic news, journalists questioned Abernathy’s decision to attack a family member of the deceased Governor in the face of their grief. The wagon driver assured reporters he intended no disrespect to Governor Lurleen Wallace, but persisted in identifying former Governor George

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<sup>125</sup> “First ‘Poor’ Group Streams Into Selma,” *JCL*, Tue, May 7, 1968, 1.

<sup>126</sup> Consider, too, that “Big Mules” is a moniker that Alabama Governor Bibb Graves (1927-31, 1935-39) coined in 1926 to identify powerful industrial elites who dominated state politics. Alabama Governor James “Big Jim” Folsom (1947-51, 1955-59) also employed the expression in several of his own campaigns as he sought to wrest power from cotton plantation and urban industrial titans. Anne Permaloff, “Black Belt-Big Mule Coalition,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, February 21, 2011, accessed June 21, 2021. <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1434>. Carl Grafton & Anne Permaloff, *Big Mules and Branchheads: James E. Folsom and Political Power in Alabama*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), preface.

Wallace with the sluggish, slow progress for justice symbolized by the speed of the wagon travel.<sup>127</sup>

Abernathy named the second mule “Jim Clark” after the Sheriff of Dallas County where Selma served as county seat.<sup>128</sup> SCLC activists engaged in the Selma-to-Montgomery march three years earlier had come to associate Clark with the resistance and violence marchers suffered from state troopers and police during their demonstration to spotlight voter suppression in 1965. Naming the mules after politicians known for denying rights to Black Americans became a way for wagon drivers to critique the political figures of the state where they traveled. On other occasions, PPC wagon drivers reported the names of the mules pulling their wagons as Mississippi Senators John Stennis and James Eastland, and Georgia Governor Lester Maddox.<sup>129</sup> Meanwhile, the arrival of 23 mules to Marks on Tuesday, May 7, and the promise for 18 more to arrive Wed, May 8, broadened the capacity for the Mule Train caravan to *name* a host of politicians who hoped to see the Poor People’s Campaign fail.<sup>130</sup>

Governor Wallace’s funerary rites and the Poor People’s Campaign presence in Montgomery, Alabama coincided in ways that displayed a collision of two southern worldviews, one rooted in a narrative of Confederate legacy and the other rooted in a narrative of change for the sake of justice. On Wednesday, May 8, Wallace’s body lay in state in a silver casket in the Rotunda of the Capital Building. While journalists erroneously reported that the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, lay in state there in 1889, the false story offered a crucial link for

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<sup>127</sup> Abernathy sent a telegram directly to George Wallace expressing condolences for Governor Lurleen Wallace’s death. “Senator Warns of Riot Plans; ‘Poor’ Arrive in Montgomery,” *JCL*, Wed, May, 1968, 1.

<sup>128</sup> “Senator Warns of Riot Plans; ‘Poor’ Arrive in Montgomery,” *JCL*, Wed, May, 1968, 1.

<sup>129</sup> Rod Such, “Blacks March Through Georgia,” *Atlanta Guardian*, May 30, 1970, 3, 18. Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) online file 1-104-0-23-1-1-1. Abernathy named two mules “Maddox” and “Nixon” during a 110-mile wagon train demonstration in protest of unjust arrests and murders of blacks in Georgia during 1970.

<sup>130</sup> “Po’ Mules Need Shoeses too--,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 8 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, No. 216.

associating the current administration with racialized ideals galvanizing the Confederate States of America that drew up its constitution there in 1861. Reporters were accurate, however, and furthered the narrative of Confederate legacy, when they recognized that Wallace's successor, Lieutenant Governor Albert Brewer, was sworn in at the very spot Davis had been sworn in as President of the CSA.<sup>131</sup>

In contrast to the long procession of mourners who scaled the steps of the Capital Building and filed past Governor Wallace's body to pay their respects, members of the southern PPC caravan sought to honor the memory of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. by marching to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church located across the street from the Capital. When rumors circulated that members of the PPC might try to march to the site of the casket, state officials outfitted its police force for violent conflict.<sup>132</sup> Officers in riot gear lined mourners' path up the steps and into the Rotunda where the Governor lay in state. Twenty-eight additional state troopers lined both sides of Dexter Avenue leading to the Capital, carrying shotguns fitted with bayonets and wearing gas masks and hard hats.<sup>133</sup>

Hosea Williams sought to lead 250 members of the southern caravan past the Capital, where the Governor lay in state, to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where the slain director of the SCLC began his ministry in 1954. As the site of King's ministry during his leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts in 1955 and 1956, the church offered an additional geographical link for memorializing the man responsible for creating the Poor People's Campaign. Police halted

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<sup>131</sup> "Senator Warns of Riot Plans; 'Poor' Arrive in Montgomery," *JCL*, Wed, May 8, 1968, 1.

<sup>132</sup> "Poor People's March Picking Up Momentum," (Montgomery, Ala. A.P.), *JCL*, Thur, May 9, 1968, 1, 12a. A picture of Lieutenant Governor Brewer's swearing-in ceremony appeared alongside the May 8 article in the Jackson *Clarion Ledger*. George Wallace offered a show of support to the political process for recognizing the new governor as he stood present in the background, wiping tears from his eyes.

<sup>133</sup> "Poor People March Near Governor's Casket," *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 18 May, 1968: 1.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Corpora, "Wagon Train Will Enter DC In Style," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 9 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 217.

the marchers from continuing a procession to the Dexter Church three blocks into the two-mile march. Officials pointed out that the southern caravan failed to acquire a parade permit and that marching in file would conflict with the line of visitors to the Capital. Williams, therefore, directed the marchers to split up into small clusters of pedestrians to avoid shutting down their plan to honor King. A lead group carried a large memorial wreath past the Alabama State Capital Building where state troopers guarded the Governor's body, and placed the wreath at the Dexter Church where they convened with several smaller groups of marchers to hold a memorial service for King.<sup>134</sup>

As the southern caravan concentrated its attention on traveling to Washington by bus following their stop in Montgomery, other segments also began their journeys to Capitol Hill, employing stops along the way as opportunity to rally additional support for the campaign. A small northeastern caravan of twenty mostly-white marchers began their trek to Washington from Brunswick, Maine.<sup>135</sup> Close to 500 of those gathered in Marks boarded twelve buses with plans to stop in Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville, Tennessee, and Danville, Virginia on their way to Washington. Once at the Capitol the early arrivers were to begin constructing Resurrection City. The bus caravan that left from Marks called itself the "Freedom Train" and proved to be a popular convoy to the District of Columbia. PPC leaders refused several dozen tearful marchers admission on overcrowded buses, promising those left behind a ride on the Mule Train which planned to leave within the next few days.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> "Place Wreath At King's First Church," *Chicago Daily Defender*, Big Weekend Edition, 11 May 1968:28.

"Poor People's March Picking Up Momentum," (Montgomery, Ala. A.P.), *JCL*, Thur, May 9, 1968, p1, 12a

"Poor People March Near Governor's Casket," *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 18 May, 1968: 1.

<sup>135</sup> "Poor People's March Picking Up Momentum," (Montgomery, Ala. A.P.), *JCL*, Thur, May 9, 1968, 1, 12a. This group included one Native American and one African American participant.

<sup>136</sup> "Po' Mules Need Shoeses too--," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 8 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, No. 216.

On Thursday, May 9, the southern segment arrived in Atlanta where 400 members visited Dr. King's home and attended a rally at the Atlanta Civic Auditorium that evening. Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr. welcomed the biracial audience of 10,000. Entertainers performed before Ralph Abernathy and Coretta Scott King addressed the crowd. Abernathy honored his predecessor but sought to invigorate confidence in his leadership moving forward. Reciting the mantra that the enemy may kill the dreamer but they would not kill the dream, Abernathy promised, "I say to the nation, to the United States, with Ralph Abernathy, you've got hell on your hands."<sup>137</sup> The new SCLC Director sought to alleviate concern that campaigns for change might weaken under his leadership by vowing nonviolence in practice while emphasizing militancy in fervor. For many Americans, Abernathy's refrain of nonviolent militancy offered a paradox they struggled to reconcile.

Rallies and meetings held on the path to Washington became important opportunities for raising public support for the Poor People's Campaign. In some cases, locals attended large gatherings that spotlighted the marchers, and contributed financially to the PPC cause. In Louisville, Kentucky, ten busloads of 500 campaigners stopped for a rally at Freedom Hall and raised \$8,000 to continue their journey.<sup>138</sup> On other occasions, the attention surrounding PPC marchers helped them acquire audience with elected officials. Sunday, May 12, ten busloads of a northeastern caravan reached Newark, New Jersey with plans to meet Governor Richard Hughes in Trenton the following day.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Thomas Corpora, "Po' Mules Have to be Tranquilized," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 10 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 218.

<sup>138</sup> Thomas Corpora, "Po' Mules Have to be Tranquilized," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 10 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 218.

<sup>139</sup> "Wagon Train Detours by Jail for Leader," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 13 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 219.

As the southern caravan quickened its travel toward Washington by bus after their stop in Montgomery, organizing efforts for the Mule Train continued to develop in Marks, Mississippi. By the time the Freedom Train caravan of bus-riders left Marks, forty-one mules grazed in the pastureland the small town devoted to PPC assembly. The work of preparing farm mules for paved-road travel proved challenging for volunteers. In spite of trials that may have caused PPC pilgrims to question their commitment to traveling in mule-drawn wagons, the campaign persisted in its effort to make a statement with the means of travel they employed.

In order to protect the hooves of the mules from the vigor of daily travel over paved and gravel roads, workers sought to shoe mules that had never been shod much less come to accept the kind of grooming necessary to equip them for the journey. When a blacksmith brought tools to Quitman County he found his equipment failing under the demand for shoeing so many mules in so short a time. A small forge necessary in the shod process required continual maintenance and several of the harnesses required repairs before they would fit the mule teams. At times, mules resisted being handled to the point that handlers resorted to tranquilizing them in order to fit the animals for the journey.<sup>140</sup>

In spite of difficulties faced for employing mules in the pilgrimage, the Poor People's Campaign remained steadfast in its commitment to the wagon train for its symbolic messaging. Abernathy called the mules and wagon a "symbol of Negro poverty" and insisted they were important to Dr. King when he initiated plans for the campaign.<sup>141</sup> Similar to ways marchers sought to memorialize the slain SCLC director in their visitation of places associated with King –

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<sup>140</sup> Thomas Corpora, "Po' Mules Have to be Tranquilized," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 10 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 218.

<sup>141</sup> "Po' Mules Need Shoeses too--," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 8 May, 1968, Vol cxiii, No. 216. Hosea Williams said the mules generated "communications notoriety." Gerald McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 96.

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, King's home in Atlanta, the Lorraine Motel in Memphis – the mule-drawn wagons became another way pilgrims venerated their former leader.

The Mule Train conjured notions of poverty that organizers highlighted during King's funeral procession when his body was carried from Ebenezer Baptist Church to Morehouse College one month before the Mule Train left Marks. In some ways, the Mule Train seemed to conflate its messaging about poverty and its desire to pay homage to King. George W. Collins, editor of Baltimore's black newspaper, *Afro-American*, identified themes motivating the PPC in his description of the slow march from King's funeral to the grave site. The following is Collins's description of the procession in his article titled "Poor People Exalted in 'Spectacular' in Atlanta":

Standing out in bold relief among the glittering collection of famous world personalities from all fields of labor were nondescript Georgia mules. They drew the honor of pulling the creaky farm wagon bearing the coffin of Dr. King through the streets of the city where he was born.... The mules – Ada and Bell – were the epitome of poverty that afflicts the nation's poor and oppressed. They were unshod, unsheared, and their bones pressed tightly against their hides giving essence to the suspicion that malnutrition had become a way of life with them just as it has for Dr. King's millions of poor followers. Poverty and neglect was also the message radiating from the wagon. It bore marks of wear and tear to the extent that a disciple of the poor kept watch over the rear wheel to assure it did not fall before completing the 4.3 miles march from Ebenezer Church to the rolling campus of Morehouse College.

The harness worn by "Ada" and "Bell" to draw the caisson by the state office building where segregationist hashslinger-turned-governor Lester Maddox presided over an armed camp, were rusty chains and tattered ropes and bands. Guiding the miniature mule train were pall bearers also garbed in the uniform of the poor – overalls. 69-year-old Edward Peeks, an itinerant farmer from Clayton City owned the mules. He was proud.<sup>142</sup>

The mule-drawn wagon employed in the Poor People's Campaign and in King's funeral procession demonstrated a measure of accessibility that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference sought to establish as a hallmark of social equity. When reflecting on his experience

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<sup>142</sup> George W. Collins, "Poor People Exalted in 'Spectacular' in Atlanta," Baltimore *Afro-American*, 13 April, 1968: 1, 3.



attending King's funeral in 1968, Meridian, Mississippi minister and funeral home owner Charles Johnson described the significance of the nonmotorized carriage for the public. Using a wagon in a funeral, Johnson explained several years later, meant that all persons – regardless of limitations associated with race, sex, economic status, social standing, mobility, age, etc. – gained the ability to participate. Everybody had the opportunity to share in the proceedings. No one was excluded.<sup>143</sup>

Johnson pointed out that the same message prompted organizers who planned President John F. Kennedy's funeral procession from the White House to St. Matthew's Cathedral in 1963. In the President's case, a team of six white horses handled by three soldier-drivers pulled the caisson draped in the American flag while family members followed the casket on foot. Reporters noted that members of the crowd who watched the procession actually fell in line alongside Heads of State and White House staff who trailed the family.<sup>144</sup> The funeral wagon travelled common ground where all members of society participated in the ceremony on equal footing.

Rather than suggest that PPC organizers *confused* their antipoverty message with paying homage to their late leader, the Mule Train demonstrates how the Southern Christian Leadership Conference adhered to an underlying motivation centered on social equity. The mule and wagon symbology employed in the march for economic transformation as well as in the ceremony to lay an embattled soul to rest speaks to the unifying principle of equitable participation that underscored their mission to pursue justice for the nation. This symbolism also offers insight for understanding Abernathy's ongoing commitment, though questionable, to employ the mule-

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Charles Johnson conducted by Chet Bush, July 27, 2020.

<sup>144</sup> "JFK's Funeral Procession Leaves the White House," Video footage, *CBS News*, Nov. 25, 1963, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/jfks-funeral-procession-leaves-the-white-house/#x>, Uploaded Nov 20, 2013. Accessed Nov 9, 2020.

drawn wagon in several events and political campaigns following the Poor People's Campaign, as will be discussed in the chapter on Mule Train legacy.

### **The Marks Launch**

In Marks, the work involved preparing the Mule Train for travel dwarfed the work required for the symbolic appearances of the mules and wagon in Memphis, Tennessee; Edwards, Mississippi; and Selma, Alabama. As noted above, struggles associated with animal care created challenges for the caravan. Preparing the mules, however, marked merely the beginning of marchers' burdens. In addition to consisting of more than 100 demonstrators who had mobilized around a common cause, these were also strangers who had coalesced around a single journey, each with ambitions of their own. Tending to the animals' needs, transporting the cargo required for sustaining the mules and so many pilgrims, and submitting themselves to the yoke of common travel provided additional layers of responsibility for members of the mobile community. Considering, too, the ways instigators sought to incite disorder among the team, it is rather astonishing that the marchers – many of them grassroots activists and local residents pursuing change for their own family and for their neighbors – managed to organize themselves for such a grand-scale pilgrimage. Meanwhile, SCLC leaders and professional organizers in Washington struggled to maintain a sense of order and to impress upon the public the importance of their mission. The remainder of this chapter focuses more broadly on the journey the Mule Train pilgrims traveled and considers the other caravans' progresses and the state of the camp-in at Resurrection City in light of the Marks contingency's campaign through the southern states.

The Mule Train departed from Marks on Monday, May 13, after a few minor setbacks delayed their start. Thirty mules had been fitted with shoes in preparation for their departure, but

several still needed to be shod. Wagon master Willie Bolden awoke Monday morning to find an opening in the fence that corralled the forty-one mules and two horses. Working off a tip that a member of law enforcement had cut the fence to intentionally loose the mules, Bolden and PPC workers retrieved the animals that had wandered off into the countryside and teamed them up to sixteen wagons.<sup>145</sup>

The Mule Train nearly doubled in length by the time additional vehicles joined the company for its departure. Flanked by police cars in front and back, the caravan included a vehicle transporting relief mules and horses, a truck carrying portable toilets, and automobiles outfitted with supplies, such as food, tents, diapers, and medicine.<sup>146</sup> As Wagon Master of the Mule Train, Willie Bolden rode saddle-back on a single white horse at the front of the line. The caravan left Marks in steady rain around noon.<sup>147</sup> Before leaving Marks, Bolden insisted that the Mule Train detour through town to the county jail at the courthouse where the Marks demonstrations had first begun. Earlier in the day, the Quitman County Sheriff Department arrested SCLC field worker Andrew Marrisett for obstructing traffic by parking a vehicle on the highway. Bolden was determined to retrieve Marrisett before the caravan left town. “I’m gonna take the mule train to the jail and pick up my partner,” the wagon master promised, “We’re gonna stay right here until we get him.”<sup>148</sup> All sixteen wagons carrying the entire company of

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<sup>145</sup> “Wagon Train Detours by Jail for Leader,” (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 13 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 219.

<sup>146</sup> “SCLC Seeks Wagon Train Ingredients,” (Atlanta, AP) Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, May 9, 1968, 20. This article records an interview in which Hosea Williams suggested a truck bearing a shanty house representing the rural African American home would also accompany the caravan to serve as “a *relic* of the Southland.” He hoped the Smithsonian Institute would welcome the shanty into its care following the journey. No evidence exists, however, that a shanty truck accompanied the Mule Train when it departed from Marks, MS May 13. Roland Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998) 39. Gerald McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People’s Campaign*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 95.

<sup>147</sup> Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People’s Campaign* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 97.

<sup>148</sup> “Wagon Train Detours by Jail for Leader,” (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 13 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 219.

pilgrims drove into town to free their fellow marcher. They circled the courthouse lawn where students had staged an impromptu sit-in nearly two weeks earlier.<sup>149</sup>

In addition to corralling mules, the caravan had gotten its first taste of corralling and organizing the team of pilgrims for departure. Counting the rolling community proved to be a challenging task as reporters recorded different numbers of the often-fluctuating population. Roland Freeman, a photographer who captured images of the caravan along the way, estimated that about 115 pilgrims started the journey May 13. The group consisted of about 100 residents seeking change and 15 SCLC workers. The travelers ranged in age from eight months to over seventy years old. Forty women and roughly twenty children started the journey that first day.<sup>150</sup>

In Washington, Poor People's Campaign workers began constructing the space that became Resurrection City for the next six weeks. Abernathy drove a ceremonial first stake Monday, May 13, wearing overalls and a denim jacket in the spitting rain.<sup>151</sup> "We will be here a long, long time," Abernathy promised those who had arrived over the weekend, which included the Freedom Train from Marks. Each time Abernathy struck the ceremonial stake, onlookers shouted "Freedom!"<sup>152</sup> Students at Columbia University designed the A-framed shelters the campaign erected throughout the camp.<sup>153</sup> Pieced together with prefabricated plywood and canvas, each unit took about forty-five minutes to build. Though it would take several more days

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<sup>149</sup> Willie Bolden Interview by Bob Short, October 7, 2009, "Willie J. Bolden, Reflections on Georgia Politics," Russell Library Oral History, Published on April 19, 2012. ROGP 088. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuCKT-vO4Eo>. Accessed July 10, 2018. Other accounts indicate police released Marrisett before the Mule Train drove to the courthouse.

<sup>150</sup> Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, edited by David B. Levine, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 38.

<sup>151</sup> "Poor People's Campaign Opens Camping Season," (Washington, A.P.), *JCL*, Tue, May 14, 1968, 1.

<sup>152</sup> *New Journal and Guide*, 18 May 1968: A1

<sup>153</sup> "Resurrection City Continues Growing in Nation's Capital," (Washington, UPI), *The Commercial Dispatch*, Columbus, MS, May 16, 1968, p 5. Louis Cassels, "Strategy Meeting of Poor People's March," (Washington UPI), *The Commercial Dispatch*, Columbus, MS, May 20, 1968, 5.

to construct all the shelters, the campaign had enough materials for 2,000 residents to move into Resurrection City the first day.<sup>154</sup>

The weather conditions that threatened to slow the Mule Train in Mississippi dogged the campaign across the eastern seaboard. After traveling by bus from Charleston to Greenville, South Carolina, the Southern Caravan marched through rain and hail to rally support for the campaign.<sup>155</sup> Perhaps alluding to the poor hand the weather had dealt the city, Abernathy interpreted Washington's experience of the Poor People's Campaign as a demonstration of divine judgment. "We're going to plague the Pharaohs of this nation, with plague after plague," Abernathy told the press, "until they agree to give us meaningful jobs and a guaranteed income."<sup>156</sup> Abernathy may have overstated the impact the rain and the presence of the poor would have on Washington residents and politicians who remained insulated from precipitation and protests. Campaign demonstrators living in Resurrection City suffered the most.

The Poor People's Campaign offered a venue through which Coretta Scott King demonstrated her aptitude for leadership in the wake of her husband's death. In contrast to Abernathy's penchant for making promises, King provided outlets of grief and interpreted the struggle for those suffering unjust inequity as well as for the broader public. She also, however, offered consoling words to crowds searching for ways to think about the void that her husband's assassination created. When the Southern Caravan attended the May 9 rally at the Atlanta Civic Center, King expressed her affection for the packed-out auditorium, assuring those gathered to support the Poor People's Campaign, "My late husband is smiling on Atlanta tonight."<sup>157</sup> King's

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<sup>154</sup> *New Journal and Guide*, 18 May 1968:A1.

<sup>155</sup> Thomas Corpora, "Mule Train Moves Slowly," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 14 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 220.

<sup>156</sup> "Poor People's Campaign Opens Camping Season," (Washington, A.P.), *JCL*, Tue, May 14, 1968, 1.

<sup>157</sup> Thomas Corpora, "Po' Mules Have to be Tranquilized," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 10 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 218.

devotion to the people of the campaign showed her ability to speak encouragement into peoples' lives while challenging the systems that exploited them.

Within a few days of the Atlanta rally, Mrs. King led marchers through battle-torn areas of Washington, D.C. that had been decimated in the disorder that erupted following news of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. Following Dr. King's assassination, more than one hundred American cities experienced public disturbances, many with commercial districts looted and burned, and multiple cases of arrest and violence. Destruction reached the highest levels of the country in the District of Columbia. President Johnson deployed 15,000 National Guard and Army troops to D.C. as riots escalated. By the time the unrest was quelled there, thirteen people lost their lives, thousands more suffered injury, and armed forces arrested nearly eight thousand. Collateral damage from riots in Washington, D.C. devastated urban neighborhoods where many residents lost their homes, possessions, and jobs.<sup>158</sup>

On Sunday, May 12, Coretta Scott King led 4,500 poor women on a march against poverty through areas of Washington, D.C. that were most devastated by the unrest in April. Identified as "welfare mothers," the biracial throng of marchers followed King in the rain along streets lined with blackened buildings charred by fires that raged a month earlier.<sup>159</sup> One African-American newspaper, Norfolk, Virginia's *New Journal and Guide*, recognized King's leadership

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<sup>158</sup> J. Samuel Walker, *Most of 14<sup>th</sup> Street Is Gone: The Washington, D.C. Riots of 1968*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 2. I use the word "riot" with some reservation for describing the unrest that erupted following King's murder, however, I resonate with Walker's rationale for using the word: "I use the term 'riot' in a descriptive, not a pejorative, way, and I do not use it as a code word to denigrate the severity of the problems that were day-to-day realities in the poor neighborhoods of the capital. What happened in Washington in 1968 fits very well with the dictionary definition and with the common usage of the term 'riot.'" Walker earlier cited the *Oxford Dictionary of English* definition of riot as "a violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd." He continues, "Further, words such as 'rebellion' and 'uprising' strongly imply that riot participants took to the streets with at least some vague political objective in mind. This attribute did not apply to any significant extent to the Washington riots. I use the words 'disorders' and 'disturbances' as synonyms for 'riots,' and again, without any intention of understating the root causes of the violence and destruction of 1968." p. 4. For the reasons laid out here, I also chose to avoid using the word "protest" given that the disorder and destruction proceeded with no affiliation to any planned remonstrance.

<sup>159</sup> Photo: "Mule Train Leads Poor People Out of Dixie," *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 18 May, 1968, A1.

and address to the welfare mothers as an inaugural act of the mass phase of the Poor People's Campaign. Standing amid the visible damage of urban outcry, King pointed to ways economic inequity leveled the lives of the urban poor who remained a neglected feature in America's conceptualization of nation building. "I must remind you that starving a child is violence," King declared, "Suppressing a culture is violence. Neglecting school children is violence. Punishing a mother and her family is violence. Contempt for poverty is violence. Even the lack of will power to help humanity is a sick and sinister form of violence."<sup>160</sup> By focusing attention on the damage the American economic system inflicted on the lives of women and children, King showed that the visible destruction evidenced in looting, larceny, and violence bore direct ties to urban policy sanctioned in large cities around the country.<sup>161</sup>

The Mule Train faced the threat of violence on the road early in its departure from Marks. In spite of police presence accompanying the caravan (or, perhaps, emboldened by police presence), locals used their motorized vehicles to unsettle the animals and put pilgrims at risk of

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<sup>160</sup> *New Journal and Guide*, 18 May 1968: A1

<sup>161</sup> Coretta Scott King's sentiments at the Welfare Mother's march also reflected the ideas that Franciscan monk, Thomas Merton, published earlier in 1968 in his book *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968). While no evidence presents itself that either King or Merton were influenced by the other, their shared understanding for addressing systemic violence from a Christian faith platform, no doubt, ideologically bonded the two. Merton wrote, "When a system can, without resort to overt force, *compel* people to live in conditions of abjection, helplessness, wretchedness . . . it is plainly violent. To make people live on a subhuman level against their will, to constrain them in such a way that they have no hope of escaping their condition, is an unjust exercise of force. Those who in some way or other concur in the oppression—and perhaps profit by it—are exercising violence even though they may be preaching pacifism. And their supposedly peaceful laws, which maintain this spurious kind of order, are in fact instruments of violence and oppression." (pp 7-8).

The day after Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed, Merton wrote Coretta Scott King a personal letter expressing his condolences. In the letter, the Catholic priest intimated that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had planned to prepare himself for the Poor People's Campaign by taking a brief retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky where Merton practiced his vocation of prayer and writing. Merton contemplated that King suspected something of his impending death when he wrote, "I think we all anticipated this one: I am sure he did. Somehow when John Yungblut spoke of Martin coming here for a brief retreat before the big march, I had the awful feeling that it might be a preparation for something like this. It was to be Memphis instead of Washington – or somewhere else on the way." (Letter from Thomas Merton to Coretta Scott King after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, 1968-04-05, Merton Center Digital Collections, <https://merton.bellarmino.edu/items/show/14922>, accessed December 7, 2020).

injury. On Tuesday, the second day of travel, state troopers arrested four white men for weaving recklessly in and out of the line of wagons. The unruly drivers had harassed the Mule Train since its departure Monday and continued their antics into day two. Troopers, slow to respond, finally caught up with the four who in their inebriation had taken to hiding in the bushes along the route. Panola County Sheriff Forrest Tuttle named the individuals for the media: Kenneth Avant, Roy Smith, Jerry Self, and Billy Winters. They were convicted of public drunkenness on Wednesday and received fines of \$22.50 each.<sup>162</sup>

As Mule Train pilgrims skirted harassment from local ruffians, Poor People's Campaign demonstrators traveling to Washington, D.C. suffered violence from jittery police who anxiously patrolled areas where marchers rallied. A segment of marchers numbering close to one thousand identified as the Midwestern caravan clashed with police in Detroit, Michigan when they stopped at a public hall for the night on Monday evening, May 13.<sup>163</sup> Police mounted on horseback began swinging their nightsticks to break up a crowd outside the venue where PPC demonstrators ate supper. Four persons suffered injuries in the melee. March representatives of the Midwestern segment told Cleveland Mayor Jerome P. Cavanaugh during a public meeting the following day that the law enforcement they encountered in Detroit the night before amounted to nothing more than "Nazi storm troopers camouflaged in blue."<sup>164</sup>

The first three days of the journey offered Mule Train pilgrims the space and time to find their rhythm, to establish a pace for long-distance travel, and to work through the logistics of

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<sup>162</sup>“‘We’ll Be Here Long, Long Time,’ -Abernathy: Marchers Pour Into Washington: Resurrection City Being Erected By Poor People,” (Washington UPI), *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 18 May, 1968: A1.

“\$\$\$Shortage Hits ‘City’,” Washington, *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 18 May, 1968, 1.

<sup>163</sup> Richard Lerner, “Resurrection City Need \$\$ Too,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 17 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 223. Lerner stated the Midwestern caravan numbered 1,000 as it passed through Pittsburgh Thursday, May 16.

<sup>164</sup> “Poor Hit In Detroit, Abernathy Flies In,” (Marks, MS UPI), *Chicago Daily Defender* (Daily Edition), 14 May, 1968, p 20. “‘Poor People’ Marching Onward,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 16 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 222.



their unorthodox transportation. While the caravan struggled to reach the 20-25 miles a day they hoped to average for the rest of the journey, the trip between Marks and Grenada provided rural passages with few obstacles other than the demands associated with their mode of travel. The team stopped short of their intended destination the first night, covering only half the twenty miles from Marks to Batesville, much of it in rain. Buses shuttled eighty marchers into Batesville for the night as Bolden, wagon drivers and assistants – most, if not all, men – parked the wagons and camped in a field. One wagon became disabled but provided parts to draw from when a wagon tongue broke the first day.<sup>165</sup> Reducing the caravan to fifteen wagons also created an additional team of mules for rotating into the procession when others needed a break, as would soon be the case. One mule went lame during this stretch and had to be rotated off the line.<sup>166</sup> On Tuesday the train increased the distance they covered time and a half and camped nearer the rest of the pilgrims in Batesville.<sup>167</sup> By Wednesday the caravan reached its twenty-mile goal, but Bolden again sent women and children ahead to Grenada before nightfall.<sup>168</sup>

Mule Train leader Willie Bolden worked to ease the hardships of the pilgrims in an effort to bolster the group's morale. When 12-year-old Henry Lee Brown got seasick from all the rocking in the back of a wagon, Bolden named him the Honorary Wagonmaster of the Mule Train. In spite of some broken hardware, a collapsed canvas wagon cover, and the occasionally aggressive passersby, the caravan forged ahead during the first week with optimism about the remainder of the trip. Small stores and houses posted along Hwy 6 East to Batesville and Hwy 51 South toward Grenada emptied as residents, workers, and patrons watched the line of wagons

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<sup>165</sup> Thomas Corpora, "Mule Train Moves Slowly," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 14 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 220.

<sup>166</sup> "\$\$Shortage Hits 'City'," Washington, *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 18 May, 1968, 7.

<sup>167</sup> "\$\$Shortage Hits 'City'," Washington, *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 18 May, 1968, 1.

<sup>168</sup> "\$\$Shortage Hits 'City'," Washington, *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 18 May, 1968, 7.

pass.<sup>169</sup> Bolden enjoyed whooping at the animals and summoning his team of travelers forward each time the caravan departed from a stop, often to provide a spectacle for onlookers. Recounting the theme from the television show *Rawhide*, the wagon master called out to his team, “Get em’ up! Move em’ out!”<sup>170</sup>

When the Mule Train reached Grenada Thursday afternoon, May 16, the black community received the pilgrims with fanfare. A Grenada resident, 10-yr-old Cleo Hayes, snapped a picture with a small pocket camera he ordered in the mail that portrayed the wagon master Willie Bolden riding a white horse at the front of the caravan.<sup>171</sup> Community and church members gathered around the wagon train as it arrived to the Belle Flower MB Church on the western perimeter of town along Highway 51. Belle Flower housed an SCLC office and served as a center for residents participating in the local Black Freedom movement to come together in their fight against racial injustice. During 1966, the church provided a point of assembly and organization for locals marching to town to demonstrate at the county courthouse in opposition to the ongoing segregation of Grenada public schools. Dr. King had addressed local activists at Belle Flower and led a march from the church to county offices less than a year prior to the Poor People’s Campaign. The fight for integration in Grenada had become grossly violent when white men of the community attacked black students marching to confront segregated schools more than twelve years after the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954. Dozens of children were hauled in cattle wagons to Parchman State Penitentiary in Sunflower County, MS, the same place Freedom Riders had been incarcerated in 1961. There police detained youth

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<sup>169</sup> “\$\$\$Shortage Hits ‘City’,” Washington, *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 18 May, 1968, 1.

<sup>170</sup> Willie Bolden Interview by Bob Short, October 7, 2009, “Willie J. Bolden, Reflections on Georgia Politics,” Russell Library Oral History, Published on April 19, 2012. ROGP 088. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuCKT-vO4Eo>. Accessed July 10, 2018.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Cleo Hayes conducted by Chet Bush on July 30, 2018.

ranging from six to eighteen years old, took pictures one by one, attached a prisoner number to each child, and created a record for Grenada County officials to identify students who participated in the demonstration. With the integration battle still fresh in residents' minds, the arrival of the Mule Train offered an alternative occasion for black Grenadans invested locally in a struggle for change.<sup>172</sup>

With the arrival of the full company of the Mule Train to Grenada, the team spent the evening and most of the next morning resting, repairing wagons, and tending to the mules. The team camped in a field north of the Willie Wilson Elementary School.<sup>173</sup> Wagons required lubrication of the wheels and axles and reinforcement of the wooden frames that weakened in the swaying cadence.<sup>174</sup> The ribs that supported the wagon covers also required attention given the weight of the canvas in the rainy conditions.<sup>175</sup> While in Grenada pilgrims waterproofed the underside of the wagon covers by lining the canvas with plastic to keep riders dry.<sup>176</sup>

## Churches

Belle Flower MB Church of Grenada, like Marks's Eudora AME Church and the many churches to come in the journey, provided the Southern Christian Leadership Conference an important passage into the community through which officers could recruit, train, and organize people to support the Poor People's Campaign as it moved through their hometowns. Due to the

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<sup>172</sup> Interview with Grenada Councilman Lewis Johnson conducted by Chet Bush on July 19, 2018. Interview with Cleo Hayes conducted by Chet Bush on July 30, 2018.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Grenada Councilman Lewis Johnson conducted by Chet Bush on July 19, 2018. Interview with Cleo Hayes conducted by Chet Bush on July 30, 2018. The school was later named after longtime Grenada educator Carrie Dotson.

<sup>174</sup> "Wagon Train," Picture by Mike Collins, *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 17 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 223.

<sup>175</sup> "Po' Mules & Horses Too," "Outsider," *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 23 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 227.

<sup>176</sup> "Po' Mules Start Long, Long Trail," *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 21 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 225.

struggle for Black Freedom already underway in the area, meetings or rallies occurred throughout the week. Former SCLC Officer R.B. Jones of Grenada argues that the rallies taking place every night of the week (except Saturday and Sunday which were set apart for rest and worship) from 1965 to 1968 helped to center the church as a site where leaders emerged to train demonstrators for marches.<sup>177</sup> By providing space for gathering, making available its existing networks for service, and linking the national goals of the PPC with local concerns, the southern black church proved an indispensable repository of resources for supporting the Mule Train. Because these local networks operated within racialized spaces where members of the white community sought to limit black reach and mobility, the Mule Train trusted community and church members to provide essential reserves for continuing their journey. Resources such as gathering spaces for activists and local supporters, sleeping quarters for pilgrims, dining options, and the availability of pasture land for the mules changed from community to community, further deepening pilgrims' reliance on local institutions.

Pilgrimagining through the South required an element of trust and surrender, not to the power structures that challenged black mobility, but to local residents already familiar with the terrain who would willingly cooperate with PPC "scouts" to accommodate the company of travelers. PPC demonstrators knew not to expect automatic cooperation from black residents living in the towns they entered.<sup>178</sup> In addition to individuals who simply chose not to engage in civil rights efforts for their own personal reasons, historian Charles Payne points out that the local people comprising communities and churches that harbored civil rights activists during

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<sup>177</sup> Interview with R.B. Jones by Chet Bush, December 18, 2020.

<sup>178</sup> Annie Rankin recorded an account in which a black resident of an Alabama town resisted Mule Train pilgrims and reported them to the local white sheriff when they invited him to join them on their journey. Annie Rankin, "An Autobiography of Mrs. Annie James Rankin," *Annie Rankin Papers*, Box 1, Folder 11. Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Collection Call No.: T1026.

Mississippi Freedom Summer learned to expect retaliation – if not physical, at least economic – from white residents when they participated with out-of-town activists. Reverend Aaron Johnson of First Christian Church in Greenwood, Mississippi reported that had he not received financial support from denominational headquarters in Kansas City, he would have been forced to leave the church and abandon his commitment to the Black Freedom struggle in that town.<sup>179</sup>

Black churches of Grenada collaborated on a highly-coordinated scale to offer a model of network and support that the Mule Train relied on throughout its journey. These churches demonstrated that they were strengthened by ties to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and to the movement in ways that transcended their allegiance to their denominational affiliation. Additionally, churches provided networks that helped people secure essential needs in the community. Through churches local folk organized transportation networks to overcome the dearth of grocery options in the black community. The SCLC cooperated with these local networks to provide groceries in bulk for groups of activists, such as the Mule Train, when they arrived in town.<sup>180</sup> By strategizing together to support local activism, by opening their facilities and sharing resources based on those strategies, and by encouraging their parishioners to participate in regular cross-congregational gatherings, black churches of Grenada fostered an amorphous collective of black activists motivated to produce change at the civic level.

Galvanized by his affiliation with the Atlanta-based SCLC organization, Grenada Belle Flower MB Church Pastor Rev. Sharper Cunningham partnered with other local ministers to insulate themselves against external pressures that threatened to undermine their effectiveness for engaging in local expressions of the Black Freedom struggle. Due to the church's location

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<sup>179</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 189.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with SCLC Field Officer, R.B. Jones, in Grenada, MS on December 18, 2020.

near downtown, Belle Flower provided space for marchers to meet and participate in street activity. Cunningham demonstrated an adroit capacity for garnering the support of small business owners in the black community and worked alongside colleagues such as Rev. L.C. Coleman of the New Hope MB Church.<sup>181</sup>

Coleman, himself a wagon driver for the Mule Train, pastored the larger New Hope MB Church about eight blocks south of Belle Flower. New Hope occupied facilities large enough to host fundraisers featuring the vocal talents of Coretta Scott King when she and her husband made visits to the community prior to 1968. New Hope provided space where community members shared grand potlucks and gathered for community-wide services. Adjacent to New Hope's property sat the smaller Vincent United Methodist Church, facing Highway 51. SCLC officers and local leaders often met at Vincent to hold more intimate meetings and dinners separate from but near to New Hope's large inter-congregational gatherings. Belle Flower, New Hope, and Vincent, together, offered strategic rally points where black Grenadans of various religious affiliation could gather to support and engage in local efforts for change.<sup>182</sup>

Given the ways Black Grenada engaged in the movement, forty-four-year-old L.C. Coleman faced little resistance when he left his New Hope congregation to join the Mule Train for six weeks. Though some wagon canvases sported religious messages, such as "Don't Laugh, Folks; Jesus Was A Poor Man," Rev. Coleman's wagon bore a message that confronted the economic priorities of the federal government: "Which is Better? Send Man to Moon or Feed Him on Earth?"<sup>183</sup> Inside his wagon, the minister hanged a colorful, fringe-lined banner flag

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<sup>181</sup> Interview with Rev. Randy Jackson, Pastor of Belle Flower MB Church at the time of the interview, conducted by Chet Bush on December 18, 2020.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with R. B. Jones conducted by Chet Bush on December 18, 2020.

<sup>183</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, Edited by David B. Levine, (Nashville: Rutledge Press, 1998), 37, 41, 49, 50.

depicting a cross with rays emanating from it. The flag read, “Banner Offering Class,” suggesting Coleman borrowed the religious vestment from a church classroom that had garnered the title for its generous Sunday School contributions in weekend offerings. The radiated cross hung behind his head from where he sat holding the reins, perhaps indicating that his wagon doubled as a small chapel for pilgrims seeking prayer or counsel with a man of the cloth.<sup>184</sup>

Due to the ways the Southern Christian Leadership Conference drew from its religious network to find leaders for the organization and to support local efforts, ministers appeared in no small measure on the Mule Train pilgrimage. Though Coleman and Bessemer, Alabama minister John Burrell comprised the only two pilgrims that Mule Train media specialist Roland Freeman documented in his roster with the title “Rev.,” several leaders with religious credentials emerged throughout the campaign in association with the Marks caravan. King and Abernathy, of course, occupied prominent roles as SCLC Directors, and many more either joined the efforts of the campaign with religious titles or sought to express their vision for change through church credentials following the caravan. Rev. A.D. King, the brother of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., participated in one of the courthouse marches in Quitman County prior to the Mule Train departure. After returning home following his Marks involvement, King announced his resignation to his Louisville, Kentucky congregation to become an associate pastor at Atlanta Ebenezer Baptist Church where his brother had served until his death.<sup>185</sup> Rev. Hosea Williams accompanied the Mule Train long enough to recruit additional pilgrims in an evangelistic appeal in Duck Hill, Mississippi before he traveled ahead to Resurrection City.<sup>186</sup> Wagon master Willie

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<sup>184</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, Edited by David B. Levine, (Nashville: Rutledge Press, 1998), 50.

<sup>185</sup> “King’s Brother to Assume Pulpit,” (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 12 June, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 241. Rev. A.D. King resigned Sunday, June 6, 1968. His resignation became effective August 25, whereupon he served alongside his father, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., at the 4,500-member Ebenezer Baptist Church.

<sup>186</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 55. Interview with Al White conducted by Chet Bush, July 31, 2018.

Bolden acquired religious credentials following the Mule Train and eventually became the pastor of the Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church of Atlanta.<sup>187</sup> Mule Train photographer Roland Freeman captured pictures of Rev. James Bevel and Rev. Andrew Young also in attendance at freedom rallies in Marks and at the Mount Bethel training events during early May, 1968.<sup>188</sup> Efforts to rally pilgrims around language and charisma inspired by the southern black church did not fall solely on the shoulders of the communities of faith who hosted the caravan as it traveled site to site, but was woven into the warp and woof of the journey itself.

The first arrests of the Poor People's Campaign in Washington demonstrated ways activists expressed cries for justice through performances associated with a community of faith. George Wiley led a group from Resurrection City to Capitol Hill to protest a welfare policy limiting the number of dependents recipients of aid could claim. The group of eighteen protestors called the law racist and expressed their objections by singing loudly and praying outside the hall where Congress convened. Police ordered the group to stop singing and praying, then arrested all eighteen when protestors defied the injunction.<sup>189</sup>

## **Women**

Though a male-dominated SCLC leadership characterized Poor People's Campaign mobilization and rhetoric, the Mule Train reflected the indispensable leadership local women provided to put and keep this band of pilgrims on the road. Women demonstrated technical knowledge, organized group members, implemented problem-solving techniques, and forecasted

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<sup>187</sup> Interview with Willie Bolden conducted by Bob Short on October 7, 2009. "Willie J. Bolden, Reflections on Georgia Politics," Russell Library Oral History, Published on April 19, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuCKT-vO4Eo>. Accessed July 10, 2018.

<sup>188</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 21, 27. Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission report May 4 & 5, 1968. Digital archives, MDAH.

<sup>189</sup> "18 'Poor People' Arrested At Capitol," (Washington, A.P.), *JCL*, Fri, May 24, 1968, p1. Richard Lerner, "Po' Campsite Swamp of Mud," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 24 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 228.



future needs of the group in ways that met the ongoing demands of the pilgrimage. Some women supported the community life of the caravan while meeting the needs of their infants and children on the journey. In addition to ways women undergird Mule Train viability, female community leaders provided local resources to encourage and enrich pilgrims.

Local women led student marchers in Marks prior to the Mule Train launch and modeled nonviolent resistance at the Quitman County Courthouse before the SCLC conducted its Mount Beulah training sessions for Poor People's Campaign participants. Lydia McKinnon, one of the teachers in the courthouse march following Willie Bolden's arrest, suffered violence from police who broke up the demonstration. McKinnon came away from the sit-in bearing severe wounds on her head and face after police beat her with the butt of their gun.<sup>190</sup> In addition to McKinnon, female students reported receiving the majority of violence from police in Marks. Five young women ranging from thirteen to eighteen years old filed a lawsuit at the Federal Courthouse in Clarksdale on Monday, May 6 against the local sheriff, a Marks police officer, and three highway patrol officers for using unnecessary force at the demonstration.<sup>191</sup> As in many race-centered demonstrations of the South, the violence police committed upon these young women garnered national attention as the press descended upon Marks in the early days of the campaign.

Female pilgrims provided administrative leadership for the Mule Train prior to its launch, during the pilgrimage, and following the dispersal at Resurrection City. While working at the

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<sup>190</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 30.

<sup>191</sup> "Negro Girls File \$500,000 Lawsuit," (Clarksdale, A.P.) *The Clarion-Ledger*, 7 May, 1968. Plaintiffs: Myrtle Mae Brown (13), Robbie McAdory (16), Annie B. Henderson (17), Johnnie Mae Heags (16), Ruth Jamison (18). Defendants: Sheriff L.V. Harrison, Marks Police Officer L.C. Pride, Highway Patrol Inspector L.Y. Griffin, "John Doe" and "Richard Roe," two highway patrolmen known by sight but not by name. Marks officers Jenkins and Pride, an African American, later counter-sued the Quitman County Voters League, the Quitman County NAACP branch and the Quitman County Teachers Association on the grounds that statements made by the defendants on flyers distributed in the area defamed their personal character and professional standing in the community. "Table Turned on Rights Group," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 27 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 229.

SCLC office in Marks, twenty-eight-year-old Bertha Johnson received the applications of potential Poor People's Campaign participants and helped maintain a roster of Mule Train pilgrims during the journey. When police closed Resurrection City, Johnson acquired bus tickets and distributed them to pilgrims for their return home.<sup>192</sup> Four young women on the Mule Train also assisted with keeping a running roster as participants joined the caravan. Shirley Brown (15), Sadie Hill (18), Denise Martin (13), and Mary Will Tato (21) recorded the name, sex, age, city of origin, and role of each traveler.<sup>193</sup> Of the 115 pilgrims registered, 43 females ranging from infancy to over fifty years of age participated in the march to Washington, 12 of whom occupied key roles as SCLC and Volunteer Staff, Assistant Recorder, Mule Train Organizer, and Assistant Wagon Driver.<sup>194</sup>

The intersection of race and gender surfaced in the Poor People's Campaign as white women participated, revealing ways they succeeded or struggled to gain acceptance as members of the Mule Train community. Before the caravans left Marks, observers representing the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission reported their discomfort with interracial romances that occurred at the Marks SCLC campsite. Sovereignty Commission plants downplayed local black participation and emphasized the preponderance of demonstrators who had come from Memphis to join the marches. Among those from out of state, about a dozen white girls and boys whom the Commission referred to as "beatniks" arrived to Marks and mingled with black activists. Reporters observed "at least one (1) act of fornication in an automobile and a good bit of open petting, one (1) couple being a white girl and a negro boy."<sup>195</sup> The report intended to

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<sup>192</sup> "Interviews with Bertha Johnson Luster," *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* by Roland L. Freeman, (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 112.

<sup>193</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train*, 102.

<sup>194</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train*, 134-135.

<sup>195</sup> Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission report, May 2, 1968. (9-31-791) Digital archives, MDAH

provide the Sovereignty Commission with a record of PPC misconduct but points more to white female sexual agency and the social constrictions they overcame as they interacted with black men.

Two white women accompanying the Mule Train illustrate contradictory paths of engagement with the community of marchers. Journalist Jean Smith ingratiated herself among Mule Train pilgrims whereas maverick participant Virgie Hortenstine struggled to gain acceptance as a legitimate member of the Mule Train. Smith, a white woman who worked for NBC affiliate WRC out of Washington, D.C., won the respect and admiration of pilgrims as she and a stripped-down camera crew out of Memphis provided the longest continual coverage of the journey. Smith said she dodged speeding pickup trucks with rifles blazoned in plain view, endured catcalls from passers-by and received phone threats during the weeks she accompanied the Mule Train. Her mission to cover the story of lives on the journey, however, spurred her on in hopes of providing Washington viewers a glimpse of this southern segment of the Poor People's Campaign.<sup>196</sup>

Virgie Hortenstine, a white woman from Cincinnati who traveled with the Mule Train in her own automobile, failed to secure protections that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference provided other marchers. When police arrested Hortenstine in Batesville, Mississippi for parking illegally and defying police orders, she resisted having her picture taken or being finger printed.<sup>197</sup> She told police she had been arrested twice previously at other demonstrations in the South and vowed not to eat until they released her. After a week of jail time with no intervention from SCLC lawyers, however, Hortenstine paid the \$45 fine for obstructing traffic

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<sup>196</sup> "Comments by Jean Smith Freas," *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 129-130.

<sup>197</sup> "\$\$Shortage Hits 'City'," Washington, *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 18 May, 1968, 1.

herself, then rejoined the wagon train as it moved toward the Alabama state line.<sup>198</sup> The 56-year-old white woman from Cincinnati does not appear in the Mule Train roster. While it is unclear if Hortenstine sought to travel on the wagons but was denied or chose to accompany the caravan as a motorist, it is clear that she failed to secure the support from SCLC officers for an infraction that pilgrim Andrew Marrisett from Birmingham garnered the day the Mule Train left Marks.<sup>199</sup>

Though white females participated as members of the Mule Train community, observers of the caravan persisted in casting white women as foreign to both the campaign and the communities through which they passed. A Grenada newspaper captured a picture of a white woman reinforcing the ribs that supported the canvases of the covered wagons, titling the photo “Outsider.” The caption described the woman as “A visitor from Alabama,” suggesting she was as much an “Outsider” of the Mule Train as she was of Grenada.<sup>200</sup> In all probability, the so-called outsider was Myrna Copeland from Huntsville, Alabama. Copeland teamed up with black Alabaman Joan Cashin to organize a group of black and white volunteers to make cloth covers for the wagons. Cashin’s husband John was the chairman of the Community Service Committee in Huntsville, a civil rights activist group incorporated with the SCLC. Motivated by a visit from Hosea Williams in early April, the Cashins hurried to acquire most of the mules and wagons used in the caravan. Copeland assisted the Cashins by organizing several faculty members from the University of Alabama and Alabama A&M in Huntsville to make the canvas covers.<sup>201</sup>

Though local observers labeled white female participation in the Mule Train an anomaly, key

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<sup>198</sup> Kent Gardner, “Attention Cast on Mules’ Welfare,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 24 May, 1968. “She did eat this week and she paid her fine and we let her go,” declared O.P. Butts, Panola County jailer at Batesville.

<sup>199</sup> “‘Poor People’ Man Arrested,” (Marks, A.P.), *JCL*, Tue, May 14, 1968, p4. “Wagon Train Detours by Jail for Leader,” (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 13 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 219.

<sup>200</sup> “Po’ Mules & Horses Too,” “Outsider,” *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 23 May, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 227.

<sup>201</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 119.

figures such as Copeland and Smith invested themselves in the community of pilgrims from the beginning to ensure the caravan succeeded in reaching its goals.

Testimonies indicate the majority of pilgrims who joined the Mule Train as the caravan stopped in communities along the way were women, some with small children. When Mary Sue Gordon joined the Mule Train following a rousing appeal from Hosea Williams for new recruits in Duck Hill, Mississippi, she brought her three children ages six, five, and two.<sup>202</sup> Jerdene Allen likewise brought her 9-month-old baby on the Mule Train following Williams's entreaty for more marchers. Allen recalled swatting mosquitoes from her baby's tender skin and remembered her time on the caravan as the moment she first used disposable diapers.<sup>203</sup> She and husband Jimmy Davis Avery decided to take a bus the remainder of the trip to Resurrection City once they reached the Alabama state line to avoid conflict with hostile white crowds.<sup>204</sup> Annie Rankin of Natchez, MS joined the Mule Train in Grenada and later reflected on the hardships Duck Hill residents suffered when they left with the caravan. She recounted that white residents removed the possessions of black marchers from their homes, an eviction that pilgrims would have to contend with upon returning after the campaign.<sup>205</sup> Women communicated the hope that by joining the Mule Train and embracing hardships associated with it, they increased their chances of improving their families' financial circumstances and living conditions in the long run.

### **Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia**

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<sup>202</sup> Interview with Sarah Louise (Gordon) Farmer conducted by Chet Bush in Duck Hill, MS on July 31, 2018.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Jerdene Allen conducted by Chet Bush in Duck Hill, MS on July 31, 2018.

<sup>204</sup> Interview with Jimmy Davis Avery conducted by Al White in the fall 2017. Source: Video of recorded interview at 610 Headstart, Duck Hill, MS. Held at the Action, Communication, and Education Reform nonprofit organization. Accessed July 31, 2018.

<sup>205</sup> Annie Rankin, "Trip on the Mule Train," in Annie Rankin Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, p1.

A five-night layover in Grenada gave pilgrims a necessary reprieve from the arduous launch in rainy weather, helping them adjust to a steady pace of daily travel. Leaving Grenada, the caravan continued south on Highway 51, staying one night each in Duck Hill and Winona. At Winona pilgrims headed east toward Alabama on Highway 82, spending nights in Kilmichael, Eupora, Starkville, and Columbus. The wagon train slowly increased the distance pilgrims covered each day, growing their ten-mile-a-day average during the first week of the trip to twenty miles during the second week they traveled through Mississippi.

The increase in distance covered daily presented pilgrims new challenges. The journey into Columbus marked the first time the Mule Train traveled late into the night. By the time pilgrims reached the fairgrounds where they set up camp Sunday, May 26 it was close to midnight. Groups of whites lined the road wielding bricks and bats in the dark night, communicating clear dissent from white Mississippi State University students who cheered marchers as they left Starkville earlier that morning.<sup>206</sup> Angry mobs heckled the caravan as they entered the city in spite of highway patrol presence. “We’ve been good to y’all,” they shouted at marchers, using the n-word, “and now you want to slap us in the back?!”<sup>207</sup> Though pilgrims had experienced hostility from detractors previous to Columbus, the darkness added a new layer of danger to their journey.

The hostile reception caused some pilgrims to rethink their commitment to participating in the Poor People’s Campaign by Mule Train. After joining the caravan in Duck Hill, Jimmy Davis Avery decided he, his wife Jerdene, and their 9-month-old baby would part ways with the

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<sup>206</sup> “Mule Train Still Trying to make It,” (Columbus, MS UPI), *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 1 June, 1968, 1-2. Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 53.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Jimmy Davis Avery conducted by Al White in the fall 2017. Source: Video of recorded interview at 610 Headstart, Duck Hill, MS. Held at the Action, Communication, and Education Reform nonprofit organization. Accessed July 31, 2018.

wagon train. Not wanting to lose face in front of the other marchers, Avery confessed to agitating his baby so they could pin their early departure on the baby's feigned illness. Avery said Jesse Jackson's persistence convinced him not to abandon the campaign entirely. Jackson put Avery, his family, and others on a bus driven by a man named "Cool Papa" and sent them straight to Resurrection City where they camped and demonstrated for the next three weeks.<sup>208</sup>

The departure of some marchers near the Alabama state line precipitated a Mule Train detour for recruiting additional pilgrims and caused some to question the wagon train's endurance. In Reform, Alabama the caravan turned due south on Highway 17 to make a five-day dip through the Black Belt communities of Carrollton, Aliceville, and Eutaw.<sup>209</sup> Clarksdale, Mississippi journalist Curtis Wilkie interpreted the hardships of the Mule Train as defeat and concluded from its detour that the group splintered before reaching its destination.<sup>210</sup> Pilgrims on the way, however, pointed to the galvanizing impact the Alabama leg of the trip had on their pilgrimage experience as they gained additional marchers and paid tribute to key figures who inspired their journey.

The condition of the mules continued to concern onlookers as the caravan neared the state line and traveled through Alabama. When the Memphis Humane Society complained to the American Humane Association in Denver, Colorado that the animals were not receiving proper care, the organization deployed Kenneth McGovern, Executive Director of the Humane Society in Miami, to inspect the mules. McGovern intercepted the Mule Train as it neared the MS / AL

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<sup>208</sup> Interview with Jimmy Davis Avery conducted by Al White in the fall 2017. Source: Video of recorded interview at 610 Headstart, Duck Hill, MS. Held at the Action, Communication, and Education Reform nonprofit organization. Accessed July 31, 2018.

<sup>209</sup> Freeman, *Journey of Hope*, 60.

<sup>210</sup> "The procession finally pulled out of Marks in a downpour. Chaos attended the journey. An animal lover obtained an injunction against the SCLC, and state troopers intercepted the wagon train outside Winona, about eighty miles from Marks, two weeks after it had set out. The caravan never reached its destination." Curtis Wilkie, *Dixie: A Personal Odyssey through Events that Shaped the Modern South* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 177.

state line. Hosea Williams told reporters they had no objection to the inspection of the mules. “We are not allowing any unshod mules on the highway,” said Williams. “If the mules don’t have shoes, they are riding in a truck.”<sup>211</sup> Assistant wagon master Andrew Marrisett described the animals’ treatment: “The mules are fed oats, corn and hay three times a day. They get a rubdown in the morning, and they are bedded down at night.”<sup>212</sup> At stops, leaders cajoled pilgrims to see that mules received water before they sought their own refreshment.<sup>213</sup>

At times, the mules tolerated the southern summer climate better than their police escorts. As the caravan left Reform, Alabama, Highway Patrol officers took turns riding the fenders of their cars, perspiring heavily beneath the burning sun. Others rode with their car doors open, hopping out to direct traffic around the slow procession of marchers. When the afternoon heat settled in, officers raised the hoods of their cars to prevent the radiators from overheating.<sup>214</sup>

Four days before the caravan reached Birmingham, local Humane Society President Marion Brodnax reported the national organization’s findings on the health of the animals involved in the Mule Train. Responding to the deluge of calls the Humane Society received from concerned citizens, Brodnax assured the public that a top regional executive, McGovern, had checked on the mules in Mississippi and found them, for the most part, to be in good condition. Two animals had died since the caravan left Marks, reported Brodnax, but allegations of mistreatment had apparently been overblown. One mule suffered injury when kicked by a horse and had to be put down. Another died from infection associated with a bad shoeing experience. The rest appeared healthy and well-shod. Brodnax assured the public that reserve mules traveled

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<sup>211</sup> Kent Gardner, “Attention Cast on Mules’ Welfare,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 24 May, 1968.

<sup>212</sup> Kent Gardner, “Attention Cast on Mules’ Welfare,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 24 May, 1968.

<sup>213</sup> Pete Clark, “Mule Train Plodding On Long, Long Trail,” *The Birmingham News*, Metro Edition, Vol no. 78. Thur, May 30, 1968.

<sup>214</sup> Pete Clark, “Mule Train Plodding On Long, Long Trail,” *The Birmingham News*, Metro Edition, Vol no. 78. Thur May 30, 1968.



in trailer trucks and organizers substituted the reserves whenever a worker mule went lame or needed a break. “The mules are pulling light wagons with no more than four adults in each, are being fed and watered along the route of the march, moving slowly and stopping often for rest breaks,” Brodnax reported.<sup>215</sup> An extended layover in Birmingham allowed pilgrims to regroup in a variety of ways, not least among these was the opportunity to reshod some of the mules and replace the metal rims on several of the wagon wheels.<sup>216</sup>

The caravan’s stop at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama demonstrated the importance that remembering the dead held for members of the Poor People’s Campaign, and especially, for Mule Train pilgrims. Five years earlier this church suffered a vicious act of terror when four Ku Klux Klan members planted fifteen sticks of dynamite beneath a set of stairs. The white terrorists programmed the bomb to detonate Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, during a period of high traffic between Sunday School and worship service. The blast killed four young black girls: Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Carol Denise McNair (11). A stop at the Birmingham Sixteenth Street Baptist Church carried significance for the PPC pilgrimage considering the church’s recent history as a site of martyrdom in the Black Freedom struggle.

The Mule Train incorporated an additional reason to gather at the church given the most recent death of a figure credited with championing the rights of African Americans and shedding light on the plight of black southerners trapped in poverty. Senator Robert F. Kennedy was shot shortly after midnight Wednesday, June 5, while campaigning for president in Los Angeles. He had just announced victory in the California primaries at The Ambassador Hotel ballroom when a 24-year old Palestinian terrorist fired several shots at Kennedy as he and his team exited

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<sup>215</sup> “‘Poor’ Mules Not Poorly Treated,” *The Birmingham News*, 31 May, 1968.

<sup>216</sup> “Mule Train Moves After Delay Here,” *The Birmingham News*, Fri, 7 June, 1968.

through the kitchen. Kennedy died of his injuries the following night, June 6, 1968, and his body was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery late Saturday night, June 8. President Johnson proclaimed the next day, Sunday, June 9, a “Day of Mourning” as nearly 60,000 Americans filed past the senator’s grave to pay their final respects.<sup>217</sup> While the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church established the site as a place where pilgrims identified with and reflected on the dead, the recent assassination of a civil rights supporter instated the church as a fitting venue for the Poor People’s Campaign to memorialize a white senator.

Demonstrations in Washington increased in size and intensity as new arrivals joined the ranks of the camp-in. After recruiting additional pilgrims to the Mule Train in Mississippi, Hosea Williams became the new leader of PPC demonstrations in Washington to replace Jesse Jackson.<sup>218</sup> There, Williams suggested to the press he might try to extend the campaign campsite to locations such as the Capitol building or even the White House.<sup>219</sup> When protestors smashed four windows at the Supreme Court building, Abernathy reiterated the Southern Christian Leadership Conference commitment to nonviolence. “I did not come to Washington to break windows,” chided Abernathy in a rally at the John Wesley AME Church, “I came to move the Congress of the United States.”<sup>220</sup>

Williams continued to display his skill at persuasive rhetoric in Washington as he had on the Mule Train. On Wednesday, June 5, he led five hundred demonstrators to march on the Department of Health, Education and Welfare then vowed marchers would stay until they gained

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<sup>217</sup> “Tens of Thousands Visit Kennedy Grave,” (Washington, AP), *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, Mon, June 10, 1968, 1.

<sup>218</sup> One reporter speculated Abernathy prompted the change in leadership when Jackson ran up a \$292.66 bill at the Agriculture Department cafeteria. Jackson ushered 150 demonstrators through the lunch counter then told the clerk to put it on the campaign’s tab. Abernathy payed the bill within 24 hours. William J. Eaton, Washington (CDN), “‘Poor’ Drive Plagued by Rivalries,” *The Birmingham News*, Sun 2 June, 1968.

<sup>219</sup> “March Leaders Pledge More Militant Scene,” (Washington, AP), *JCL*, Tues, June 4, 1968, 11.

<sup>220</sup> It is unclear if the change in leadership was in any way related to the window breaking incident at the Supreme Court building. “Don’t Try to Close Camp, Poor Campaign Leaders Say,” *The Birmingham News*, 30 May, 1968.

a hearing with the Secretary of the Department of Welfare, Wilbur J. Cohen. Secretary Cohen appeared about an hour and a half later.<sup>221</sup> The next day Williams led 100 demonstrators to the Office of Economic Opportunity. “It’s either [increased attention to the War on Poverty] or violence and death for us all,” cried Williams, “this War on Poverty is still a scrimmage. Either you go to war or someone else is going into a different kind of war.”<sup>222</sup> O.E.O. Director, Bertrand Harding, emerged from the building to address the protestors but received little audience. Harding defended President Johnson’s War on Poverty and announced that an additional \$25 million would be placed in antipoverty projects within the month. Marchers responded to Harding’s promises with more heckling.<sup>223</sup>

While the Mule Train quietly plodded eastward, notable events associated with the deaths of civil rights workers intersected with activity of the Poor People’s Campaign. On Friday, June 7, one hundred thousand visitors filed past the closed casket of Senator Robert F. Kennedy where he lay at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City.<sup>224</sup> Following the funeral mass in Washington on Saturday, the interment procession traveled through Resurrection City on the way to Arlington National Cemetery where the senator was laid to rest near his brother, President John F. Kennedy.<sup>225</sup> President Johnson and about twenty staff attended a private White House ceremony honoring Senator Kennedy the next day as nearly 60,000 mourners made pilgrimage to Kennedy’s grave.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> “New ‘Poor’ Leader Says Campaign Will Get More Militant More Often,” *The Birmingham News*, Sun 2 June, 1968.

<sup>222</sup> James R. Polk, Washington AP, “Must Increase War on Poverty, Says Williams, Or Face Another Kind of War,” *The Birmingham News*, Thu 6 June, 1968, 34.

<sup>223</sup> James R. Polk, Washington AP, “Must Increase War on Poverty, Says Williams, Or Face Another Kind of War,” *The Birmingham News*, Thu 6 June, 1968, 34.

<sup>224</sup> “A Day for the Humble,” *JCL*, Sat, June 8, 1968, 1.

<sup>225</sup> Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws that Changed America*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 422.

<sup>226</sup> “Tens of Thousands Visit Kennedy Grave,” (Washington, AP), *JCL*, Mon, June 10, 1968, 1.

During the same weekend, police arrested James Earl Ray, the assassin of Martin Luther King, Jr., on a London layover during a flight between Portugal and Brussels. Officials identified Ray by tracking the passport he used to travel under the name Ramon George Sneyd.<sup>227</sup> Two days later Ray sat in a London courtroom where U.S. counsel petitioned to have Ray extradited to the United States to face charges for murder.<sup>228</sup> The British court scheduled a hearing for the request June 27 at London's Bow Street Magistrate Court under heavy guard from Scotland Yard. The search to secure Ray legal counsel ended when Birmingham attorney Arthur J. Hanes stepped forward to lead Ray's defense. A former mayor of Birmingham, Hanes also had experience defending murderers of civil rights activists. Ray later replaced Hanes, but the Alabama lawyer continued to defend violence perpetrated against Black Americans. History most notably remembers Hanes for representing Robert Chambliss, one of the killers indicted in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.<sup>229</sup>

While the Poor People's Campaign message in Washington remained largely centered on ways poverty affected Americans across racial and geographical boundaries, the presence of the southern caravan in communities such as Birmingham drew attention to the myriad ways that black southerners suffered oppression. As the Mule Train memorialized Senator Kennedy at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where horrendous violence was performed against a community of faith and four young girls, the former Alabama mayor readied himself to defend Dr. King's

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<sup>227</sup> "King Death Suspect Nabbed in London," (Ottawa, AP), *JCL*, Sun, June 9, 1968, 1.

<sup>228</sup> Scott B. Bruns, "Ray Hearing Set June 27," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 18 June, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 245. Monday, June 10, the Judge ordered for Ray to be held an additional eight days pending the preparation of the case against Ray for fraudulent passport and possessing a weapon charges. This allowed the prosecution from the U.S. to prepare a request for extradition for the murder charge as well as a charge against Ray for escaping from the Missouri State Prison.

<sup>229</sup> "Birmingham Attorney Accepts Ray Defense," (Birmingham, AP), Thur, June 20, 1968, 5.

assassin. After spending three nights in Birmingham, the Mule Train resumed travel by driving onto Interstate 20 toward the Georgia state line.<sup>230</sup>

Mule Train Wagon Master Willie Bolden later recounted the ongoing drama that ensued when a southern politician sought to prohibit the procession of the campaign through his state. Georgia Governor Lester Maddox met Bolden at the head of the caravan as the wagons drew near to Georgia on the recently built interstate highway that connected the neighboring states. “These wagons and mules will not go down 20,” stated the Governor.<sup>231</sup> Bolden responded, “Mr. Governor, the Governor of Mississippi allowed us to come down 20, the Governor of Alabama allowed us to come down 20. Now you meant to tell me my governor in my home state will not allow us to continue our journey?”<sup>232</sup> Maddox further warned, “I don’t care what Mississippi did. I don’t care what Alabama did. I’m telling you what’s going to happen in Georgia.” Bolden continued to challenge the Governor. “Mr. Governor, it’s obvious you don’t know me very well. We are going down 20. One way or the other, we’re going down 20.”<sup>233</sup> When the Mule Train crossed the state line on the interstate, Maddox ordered Bolden’s arrest. Police detained the Wagon Master in the jailhouse located in Tallapoosa, Georgia. Similar to the way Bolden described his retrieval of Hosea Williams following Williams’s imprisonment at the Quitman County jail in Marks on the first day of travel, Bolden reported that Andrew Marrisett led the Mule Train into town to protest their leader’s arrest. “We’re not leaving until Willie Bolden is

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<sup>230</sup> “Mule Train Moves After Delay Here,” *The Birmingham News*, Fri 7 June, 1968.

<sup>231</sup> “Willie J. Bolden, Reflections on Georgia Politics,” Willie Bolden Interviewed by Bob Short, October 7, 2009. Russel Library Oral History, published April 19, 2012. ROGP 088. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuCKT-vO4Eo>, accessed July 10, 2018.

<sup>232</sup> No evidence exists that the Mule Train traveled on Interstate 20 in Mississippi.

<sup>233</sup> “Willie J. Bolden, Reflections on Georgia Politics,” Willie Bolden Interviewed by Bob Short, October 7, 2009. Russel Library Oral History, published April 19, 2012. ROGP 088. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuCKT-vO4Eo>, accessed July 10, 2018.

out of jail,” Marrisett declared.<sup>234</sup> Though Bolden attained his release six hours later, the struggle between Governor Maddox and the Mule Train intensified as the caravan traveled deeper into Georgia.

From Tallapoosa the Mule Train traveled west on Highway 78 to Douglasville where they set up camp on the playground of a black school named the R.L. Cousins School on Highway 92.<sup>235</sup> Friday morning, June 14, the caravan once again attempted to reenter Interstate 20 south of Douglasville, but State Troopers promptly ushered the caravan off the Interstate for violating a law that prohibited operating nonmotorized vehicles on the highway.<sup>236</sup> Marchers knelt and prayed where the Highway Patrol stopped them, but police arrested 126 members of the caravan including 32 children.<sup>237</sup> Patrolmen carried the pilgrims in groups of five or six back to Douglasville where they held them at the National Guard Armory, allowing a few marchers who never fully exited the on-ramp to stay behind and look after the mules.<sup>238</sup> When the officers took minors into custody – including Ralph Abernathy’s nine-year-old son, Ralph David Abernathy III – lawyers working with the Mule Train pointed out the illegality of arresting and detaining children. Police clarified that they were only charging 67 adults with the violation, but the children refused to leave the adults. In the armory, pilgrims sat on blankets on the concrete floor awaiting the final verdict of their offense, some playing cards to pass the time. Local

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<sup>234</sup> “Willie J. Bolden, Reflections on Georgia Politics,” Willie Bolden Interviewed by Bob Short, October 7, 2009. Russel Library Oral History, published April 19, 2012. ROGP 088. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuCKT-vO4Eo>, accessed July 10, 2018.

<sup>235</sup> “Train Halted by Georgia Patrol,” by Tommy Toles, *Douglas Sentinel*, Douglasville, Georgia, June 20, 1968. Accessed at Douglas County historical website *Every Now and Then* in a blog hosted by Lisa Land Cooper, titled “The Mule Train: A Different King of Stubborn,” <http://douglascountyhistory.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-mule-train-different-kind-of.html>, posted February 9, 2013 and accessed April 7, 2021. Willie Bolden was among those who stayed behind.

<sup>236</sup> *Call and Post*, City Edition, Cleveland, OH, (UPI), 29 June 1968, 1b.

<sup>237</sup> “Journey’s End: Mules Free At Last,” *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 29 June, 1968: 15.

<sup>238</sup> “Train Halted by Georgia Patrol,” by Tommy Toles, *Douglas Sentinel*, Douglasville, Georgia, June 20, 1968. Accessed at Douglas County historical website *Every Now and Then* in a blog hosted by Lisa Land Cooper, titled “The Mule Train: A Different King of Stubborn,” <http://douglascountyhistory.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-mule-train-different-kind-of.html>, posted February 9, 2013 and accessed April 7, 2021.

newspaper editor Tommy Toles reported that a Douglasville restaurant prepared food for the poor people, but also suggested the police officers who detained them had gone without food and sleep for one, maybe two, days. Haggard and frustrated, said Toles, one officer asked, “Why didn’t they just decide on a route instead of trying to break the law and causing all this trouble?”<sup>239</sup> After some consideration, Douglas County Sheriff Claude Abercrombie announced that the county was dropping all charges against those arrested.<sup>240</sup>

After being released from jail, the pilgrims rallied together with supporters at an evening meeting Friday night. Bolden reiterated the Mule Train’s commitment to drive into Atlanta on Interstate 20. “We just flatly refuse to let Governor Lester Maddox dictate to us,” promised the wagon master.<sup>241</sup> State Patrol officers communicated with caravan leaders that they would escort them on any highway to Atlanta except Interstate 20. For Bolden, however, traveling by interstate fulfilled key aspirations of the pilgrimage. He continued to argue that marchers had traveled I-20 in Mississippi and Alabama with no opposition and pointed out that taking the interstate to Atlanta would save the Mule Train several hours.<sup>242</sup>

Officials reconsidered allowing the caravan to travel by interstate only after members of the Atlanta Humane Society drew attention to the wear and tear the journey had inflicted on the mules.<sup>243</sup> Dr. William C. Driggers and Bill Newman inspected the animals where they remained tied to a fence along the I-20 on-ramp. Pointing to open sores, Driggers and Newman argued that

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<sup>239</sup> “Train Halted by Georgia Patrol,” by Tommy Toles, *Douglas Sentinel*, Douglasville, Georgia, June 20, 1968. Accessed at Douglas County historical website *Every Now and Then* in a blog hosted by Lisa Land Cooper, titled “The Mule Train: A Different King of Stubborn,” <http://douglascountyhistory.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-mule-train-different-kind-of.html>, posted February 9, 2013 and accessed April 7, 2021.

<sup>240</sup> “Mule Train Makes It Into Atlanta,” (Atlanta AP), 15 June, 1968.

<sup>241</sup> “Atlanta Thousands Roar for Wallace,” (Atlanta, AP), *JCL*, Fri, June 14, 1968, 19.

<sup>242</sup> “Train Halted by Georgia Patrol,” by Tommy Toles, *Douglas Sentinel*, Douglasville, Georgia, June 20, 1968. Accessed at Douglas County historical website *Every Now and Then* in a blog hosted by Lisa Land Cooper, titled “The Mule Train: A Different King of Stubborn,” <http://douglascountyhistory.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-mule-train-different-kind-of.html>, posted February 9, 2013 and accessed April 7, 2021.

<sup>243</sup> “Sympathy Extended to Mules,” (Atlanta, AP), *JCL*, Sun, June 16, 9.

the mules needed rest, food and water before continuing the journey. They had the team carted back to the R.L. Cousins School where pilgrims had regrouped following their release from the armory. After a full day of ongoing negotiation, the Mule Train received permission from the governor to travel I-20 during low traffic hours, between 3:45 a.m. and 7:00 a.m. Bolden pointed out public officials' priority that seemed to characterize much of the caravan's reception throughout their journey. "They seem more concerned about the mules than the folks," the wagon master lamented.<sup>244</sup>

At 3:45 a.m. Saturday, June 15, the Mule Train promptly departed Douglasville for Atlanta, traveling the entire route by Interstate 20. Four Georgia State Patrol cars escorted the convoy and after about an hour into the morning journey, Governor Maddox, himself, joined the troopers. Once inside city limits, Maddox and the state troopers abandoned the caravan and left supervision of the Mule Train to Atlanta City Police. Atlanta Police Superintendent, George Royal, reported smooth travel with no traffic backups. The pilgrims finally exited 30 miles down the highway and only 45 minutes past Governor Maddox's deadline. Bolden declared the final leg of the journey to Atlanta a victory.<sup>245</sup>

In Atlanta, the Mule Train exited I-20 north on Ashby Street, took a right on Hunter Street, then took another right onto Chestnut before most of the city had begun stirring on a Saturday morning.<sup>246</sup> At that time Rev. Abernathy's Church, West Hunter Street Baptist Church, sat on the corner of Hunter and Chestnut. Drivers parked the mules and wagons at the Clark

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<sup>244</sup> "Train Halted by Georgia Patrol," by Tommy Toles, *Douglas Sentinel*, Douglasville, Georgia, June 20, 1968. Accessed at Douglas County historical website *Every Now and Then* in a blog hosted by Lisa Land Cooper, titled "The Mule Train: A Different Kind of Stubborn," <http://douglascountyhistory.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-mule-train-different-kind-of.html>, posted February 9, 2013 and accessed April 7, 2021.

<sup>245</sup> "Mule Train Makes It Into Atlanta," (AP), Atlanta, GA, 15 June, 1968.

<sup>246</sup> In the years following the Poor People's Campaign several Atlanta street names changed. Ashby Street became Joseph E. Lowery Boulevard, Hunter Street became Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, and Chestnut became James P. Brawley Drive.



College football field and pilgrims gathered at the church where they rested not only from the long morning but from five weeks of arduous travel. For lunch the Mule Train enjoyed a hot meal of steak and loaded baked potato prepared by a black-owned restaurant across the street.<sup>247</sup> After traveling well over four hundred miles, the pilgrims' long journey by mules and wagon through Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia came to a contentious but satisfying close. That evening pilgrims gathered with local supporters in a rally held at the church where Abernathy served as pastor.<sup>248</sup>

Two meetings coincided with the presence of the Poor People's Campaign in Atlanta, one antagonistic to campaign appeals to confront poverty and the other in favor of the Mule Train message. George Wallace was touring the country in the wake of his wife's death in pursuit of presidential office as an independent candidate. In Atlanta, Wallace criticized the PPC claiming it was using poor people to advance the protest movement. He told reporters he would not attend the Solidarity Day celebration in Washington, if invited, and reiterated his support for segregated education. Wallace trailed the Mule Train as it continued toward Washington, stopping in Virginia to test a new slogan he had adopted. In contrast to the chant Hosea Williams led PPC marchers to shout, "Soul Power!", Wallace told Virginians at a campaign stop in Richmond he preferred the mantra "Southern Power."<sup>249</sup>

The Delta Sigma Theta Sorority also gathered in Atlanta the weekend of June 15 for their Southern Regional Conference. Mrs. Frankie Freeman, President of the sorority, expressed support for the Poor People's Campaign on behalf of the Greek society. Freeman presented two

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<sup>247</sup> The diner that fed the marchers was most likely the iconic Busy Bee Café established in 1947 and located at 810 Hunter Street, now Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. "Willie J. Bolden, Reflections on Georgia Politics," Willie Bolden Interviewed by Bob Short, October 7, 2009. Russel Library Oral History, published April 19, 2012. ROGP 088. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuCKT-vO4Eo>, accessed July 10, 2018.

<sup>248</sup> "Mule Train Makes It Into Atlanta," (AP), Atlanta, GA, June 15, 1968.

<sup>249</sup> "Wallace Acquires Slogan," Richmond, VA (AP), *JCL*, Jun 18, 1968, 1.

checks to Atlanta activists associated with the Poor People's Campaign, Juanita Williams and Juanita Abernathy, to defray the cost of transporting the pilgrims, mules and wagons to Washington.<sup>250</sup> A \$2000 check provided the resources to purchase transportation for all the members while a \$150 check met any emergency needs the children of the Mule Train required.<sup>251</sup> Hoping to arrive in Washington in time for a June 19 Solidarity Day celebration, the Mule Train accepted the generous donation and made alternative travel plans to Capitol Hill following a visit to the grave of Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>252</sup>

## On To Washington

Though some marchers later denied participating in a shortcut to Washington by public transportation, 132 pilgrims of the Mule Train boarded Southern Railway for Alexandria, Virginia, Monday, June 17.<sup>253</sup> Workers disassembled 13 wagons and loaded the hardware, additional equipment, and mules onto freight cars traveling the same route.<sup>254</sup> A few pilgrims drove the stretch from Georgia to Virginia in an automobile that served as an important vehicle for transporting essential items, such as medical supplies, throughout the journey.<sup>255</sup> The railroad

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<sup>250</sup> Juanita Williams was married to the southern caravan leader and the newly-appointed leader of Washington demonstrations, Hosea Williams. Juanita Abernathy was married to SCLC Director, Ralph Abernathy.

<sup>251</sup> "Deltas Give \$2000 to Aid Mule Train," *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, June 22, 1968, 16.

<sup>252</sup> "Po' Mules Get to the Big City," (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 18 June, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 245.

<sup>253</sup> Wagon driver Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. denied driving the mules and wagons only to Atlanta, claiming he drove the entire route from Marks, MS to Washington, D.C. Chapter Five explores Webster's claim in more detail.

Ethel L. Payne, "So This is Washington," *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition)*, Chicago, IL, 22 June, 1968, p 24. "Po' Mules To Ride Awhile," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 17 June, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 244.

Both articles indicate the marchers boarded buses for the journey to Atlanta. The UPI source records that 135 members of the Mule Train disembarked Southern Railways upon arriving to Alexandria. Roland Freeman documents marchers' transportation to Virginia by Southern Railway. Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 66-69.

<sup>254</sup> "Po' Mules To Ride Awhile," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 17 June, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 244.

<sup>255</sup> Annie Rankin described her journey to Alexandria in a station wagon with two women and one man of the Mule Train. Annie Rankin, "An Autobiography of Mrs. Annie James Rankin," 10-11. Chapter Four explores this episode in more detail.

passengers traveled overnight and arrived in Alexandria Monday morning, June 18.<sup>256</sup> One UPI reporter described the diverse group of pilgrims as well-disciplined: “There were old men and women, healthy young people, small children, a blind man, a couple of semi-invalids, one white boy of about 16, and a small puppy.”<sup>257</sup> They ate box lunches on the way and arrived in Alexandria sleepy, but smiling. After disembarking, pilgrims secured transportation to Gainesville, Virginia, 32 miles south of Washington. They rested at the Northern Virginia Baptist Association Campground in preparation for one final procession into the District of Columbia the next morning.<sup>258</sup> The mules remained in Alexandria in a temporary corral set up near the railroad station.<sup>259</sup>

Wednesday morning a crowd gathered at the Southern Railway freight yard to watch pilgrims reassemble the wagons for a June 19 entry into Resurrection City.<sup>260</sup> Handlers hitched the mules and the caravan proceeded along the banks of the Potomac River on George Washington Memorial Parkway. Many of the pilgrims walking alongside or behind the wagons as they had for the four hundred miles between Marks, Mississippi and Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>261</sup> Unfortunately, gaining access to Memorial Bridge from Arlington to the Lincoln Memorial where Solidarity events and speeches were being held proved more challenging than Mule Train pilgrims anticipated. It is unclear whether the mules and wagons or the 50,000 attendees created the traffic that prevented the Mule Train from riding triumphantly into Resurrection City the morning of June 19. Nevertheless, the caravan of pilgrims parted ways with the wagon train at an

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<sup>256</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 66-69.

<sup>257</sup> “Po’ Mules Get to the Big City,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 18 June, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 245.

<sup>258</sup> “Po’ Mules Get to the Big City,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 18 June, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 245.

<sup>259</sup> Ethel L. Payne, “So This is Washington,” *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition)*, Chicago, IL, 22 June, 1968, 24. Freeman, *The Mule Train*, 66-69.

<sup>260</sup> Freeman, *The Mule Train*, 66-69.

<sup>261</sup> Freeman, *The Mule Train*, 66-69.

assembly point near Arlington Cemetery so that they could participate in Solidarity Day activities.<sup>262</sup>

Solidarity Day served as an apex of Poor People's Campaign activity in Washington and in anticipation of the day promoters had spread the news of the Mule Train's arrival. The absence of the mules and wagons in Resurrection City disappointed several in attendance. Ralph Matthews, a writer for the Baltimore *Afro-American*, documented the confusion surrounding the Mule Train's failure to show:

Another feat of legerdemain was the disappearance of the 16-wagon mule train which was seen winding its way down the Virginia highway earlier in the morning, tying up traffic en route. Then it seemed to vanish into thin air. Some restless kiddies among the crowd at the Sylvan Theater kept making quite a commotion with their parents demanding, "Mamma, where are the mules? Which way are the mules coming?" "Mamma, I don't want to hear the speeches, I came to see the mules." The hubbub was equivalent to what you would expect if right in the middle of the circus performance, the elephants had vanished. Three times as we trudged the half-paved roadway up the left side of the mile-long pool the word came down "Clear the way! Clear the way, the mules are coming." But the mules never came.<sup>263</sup>

Mule Train pilgrims, however, had already joined the throng of activists championing the Poor People's Campaign message at the Solidarity Day assembly. When residents of Resurrection City gathered at the Washington Monument to march together to the Lincoln Memorial, they travelled in groups. Ralph Abernathy and Coretta King led one group. At the head of another group marched Jesse Jackson and Mule Train Wagon Master Willie Bolden.<sup>264</sup> Another pilgrim named Annie Rankin had traveled with the caravan since Grenada, Mississippi.

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<sup>262</sup> "Thousands Join Poor March," (Washington UPI), *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)*, 20 June, 1968, p3.

<sup>263</sup> Ralph Matthews, Entertainment Fine But Vanishing Mule Train Disappoints Marchers," *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD (1893-1988), 22 June, 1968, 16.

<sup>264</sup> "Poor Launch Massive D.C. Plea for Aid," *Milwaukee Star*, (22 June, 1968), Vol viii, Issue 35, 1.

She reminded members of the campaign in Washington that they, the people, were the spectacle, not the mules. “*We are the dream,*” she proclaimed.<sup>265</sup>

The Mule Train did not emerge in the public eye for another six days, long after some pilgrims from the Mississippi to Georgia trek had found alternative routes home. With the clearing of Resurrection City Monday morning, June 24, several PPC leaders submitted to arrest, among them Ralph Abernathy and Hosea Williams.<sup>266</sup> By 12:30 p.m., Chief John Layton reported that the Washington Metro Police had successfully cleared the National Mall of about 100 remaining campers and 836 A-frame huts that comprised the temporary shantytown.<sup>267</sup> The Mule Train finally appeared again Tuesday, June 25 crossing Memorial Bridge, circling the Capitol, and proceeding through poor neighborhoods of Washington.<sup>268</sup> For a week the animals became beneficiaries of voluntary public assistance. The local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals fed the mules, the Arlington Fire Department watered them, and the US Park Service groomed them at a grazing field near Memorial Bridge where they had remained since Solidarity Day.<sup>269</sup>

The reemergence of the mules as symbols of the campaign coincided with Hosea Williams’s release from jail Tuesday. Williams expressed relief that the burden of maintaining Resurrection City was behind them and indicated that the Poor People’s Campaign would press on with additional demonstrations. Accusing the government of tricking leaders into maintaining

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<sup>265</sup> Annie Rankin, “An Autobiography of Mrs. Annie James Rankin,” 11. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>266</sup> “Poor People Arrested; Resurrection City Shut: Abernathy Taken Into Custody. End of Shanty Town Signaled As Police Move In Quickly,” *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 29 June, 1968, 1.

<sup>267</sup> Michael Anders, “Washington Cools As Tear Gas Clears,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 25 June, 1968.

<sup>268</sup> “Po’ Mules Sent to Pasture,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 27 June, 1968. “Poor People Arrested; Resurrection City Shut: Abernathy Taken Into Custody. End of Shanty Town Signaled As Police Move In Quickly,” *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 29 June, 1968, 1. “Resurrection City Gone, Drive Gets New Symbol,” *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 29 June, 1968, 15.

<sup>269</sup> “City Falls to Workmen’s hammers; Mules Come to D.C.,” *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 29 June, 1968, 15. “Po’ Mules Sent to Pasture,” (UPI) *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 27 June, 1968.

a city, Williams called the camp-in shutdown a blessing in disguise. “The government’s motive was to divert the campaign from its basic goals of lobbying,” said Williams, “Now we’re free to do what we know best.”<sup>270</sup> After another week of mule and wagon demonstrations that lacked connection to an organized campaign, however, the Washington Park Police took possession of the remaining mules. A writer for the African-American newspaper, *Milwaukee Star*, offered commentary on how fitting it was that the animals of the Mule Train ended their campaign under arrest:

The Mule Train, symbol of the poor people’s march, has been forced to discontinue its tours of Washington. The Washington Park Police have taken the 24 mules into custody, presumably for illegal demonstration. Their crime was eating the taxpayers’ grass in Potomac Park.

It seems fitting that the mules should be impounded. The symbol of the ppc should rightly follow the poor people themselves into legal custody. Every day more and more of the leaders and friends of the poor people are being arrested for the crime of demonstrating to show solidarity with their brothers who are already behind bars.”<sup>271</sup>

Though the Southern Christian Leadership Conference planned to return the mules to their original homes in Mississippi and Alabama, the U.S. Park Police coopted the animals’ destiny. When police communicated that they would impound the mules if not put out to pasture, the SCLC cooperated with Marilyn Riviere, a Washington resident and animal enthusiast. Riviere contracted with the Variety Horse Center in Columbia, Maryland to retire the mules with plenty of pasture, food, and veterinary services.<sup>272</sup> Park Police rejected the plan, however, and trucked the animals to Waterford, Virginia where they continued to be fed by the Society for the Prevent of Animals, watered by the Arlington Fire Department, and groomed by U.S. Park Service

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<sup>270</sup> “Mules Arrive in Capital; Abernathy Given 20 Days,” (Washington AP), *JCL*, Wed, June 26, 1968, 1, 14.

<sup>271</sup> “Mules Arrested,” *Milwaukee Star*, 3 July, 1968, 4.

<sup>272</sup> “City Falls to Workmen’s hammers; Mules Come to D.C.,” *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 29 June, 1968, 15.

Police.<sup>273</sup> Meanwhile, pilgrims returned home to their communities with hopes that life might be different moving forward.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> “SCLC To Move Mules from D.C.,” *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 29 June, 1968, 1.

<sup>274</sup> “SCLC Continues Aid to Marks,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 27 June 1968, A4. A Los Angeles chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference continued to send relief to residents living in Marks, MS. Beginning during the campaign and continuing after marchers returned home, the LA chapter reportedly shipped more than fifty tons of food and clothing. Director of the project and pastor of the Victory Baptist Church Dr. A. Atlas Peters traveled to Marks with one shipment of food and clothing on his way to Washington, D.C.

## CHAPTER THREE

### JOURNALISM AND VOICES IN OPPOSITION TO THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN

#### **Introduction**

Newspaper reports and columns documenting and reacting to the Poor People's Campaign provided the medium through which residents along the Mule Train (MT) route received much of their information and contributed to the public dialogue about the campaign's message and methods. In this chapter, I analyze PPC and Mule Train reports, editorials and columns produced by national syndicates, such as the Associated Press and the United Press International, that appeared in local papers of the states through which MT pilgrims traveled. I also consider articles and write-ins unique to areas impacted by PPC presence to offer insight on how residents fit national politics into their community experiences. In particular, the *Clarion Ledger* distributed out of Jackson, Mississippi, provided a forum that kept national interests in conversation with local issues, so that the racially-integrated pilgrimage to Washington, D.C. remained tied to civic matters around which social unrest and public debate swirled. The camp-in on the Washington Mall, therefore, also represented the contested spaces in the daily lives of Mississippians, Alabamans, and Georgians as people within communities fought for or resisted the integration of such sites as city swimming pools and public parks. Consequently, residents viewed the Mule Train as the mobile community that brought the ideals and problems of Resurrection City to their state and town.

Though stark contrasts existed between southern- and northern-based media publishers, the national press coalesced around the Poor People's Campaign to provide a negative depiction



of campaigners who traveled through the South on their way to the nation's capital. As politicians, pundits, and citizens have promoted the national mythologization of the civil rights movement to champion the broader story of American democracy at the close of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century, the accepted narrative of the movement has often credited the national media, particularly northern syndicates, with bringing attention to black southerners' struggle for equality. By covering black southerners' resistance to Jim Crow laws, the press provided the violent images and stories that incited northerners' disgust at unjust systems of segregation-based racism in the South. As the movement sought to challenge inequity based in northern areas, however, the press offered little support for representing Black Americans' experiences. Historian Jeanne Theoharis writes, "These [northern] papers naturalized the shock and disgust of many whites at Northern uprisings and under-covered Black perspectives – regularly downgrading Black protest, interviewing few Black people, and devoting few resources to investigating the structures of racial inequality in their cities."<sup>275</sup> By downplaying Black Americans' concerns in their own backyard, Theoharis argues, national syndicates offered new obstacles to overcoming racial injustice outside of the South. "This would have required turning the light on the racial politics of their own communities and challenging the 'fantasy of self-deception' as King put it in 1967."<sup>276</sup> Reports of PPC action in the North reinforced the negative impressions southerners received in community-based editorials as national press syndicates and local opinion columns, together, invoked resistance against Mule Train pilgrims moving through southern communities.

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<sup>275</sup> Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 105.

<sup>276</sup> Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History*, 122.

The primary narrative about the Poor People's Campaign dominating large city newspapers and providing the framework for smaller communities to understand their local experience of the Mule Train was built on the idea that the campaign posed an immediate threat to the average American, white or black, and was an unreliable program for realizing the true problems surrounding poverty – a social condition that many argued was free of racial implications. According to popular public opinion, the PPC – plagued by disorganization, disrepute, and dishonesty (qualities of character opinion-writers were *not* hesitant to attach to race) – was destined for failure. Rather than alleviate fears about the perceived negative social impact of the campaign, however, the failure narrative only exacerbated the concerns of local citizens. Reports of health crises demonstrate ways local residents simultaneously discounted PPC effectiveness for achieving its goals and credited the PPC with compromising the health and vitality of American society. According to the dominant narrative, the PPC's organizational and moral failures posed an immediate threat to everyday, law-abiding citizens who sought to make an honest living and raise their families in the communities they loved.

Many public figures believed the unreliability of the Poor People's Campaign proved it was a dangerous operation that threatened to undermine American democracy, pollute American values, and violate American cities. Certain individuals and groups sought to offer evidence that the PPC represented a communist agenda that had infiltrated the broader civil rights movement. Other anti-PPC voices, concerned by the liberalism they perceived to be sweeping the country, argued that recent civil rights legislation only diminished the freedoms and liberties of responsible citizens. In addition to pointing to the campaign as a political threat, journalists condemned PPC participants for their lack of conservative mores that valued the traditional family and reinforced a Protestant work ethic. Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, city officials

worried PPC presence would ignite the kind of violence and unrest that erupted in many American cities, including Washington, D.C., following the assassination of longtime SCLC leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. Though they believed the PPC was an illegitimate movement that was destined for implosion, concerned Americans feared the undoing of the PPC may have hazardous consequences for the rest of society.

Key public voices representing the religious community and populist nationalism used the Poor People's Campaign to clarify their platform or wage counter campaigns. Some local religious figures gestured toward the PPC to express dissent with their own tradition's institutional position on civil rights or to attack public policy. At other times religious voices, such as Billy Graham, expressed a privatized form of spiritual separatism that sought to divorce American Christianity from the social issues they believed were dividing the country. Populist figure George Wallace ran an entire political campaign by opposing the premises that undergird the PPC. Perhaps no single voice, however, prodded Americans to resist and despise PPC pilgrims more than radio celebrity and newspaper columnist Paul Harvey. Spinning hometown values with a sense of responsible law and order, Harvey leveled a direct smear campaign against the PPC and leaders within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Americans, informed by the public discourse found in local newspapers, learned to fear PPC methods, dismiss PPC petitions, and reject PPC pilgrims for the campaign's unreliable operation and dangerous mission.

This chapter covers the period starting with the departure of the first group of marchers that began travel on Thursday, May 2, 1968, and ending with the Mule Train's formal reunion with the rest of the campaign in Washington, D.C. on June 19, 1968, also known as Solidarity Day. In an early march of the southern campaign, 136 marchers traveled in four buses from

Edwards to Selma, Alabama where they symbolically crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge by foot behind a lead wagon pulled by mules.<sup>277</sup> Thirty state troopers stood by in riot gear for the early PPC march little more than three years following the “Bloody Sunday” conflict between police and Black Freedom marchers, Sunday, March 7, 1965.<sup>278</sup> Mule Train pilgrims’ reconnection with the greater campaign in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, June 19, 1968 also conjured a previous freedom performance: the 1963 March on Washington where King sonorously proclaimed his “I have a dream” speech. The 1963 and 1965 events serve as commemorative bookends for the Mule Train journey, framing pilgrim travels within the broader struggle southern people of color waged as they petitioned American centers of power for change. Reports on the Poor People’s Campaign from May 2 through June 19, 1968 provided the eyewitness accounts and commentary of PPC activity around the nation that helped shape residents’ beliefs about the Mule Train pilgrims traveling through their state and community. Framing the anti-PPC rhetoric within this timeline acknowledges the public discourse that informed how communities anticipated, received or rejected, and understood the Mule Train caravan that entered their towns and traveled their streets.

It is important to note that while the national Poor People’s Campaign sought to demonstrate in Washington as an interracial coalition, southerners viewed the caravans of their region within the arc of black activism.<sup>279</sup> Though episodes of the freedom struggle in the South frequently included white allies, the public conjured blackness when they read about, talked about, and beheld “the poor” of this campaign. The Poor People’s Campaign was so fused with

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<sup>277</sup> The Selma Mule Train march took place on Monday, May 6, 1968. The first march of the Poor People’s Campaign, occurring May 2, took place in Memphis, TN. Abernathy drove a team of mules to lead one thousand marchers on foot from the Lorraine Motel to a set of buses that transported demonstrators to Marks, MS.

<sup>278</sup> “First ‘Poor’ Group Streams Into Selma,” *JCL*, Tue, May 7, 1968, 1.

<sup>279</sup> For more on PPC attempts to build an interracial coalition to combat poverty see Gordon Mantler’s *Power to the Poor: Black-Brown Coalition and the Fight for Economic Justice, 1960-1974* (UNC Press, 2013).

the Black Freedom struggle in the South that one Mississippi columnist interpreted the Mule Train strategy as an attempt to embellish the African American economic situation. Stuart Covington argued the PPC set out “to portray the lot of *all* Mississippi Negroes,” a proverbial straw man which the writer set out to knock down as erroneous. By pointing to black Mississippians who enjoyed middle-class lifestyles, he suggested that not all black people were poor and concluded the fundamental premise of the PPC was false.<sup>280</sup> Covington simultaneously ignored the campaign’s message that the American poor needed and deserved public assistance, rejected the campaign for the preponderance of blacks associated with it, and accused the campaign of racializing poverty in the Mule Train; a tactic employed by southern white communities to dismiss economic disparity associated with race and to silence black voices.

On the other hand, by reducing pilgrims to the moniker of their economic status, opinion columnists and reporters suggested the mission was embedded with an inferior moral ethic that they frequently attributed to race. The use of quotation marks – or *scare-quotes* – to modify demonstrators conveyed subtle messages that undermined the pilgrims’ method and petition. For the sake of brevity in the media, Poor People’s Campaign demonstrators became “Poor” Marchers, “Poor People,” or simply the “Poor.” The word *poor* took on new meanings when paired with other words circumscribed within headlines. Thus, the article entitled “Poor Straggle On Toward Washington” contained just enough and few enough words to convey to the public that both the character of the activists and the means they employed were impoverished.<sup>281</sup> Subversive journalism was not unique to the Poor People’s Campaign, of course, but merely linked the PPC to the existing rhetoric used to mock public demonstrations and the freedom

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<sup>280</sup> Stuart Covington, Mississippi News Bureau, “Mule Train Reflects New Mood of Reaction,” *The Birmingham News*, Sun 2 June, 1968.

<sup>281</sup> “Poor Straggle On Toward Washington,” *The Associated Press*, Fri, May 10, 1968, 7.

fighters who employed them as a means for change. Folk accustomed to reading headlines such as “Negroes March for Breakfast in Holly Springs” already possessed racialized mental categories, therefore, for holding “poor marchers” in derision.<sup>282</sup>

While the use of the word *poor* in the press came to signify something about the character of PPC pilgrims, the word evoked sympathy and compassion when attached to the mules of the campaign. Employed by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as a medium for understanding the plight of poor Americans, the mules became an object of American attention, fascination and ultimate concern. Noting the diminished need for mules in the agricultural industry, Warren County, Mississippi county agent Hunter George speculated on the increasing rarity of the working animal. George estimated that while the PPC occupied forty plus mules in their campaign, fewer than 100 mules were left in his county. Others argued as little as two dozen working mules could be found in all of the Mississippi Delta.<sup>283</sup> Fred Starr’s ode to the mule in *The Progressive Farmer* was reprinted in the *Clarion Ledger* in early June 1968. He praised the reliability of the mule for doing farm work and lamented, “The mule will soon be as extinct as the dodo bird, and with his passing the farm will have lost a strange, warm-hearted, long-eared critter that the cold steel of a tractor can never quite replace.”<sup>284</sup> Sentimentality for the symbol of farming from yesteryear gave way to valorizing the beast of labor.

Latching on to the mule as a symbol and metaphor for conservative American values one writer, seeking to challenge “the New Left and the myth of freedom,” claimed “man is not, has never been and never will be a free creature” but was “born to wear a yoke.” The author

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<sup>282</sup> “Negroes March for Breakfast in Holly Springs,” *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, Wed, May 1, 1968, 14. While the march revolved around integrating public dining spaces, the headline denigrated marching as a tactic employed by black people to acquire food without paying.

<sup>283</sup> “Mules Once Essential Vanishing From State,” Vicksburg, *JCL*, Thur, June 6, 1968, 3.

<sup>284</sup> Fred Starr, In the *Progressive Farmer*, “Guest Editorial: A Farewell To the Mule,” *JCL*, Thur, June 6, 1968, 10a.

ambiguously concluded, “only question...which one?”<sup>285</sup> By framing his political convictions in terms of an agricultural harness, the author sought to express his ideas about citizen power, or lack thereof, and ways government limited personal freedom. The mules became a metaphor through which opponents renounced PPC petitions.

As public voices focused on the animals used in the Mule Train, many expressed concern over the mules’ welfare in the face of such arduous travel. When the Mule Train departed from Grenada, MS, a columnist in the county weekly took a shot at the demonstrators, calling them a “crummy lot,” then accused the campaign of treating the mules cruelly. “What ever happened to the society for the prevention of cruelty to dumb animals?” Andrew Whitaker asked before asserting that public works organizations operated within racialized procedures that show deference to people of color. Whitaker continued, “Or does this organization only come to life when white [people] are involved in the cruelty?” The local columnist confirmed for his community that the only segment of the Poor People’s Campaign Mule Train he felt sympathy toward was the “po’ mules.”<sup>286</sup>

One Laurel, Mississippi man castigated the PPC mule train by offering a gesture of goodwill toward the animals he felt had been purloined by SCLC leaders. Responding to claims that the PPC was mistreating the mules, C.L. McKinley expressed his own form of public performance by defiantly sending a sack of feed to the Mule Train. McKinley acted, he said, “in the interest of the hungry bellies of the Mississippi mules,” and argued that the animals, by then in Georgia, should be returned to Mississippi. “We have work for them to do, tilling the soil to raise food to feed the hungry people here,” claimed the Laurel resident. “These mules need to be

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<sup>285</sup> “Man Is Born To Wear A Yoke,” editorial, *JCL*, Thur, June 6, 1968, 10a.

<sup>286</sup> Andrew Whitaker, “Seen, Heard, and Told,” *Grenada County Weekly*, 23 May, 1968, 1.

back in the field,” barked McKinley, “not on the highway.”<sup>287</sup> His public statement and action suggested the Mule Train was a mere diversion to real concern for poverty and that the PPC, through its message, marches and methods, simply reinforced the conditions that intensified hunger in southern states.

In contrast to ways the Southern Christian Leadership Conference sought to display and petition for the needs of poor Americans, members of the press portrayed marchers as disorganized, dishonest, and dangerous. Populist figures depicted PPC activists as breaking the law, behaving immorally, and abusing the animals they employed to pull the wagons. According to PPC coverage in the media, cynics saw members of the Mule Train as transients and criminals and maybe Communists, but they do not seem to have seen them as pilgrims.

### **An Unreliable Campaign**

Press reports on the Poor People’s Campaign promoted the idea that the program was disorganized at every level of operation and was led by persons who had criminal records or, at the least, exercised poor moral judgment. Reporters cast pilgrims as persons motivated by base desires who sought to acquire resources through questionable methods. They portrayed the PPC as an unreliable campaign given its tendency to discord as an element of a fractured civil rights movement, as an operation fraught with internal conflict, and as a program that lacked support from other Black Americans. Beyond the problems associated with being led by disreputable leaders, politicians and agency officials argued the campaign was founded on entirely false premises. Hunger was not as widespread as the SCLC suggested, antagonists claimed, and in

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<sup>287</sup> “Laurel Man Feeds Mules,” *JCL*, Mon, June 17, 1968, 4. Because McKinley framed the feeding of the mules as an act of compassion, one might hear his “back in the field” comment as a paternalistic nod to what he believed was PPC pilgrims’ *proper place*.



cases where children did lack food the matter was more likely one that involved poor parenting. The public surmised that ignorance compromised the health of poor people's children and, with this national procession, now threatened the health of American citizens in communities around the nation.

From the outset, reports of Poor People's Campaign struggles occupied much of the narrative to convince the public that the demonstration was plagued by its own disorganization. As pilgrims navigated the complicated undertaking of mule-drawn wagon travel and temporary camp life, journalists documented their trials. The front page of the Saturday, May 4 *Clarion Ledger* announced "Confusion Clogs March Machinery."<sup>288</sup> Pointing to internal negotiations on how to direct such a grand-scale demonstration, the article suggested SCLC leaders lacked the acumen to pull off such a lofty project. When mule trainers in Marks struggled to ready a resistant mule for its journey on paved roadways, a picture of several men restraining the mule, hog-tied in muddy soil, appeared in papers around the nation. "New Way [to] Shoe a Mule?" the caption asked as it narrated a journey that reporters asserted was as "bogged down" as the mule.<sup>289</sup>

Themes of disarray persisted throughout the march as reporters pointed to leader absenteeism and shakeup that they claimed slowed the pace of the PPC. When Ralph Abernathy traveled to additional sites around the country during the campaign to rally support for the project and Jesse Jackson fell sick with the flu, newspapers reported that "top aides were missing" from the campsite in Washington. When Hosea Williams was named Director of Operations in Resurrection City halfway through the campaign, reports compared the transition

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<sup>288</sup> "Confusion Clogs March Machinery," *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, Saturday, May 4, 1968, 1.

<sup>289</sup> "New Way Shoe a Mule?" *JCL*, Sun, May 12, 1968, 20.

to the mire of mud and confusion threatening to stall the Poor People's drive.<sup>290</sup> The heavy rains and muddy conditions in Washington and much of the country during the spring and early summer of 1968 served as a metaphor for those presenting to the nation a campaign marked by chaos and confusion at the leadership level.

Investigators scrutinized leaders of the PPC, accusing them of moral failure and hypocrisy, and reported criminal records from participants' past to defame the character of activists seeking Congressional reform for impoverished Americans. As the newly-named SCLC leader following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, Ralph Abernathy became a person of public curiosity. Though Abernathy was King's assistant and long-time close friend, the nation did not know the second civil rights reverend like they did the first. A Montgomery, Alabama editorial condemning Abernathy for sexual deviancy with a church member in 1958 emerged in the early days of the PPC and was reprinted in various forms by papers around the country. The story detailed how an angry husband chased the reverend from his church office wielding a pistol and a hatchet after the minister had called on his wife. The topic became an item of FBI attention when a concerned citizen of Detroit, Michigan mailed J. Edgar Hoover a copy of the Montgomery column: "Leader of the Great Crusade."<sup>291</sup> Interest in the story revolved around Ralph Abernathy's relationship with a member in his church rather than the violent act of her manic husband. Paul Harvey, a figure explored in more detail later in this chapter, amplified this story six weeks after the story broke during the zenith of the Poor People's Campaign on Solidarity Day.

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<sup>290</sup> "Poor People's Drive Stalled In Mire of Mud and Confusion," *JCL*, Sat, June 1, 1968, 1.

<sup>291</sup> "The Leader of the Great Crusade" appeared in the May 2, 1968 edition of *The Montgomery Advertiser*. Accessed in the FBI Vault, *Abernathy Master*, 294-295.

An FBI informant in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference later reported that leaders within the organization did not believe there was any substance to the accusation that the new SCLC leader had carried on an affair with the church member, however versions of the tale continued to circulate among opponents of the PPC.<sup>292</sup> On May 20, 1968, US House Representative from Mississippi, Tom Abernethy, responded to a personal letter from a judge in Cleveland, Mississippi named H.B. Boykin. Boykin had sent Representative Abernethy a column from *The Bolivar Commercial* on Ralph Abernathy's supposed misdeeds ten years earlier and the Congressman sent a letter in response. "The record of this tyrant is the most sordid thing I have ever read," Rep. Abernethy wrote, assuring the county justice that records from the court case in Alabama were also being passed among members of Congress. Rep. Abernethy lamented the Federal Administration's tolerance of the campaign and closed the letter to Boykin with a racist insult: "It really amazes me what one can get by with. That is, if one is black."<sup>293</sup> The Democratic Congressman from Mississippi demonstrated the willingness of PPC opponents to dismiss campaign petitions based on charges questioning the morality of its leaders and based on beliefs that blackness granted participants immunity from legal recourse.

To further defame the character of PPC participants, politicians and journalists highlighted the arrest records of certain activists associated with the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. R. B. Cottonreader, Jr., an SCLC Lieutenant stationed at the Grenada Office, faced legal trouble when he joined local efforts to integrate businesses in nearby Holly Springs. After receiving a \$210 fine there for "driving while intoxicated," Cottonreader

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<sup>292</sup> COMINFIL FBI File, "Communist Infiltration of the SCLC and J. Edgar Hoover's Official and Confidential File on Martin Luther King, Jr.," Microfilm, Reel 6, section 80, 100-438794-2142, JD Williams Library, University of Mississippi.

<sup>293</sup> Letter from Tom G. Abernathy to H.B. Boykin, May 20, 1968, *Thomas G. Abernathy Collection* [MUM0001], Box 309: Civil Rights, 1943-1969, Poor People's March Folder. Archives & Special Collections, JD Williams Library, University of Mississippi.

suffered public scorn when his arrest record from previous years was printed in the Jackson *Clarion Ledger*.<sup>294</sup> One Grenada weekly columnist reveled in Cottonreader's misfortune, jeering, "Grenada's loss is Holly Springs' gain! See where R.B. Cottonreader is now plying his trade in that town."<sup>295</sup> United States Senator from Mississippi John Stennis took the smear campaign to a new level when he had investigators unearth the details of arrest records for Cottonreader and three other PPC and Mule Train participants – Lester Hankerson, Major Wright, and James Bevel – broadcasting their interstate records in the *Clarion Ledger*. Stennis singled out Hankerson, who had been arrested in five separate states, as an object of public scrutiny by listing details of the license plate and the late-model Dodge the activist had last been seen driving in the state's widest-circulated newspaper.<sup>296</sup>

By focusing on the arrest records of charismatic black men within the campaign, the press helped to alter a narrative of violent policing that precipitated the launch of the Mule Train in Marks. In anticipation of the Poor People's Campaign, Willie Bolden encouraged students and teachers from the local high school to march on the Quitman County courthouse lawn. During the first of three marches police issued a warning to disperse, then inflicted blows when marchers remained seated. One young high school teacher named Lydia McKinnon was beaten unconscious when an officer battered her with the butt of his rifle.<sup>297</sup> Law enforcement arrested seven, but received reprisal for police aggression. Five young women filed suits against police for damages to the tune of \$500,000.<sup>298</sup> Though law suits continued to hang over the heads of three Quitman County police for the duration of the campaign, the public spotlight loomed over

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<sup>294</sup> "Senator Warns of Riot Plans; 'Poor' Arrive in Montgomery," *JCL*, Wed, May 8, 1968, 1.

<sup>295</sup> Andrew Whitaker, "See, Heard, and Told," *Grenada County Weekly*, 9 May, 1968, 1.

<sup>296</sup> "Senator Stennis Says Some 'Poor' Leaders Have Arrest Records," *JCL*, Tue, June 4, 1968, 21.

<sup>297</sup> Hilliard Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train*, 39.

<sup>298</sup> "Officers Jail Seven in Marks Protest," *JCL*, Thursday, May 2, 1968.

the pasts of activists rather than ways police responded to demonstrations at the start of the campaign.<sup>299</sup>

Readers anticipating the Mule Train in their communities encountered in local papers a profile of the Poor People's Campaign that depicted a movement of lawbreakers who threatened to bring to town the kind of disorder they were exacting in Washington, D.C. A full week and a half before the campaign began setting up temporary shelters in Resurrection City, the *Clarion Ledger* declared the failure of campaign leaders to secure a permit for constructing shanties on federal property. When leaders did acquire permits, the news seemed to fall out of the purview of the widest-circulated paper in the state. In an article titled "No Room For a Privileged Group of Lawbreakers in this Country," a *Clarion* columnist suggested the potential for lawlessness the PPC will perform in the name of civil rights.<sup>300</sup>

The first round of arrests involving the Poor People's Campaign in D.C. occurred when protesters marching on Capitol Hill called existing welfare laws "racist."<sup>301</sup> One week later, three protestors associated with the campaign faced arrest for throwing rocks at the building occupied by the United States Supreme Court. After breaking a window, the trio tried to lower the American flag flying outside to half-mast in a show of support for indigenous demonstrators protesting the court ruling on "Indian fishing rights."<sup>302</sup> Accounts of disorderly conduct coupled with leaders' promises to escalate the demonstration to a more "militant" campaign reinforced the fears of local residents when caravans of the campaign moved through their towns.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> "Negro Girls File \$500,000 Lawsuit," (Clarksdale, AP) *The Clarion-Ledger*, 7 May, 1968.

<sup>300</sup> "No Room for a Privileged Group of Lawbreakers in this Country," *JCL*, Fri, May 3, 1968, p12A

<sup>301</sup> "18 'Poor People' Arrested At Capitol," (Washington, AP), *JCL*, Fri, May 24, 1968, p1.

<sup>302</sup> "Windows Broken, Three Jailed As 'Poor' Besiege High Court," (Washington, AP), *JCL*, Thur, May 30, 1968, 1.

<sup>303</sup> "March Leaders Pledge More Militant Scene," Washington AP, *JCL*, Tue, June 4, 1968, p11.

Reporters also misdirected the public by using the word “militant” in ways that contradicted how campaign officials used the word. While PPC leaders had long referred to the campaign as a *militant, nonviolent movement* on Washington, they also sought to distance themselves from elements within Resurrection City who disregarded camp rules. When PPC officials formally removed a couple hundred individuals who had acted hostile toward members of the press and other Resurrection City residents, headlines reported “Poor Officials Bounce 200 Negro Militants.”<sup>304</sup> By usurping a term the campaign had long used to connote the utmost degree of fervent resolve in petitioning for change and using it instead to describe delinquents within the camp, the press managed to characterize the entire program with deviancy.

Many in the media argued that though the Poor People’s Campaign sought to dramatize poverty, members of the campaign enjoyed posh comfort and luxury and were merely feeding off the hard work of others. In an article recounting a visit to Washington PPC leaders paid ahead of the campaign, the Associated Press described Congress’s reception of Abernathy and leaders as “Red Carpet Treatment.”<sup>305</sup> Despite the fact that Congress indicated no intent to accommodate the petitions of the campaign, the press suggested that the Congressional hearing from the interracial “Committee of 100” who laid out PPC requests substantiated special treatment. When the bus caravan known as the Freedom Train left Marks for Washington on May 8, the national syndicate pointed out that demonstrators rode comfortably in the air conditioning.<sup>306</sup> Even after the Mule Train launched its arduous journey, Billy Skelton, a *Clarion Ledger* staff writer, wrote

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<sup>304</sup> “Beat Up On Whites: ‘Poor’ Officials Bounce 200 Negro Militants,” (Washington AP), *JCL*, Thur, May 23, 1968, 6F.

<sup>305</sup> “‘Poor People’ Campaigners Get Red Carpet Treatment,” *JCL*, Wed, May 1, 1968, 1.

<sup>306</sup> “Poor People’s March Picking Up Momentum,” (Montgomery, AL, A.P.), *JCL*, Thur, May 9, 1.

in his current events section that “the Poor People’s March is strictly speaking a Poor People’s Ride.”<sup>307</sup>

The argument that the PPC displayed an interest in undermining the strength of the American economy shared common ground with conservative criticism of the Federal War on Poverty. Published in early 1968, Shirley Scheibla’s *Poverty Is Where the Money Is* produced a scathing critique of the federal project, calling it “one of the most expensive, scandal-ridden and revolutionary programs ever undertaken by the United States government.”<sup>308</sup> Basing her argument on research she conducted in Congressional records and outcomes she interpreted from big-city periodicals, Scheibla denounced the Office of Economic Opportunities for undermining free enterprise and fueling a politically powerful, and violent, lower class.<sup>309</sup> As the first female journalist hired by the *Wall Street Journal* in 1943 and a respected writer for *Barron’s Magazine*, Scheibla offered no marginal voice to the world of American economics.<sup>310</sup> Her method for critiquing federal projects, however, portrayed contemporary trends to dismiss the viability of programs based on their ineffectiveness to prevent activists from protesting additional injustices. Tom Etheridge published a review that recounted the merits of Scheibla’s book in the *Clarion Ledger* about the time the Mule Train crossed the Alabama State Line.<sup>311</sup>

Echoing Scheibla’s fear of class warfare, US Senator (D) from Mississippi John Stennis reported to a group of Jaycees in mid-May that “hordes of people” had invaded the Capitol in search of a Promised Land. Referring directly to the Poor People’s Campaign, the Senator

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<sup>307</sup> Billy Skelton, “Current Scene Analysis,” *JCL*, Sun, May 19, 1968, 3f.

<sup>308</sup> Shirley Scheibla, *Poverty Is Where the Money Is*, (New York: Arlington House, 1968), 7.

<sup>309</sup> Scheibla, *Poverty Is Where the Money Is*, 7. Periodicals included the *The Chicago Sun Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Star*.

<sup>310</sup> Obituary for Shirley Hobbs Scheibla, d. March 18, 2000, *Washington Post* Online, March 22, 2000. Accessed October 7, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2000/03/22/shirley-h-scheibla-dies/882d4c8d-7f10-4046-abd2-b40c1731f59f/>.

<sup>311</sup> Tom Etheridge, “Mississippi Notebook,” *JCL*, Fri, May 31, 1968, 16.

proclaimed, “The great majority of those now camped in Washington have been mentally drugged by the philosophy that the government and those in society who are willing to work owe those who are not willing to work a living.”<sup>312</sup> Powerful public voices continually castigated the Poor People’s Campaign for threatening the health of American economic wellbeing and the press became the medium for broadcasting these concerns.

Anti-PPC voices pointed to race and provided inferential statistics to propagate the notion that the PPC was founded on false claims. Arguing that national unemployment was not the problem PPC voices claimed, politicians and reporters provided statistics to show how black employment was growing at the same rate as white employment.<sup>313</sup> One unidentified *Clarion Ledger* columnist attacked black leaders within the PPC, arguing “a few highly-paid big-mouthed Negro agitators with several hundred conscripted negro families are in Washington about poverty.... It may come as a surprise to many Americans that there are more poor whites than poor negroes in the USA.”<sup>314</sup> The writer proceeded to offer statistics from the US Department of Agriculture indicating 80% of poor, rural families earning less than \$3,000 a year in 1967 were white. “So, negroes have no monopoly on poverty,” fumed the columnist. By arguing for racial parity in American poverty these writers sought to delegitimize the concerns of the underclass and wrest economic discourse from black activists.

Politicians also challenged the Poor People’s Campaign platform armed with statistics they believed disproved the demonstration’s claims that some Americans often went hungry.<sup>315</sup> Less than a week prior to the Juneteenth Solidarity Day march in Washington, House Representative “Sonny” Montgomery (D-Miss) claimed charges of widespread hunger in his

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<sup>312</sup> “Honest Day’s Work Extolled By Stennis,” *JCL*, Sun, May 19, 1968, 1.

<sup>313</sup> “Number of Jobless Dips to New Low,” *JCL*, Thur, May 9, 3b.

<sup>314</sup> “Poor Status Not Racial,” *JCL*, Sun, June 2, 1968, 2f.

<sup>315</sup> “Miss. ‘Starvation’ Myth Is Exploded,” *JCL*, Sat, June 8, 1968, 1.



home state amounted to nothing more than a “cruel hoax.”<sup>316</sup> Montgomery refuted a request from Secretary of Agriculture, Orville L. Freeman – who asked for an additional \$100 million to fund the food stamp program – by accusing poor families of neglecting to provide aid to their own children. “Many families do not know how to properly prepare the food once they receive it,” claimed Rep. Montgomery, “and there is a general lack of knowledge among needy families of the availability of food stamps and surplus foods.”<sup>317</sup> He sought to support his argument by pointing to a survey conducted by the MS State Board of Health in which 600 pre-school age children across the state were assessed for hunger. The survey “showed no evidence of malnutrition,” said the Mississippi Representative. Three days later, on Sunday, June 16, The House Agricultural Committee made public a 79-page document that included reports from health officials in 181 counties and 19 states. Published in response to The Citizen’s Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States [established by the Citizens’ Crusade Against Poverty], the report claimed there was little hunger in the U.S., and said that the places where malnutrition did exist represented cases resulting from the ignorance of poor parents.<sup>318</sup> Southern politicians who opposed the PPC argued, first and foremost, that Americans were not hungry, then in contradiction to their previous position, blamed the hungry poor for not participating in existing aid programs responsibly.

Further evidence for the public that disunity plagued the Poor People’s Campaign appeared in reports detailing dissent other activist groups expressed toward PPC aspirations. An Inside Report by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak examined a CORE (Congress of Racial

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<sup>316</sup> Gordon Brown, “Mississippi Hunger Charges Are Blown Up,” (Washington, AP), Fri, June 14, 3.

<sup>317</sup> Gordon Brown, “Mississippi Hunger Charges Are Blown Up,” (Washington, AP), Fri, June 14, 3.

<sup>318</sup> “Malnutrition Caused by Ignorance: Congressmen Find Very Little Hunger,” (Washington, A.P.), *JCL*, Mon, June 17, 1968, p1. This report was published in response to The Citizen’s Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States, who listed 256 counties in 20 states where it said emergency conditions existed.

Equality) proposal that described the SCLC campaign as a project begging for handouts. The authors claimed CORE leaders Floyd McKissick and Roy Ennis shared the same sentiments as Richard Nixon in a speech he gave on the radio April 25 which, the authors lamented, had suffered severe neglect from the press. Evans and Novak suggested that the CORE proposal fears Abernathy's demand for one million jobs, if granted, would only produce annual pilgrimages for more Federal handouts. They quoted CORE leaders asserting, "handouts are demeaning," and claimed that CORE called the PPC March a black economic nationalism.<sup>319</sup> By citing philosophical differences between the two civil rights-seeking organizations and aligning CORE with conservative candidate Richard Nixon, journalists sought to isolate and condemn the PPC as a radical initiative.

Southerners who learned about black public voices that disapproved of PPC methods found justification for discounting the legitimacy of the campaign. Reporter Drew Pearson credited Louis Lomax as a "national Negro columnist" then featured Lomax's critique of the Washington campsite. Lomax described Resurrection City as "completely unsafe" and called it "a jungle at night." As early as May 25 the black journalist referred to the campground as a "city falling apart, dangerously so."<sup>320</sup> Known for his conservative politics and endorsement of Barry Goldwater in 1964, African American writer and editor, George S. Schuyler, criticized the upcoming Juneteenth celebration in D.C. He called the PPC a group of "marching mobs" who, Schuyler said, camped in "Insurrection City."<sup>321</sup> Dissenting black voices became the fodder that

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<sup>319</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "CORE, SCLC Break Is Seen," *JCL*, Thur, May 9, 2.

<sup>320</sup> "Drew Pearson Says," (Washington), *JCL*, Sat, June 15, 1968, 8.

<sup>321</sup> George S. Schuyler, "Famed Negro Writer Says: 'Suckers Finally Catching On'," *JCL*, Sun, June 16, 1968, 1. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman, Editors *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance, Volume II, K-Y* (New York: Routledge - Taylor & Francis, 2004), 1091-1092.

black and white residents of communities linked by the Mule Train used to reject the credibility the campaign.

In addition to dissention that marked relations between the SCLC and other black voices, media outlets zeroed in on conflict between leaders within the PPC itself to portray a campaign marked by disarray. When Bayard Rustin resigned from the post as the organizer of the Solidarity Day march two weeks from the event, writers concluded the internal conflict demonstrated a divided camp. Sterling Tucker, of the Washington Urban League, was named the march's new director. Reporters, also, featured campers' feelings on Abernathy's lodging arrangements, pointing out that while they camped in the humid and muddy outdoors, Abernathy stayed at the air-conditioned, black-owned Pitts Motel where officers had established a headquarters office.<sup>322</sup> Associated Press Reporter in Washington, Oscar Griffin, pointed to struggles for power within the SCLC as the foundation for the many frustrations and troubles the PPC faced, citing a litany of obstacles: the delay of Solidarity Day, the campaign's perceived failure to touch the conscience of the nation, the inclement weather, the public's fear of rioting, racial divisions within the camp, the declining number of campers (3,000 to 1,000), and absentee leaders.<sup>323</sup>

### **A Threat to American Welfare**

Concerns about a health crisis created by the Poor People's Campaign underscored citizen fears that the campaign demonstrated more than a program doomed to internal implosion, but one that endangered American cities and citizens for its reckless irresponsibility and endangerment. Many used the narrative of PPC disorganization, therefore, to point to ways the

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<sup>322</sup> "Woes Multiply: 'Plague' Attempt Backfires in D.C.," (Washington, AP), Sunday, June 9, 1968, 1.

<sup>323</sup> Oscar Griffin, "Power Squabbles Cause Weakening of Poor Effort," (Washington), *JCL*, Thur, June 13, 1968, 4b.

campaign threatened the health of cities lying in the path of the caravan. Reporting on the Midwest Segment, the Associated Press in Pittsburgh reported that widespread fatigue and improper diet had led to respiratory illness, dysentery, and indigestion in many PPC marchers. One thousand pilgrims experienced a layover in Pittsburgh awaiting construction in Resurrection City as volunteers worked furiously to catch up to the demand of arriving campers. While lodging in local college and church facilities during the interim, four hundred of the thousand suffered with respiratory and / or gastrointestinal illnesses.<sup>324</sup>

Reporters also pointed to conditions in Resurrection City that would make a prolonged campaign unsustainable and might pose health risks to the wider city. Jack Miller documented the living conditions in Resurrection City, citing no running water, no sewer [only portable chemical toilets], and no kitchen. Two thousand campers left the temporary campground to seek shelter in area churches, four hundred had given up and gone home, and only about twenty-two hundred remained, said Miller. Medical chairman Dr. Edward Mazique treated fifteen hundred for common illnesses and colds, and six required hospitalization. Miller blamed the lack of organization with imperiling the health of people in the Poor People's Campaign as well as residents in the city of Washington.<sup>325</sup>

### **A Political Threat**

Many voices denounced the Poor People's Campaign for the way they felt it fit into a radical liberal agenda sweeping the country with designs to undermine American democracy. Conservative politicians, political cartoonists, and leaders of citizen organizations lumped PPC marchers into a broad category of Communists that many believed also included the United

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<sup>324</sup> "Many Sick In March Contingent," (Pittsburgh, AP), *JCL*, Tue, May 21, 1968, 3.

<sup>325</sup> Jack Miller, "Resurrection Not Pleasant Place," *JCL*, Sun, June 2, 1968, 10.

States Supreme Court. Interpreting civil rights laws as limiting freedoms for average Americans, critics of the PPC saw campaign efforts as a threat to democratic ideals.

Politicians and political commentators equated the Poor People's Campaign to an attempt at a Communist takeover demonstrating on federal property. US Senator (D) from West Virginia Jennings Randolph claimed the PPC provided strong evidence of Communist involvement prior to any of the caravan departures. Warning Americans of the impending threat to democracy this demonstration posed, Randolph called it a Commie march and detailed ways he believed Communist activists were involved at every stage of the planning and participation.<sup>326</sup>

The fears of Randolph and others that the PPC harbored Communist ideals fit within a broader narrative that subversive political actors infiltrated interest groups to stage a grand-scale coup of the federal government. When Abernathy and the Committee of 100 spoke before Congress in late April about plans to mobilize the American poor at the Capitol, Rep. Albert W. Watson, R-S.C., presented an hour-long speech to the House warning Congress of Communist involvement in the Poor People's Campaign.<sup>327</sup> The month the PPC launched its campaign, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) issued a report on Communist strategies, alerting Congress and the American people of guerilla operations based in urban ghettos that functioned in the guise of black nationalist organizations. HUAC linked the 1967 unrest in Watts, Los Angeles with protests and clashes around the country following the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, arguing that a core tenet of Communist philosophy involved escalating riots to rebellion. The Jackson, Mississippi *Clarion Ledger* printed details of the report in an article

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<sup>326</sup> "Solon Says March Commie Planned," *JCL*, Friday, May 3, 1968.

<sup>327</sup> "Poor Make First March on Congress," (Washington, AP), *JCL*, Wed, May 22, 1968, 1.

subtitled “Insurrection Prelude” on May 6, the day Ralph Abernathy led the southern leg of the PPC across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.<sup>328</sup>

Newspaper illustrators also made bold claims in their drawings about the communist threat they perceived to be at work in the Poor People’s Campaign. One political commentator, a cartoonist, drew an image depicting civil rights marchers near a wolf that lurked behind a tree. The tagline read, “Commies and Troublemakers,” suggesting the Little-Red-Riding-Hood innocence of America was jeopardized by demonstrators seeking change.<sup>329</sup> Political adversaries of the PPC interpreted and described the poor people’s descent upon Washington as an act of communist rebellion toward the federal government.

Following the Mule Train’s departure from Mississippi, state leaders organized a rally at the Pearl High School gymnasium in Pearl, MS distressed over the Washington invasion by the poor. Inviting “every white Christian American concerned about his children and loved ones,” backers promised refreshments, entertainment, and a plan on how to stop the Communist takeover of the southern states. Entertainer-turned-politician Jimmy Swan was known for the white supremacist platform he employed to campaign for Governor of Mississippi in 1967. Swan was a featured guest at the Pearl High School rally alongside United Klans of America Imperial Wizard Robert Shelton, former Governor Ross Barnett, and Governor John Bell Williams. Members of the Citizens Councils, the John Birch Society and the Minute Men – all organizations committed to racial segregation and disavowing communism in America during 1968 – also promised to be in attendance.<sup>330</sup> Open alliances between state officials in Mississippi and leaders of violent white supremacist organizations, and the narrative around which these

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<sup>328</sup> “Un-American Group Reports Commies Agitate for Riots,” *JCL*, Mon, May 6, 1968, 20.

<sup>329</sup> “Commies & Troublemakers,” Cartoon, *JCL*, Sat, May 18, 1968, 8.

<sup>330</sup> “Conservative Rally Called,” *JCL*, Sun, June 2, 1968, 11.

figures coalesced, offer insight for understanding the level of political threat white southerners perceived the PPC to represent.

Commentators found alternative methods for influencing citizens unmoved by communist conspiracy reports of the Poor People's Campaign by appealing to Americans' sense of personal freedom. Casting all demands for racial justice as deviant, pundits equated civil disobedience with violence rather than nonviolence and argued that the pursuit of civil rights actually limits the freedoms of the average American. Another unnamed cartoonist drew a picture of a dark figure in the shadows raising a wooden bat toward a man smoking a pipe in the sunlight. The illustrator labeled the figure in the shadows "Violence and Civil Disobedience" and labeled the unsuspecting man in the sunlight "Personal Liberties." The cartoon caption read, "His Next Victim?" suggesting that civil rights demonstrators' pursuit of justice for all Americans had in its sights an aim to reduce the freedom of Americans who smoked.<sup>331</sup>

### **A Threat to American Values and Communities**

As an expression of a broader protest movement, public figures grouped the PPC with other demonstrations in which they felt young activists undermined conservative family values. Reporters, furthermore, pointed toward the behavior of PPC participants as evidence that its members did not represent conservative sexual standards. One Associated Press article recounted how thirty PPC demonstrators danced to the rhythm of a tambourine during a vigil against hunger Sunday, June 16. Activists marching at the Department of Agriculture broke into dance together amid signs declaring, "Feed Folks," "Food Plenty, Stomachs Empty," and "No More Hunger." The reporter at the march critiqued the legitimacy of the protest by describing ways

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<sup>331</sup> "Violence and Civil Disobedience," Cartoon, *JCL*, Thur, June 13, 1968, 14.

marchers moved their bodies. The lot of campaigners amounted to “a mass of thrusting hips,” observed the writer. Overwhelmed by the number of “bodies pulsing” and the presence of a female “gyrating in tight pink pants,” the reporter offered little information on the marchers’ cause. Failing to identify political statements dancers may have asserted about the body in moments of protest, leisure and recreation, the writer opted to denounce participants for expressing their sexuality.<sup>332</sup>

Though gaining sustainable employment lay at the heart of PPC demands, many figures argued the campaign threatened notions about the virtue of labor. A guest editorial titled “Downgrading Honest Labor” claimed the recent emphasis on poverty in the country had obscured the value of honorable work.<sup>333</sup> Populist influencer Paul Harvey expounded on the idea of moral labor in more detail, which will be covered later in this chapter. Claims that the Poor People’s Campaign represented a breakdown in the moral fabric of the nation underscored attacks on the campaign as a political threat as well.

In addition to ways people believed the Poor People’s Campaign threatened American politics and moral vision, political figures and pundits feared the march posed a direct physical threat to American communities by linking it to the unrest several cities experienced in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Viewing the May-June campaign as a continuation of April riots, detractors framed the demonstration as an effort to infect rural, peaceable communities with the disease of urban unrest. The chief community at risk, many claimed, was Washington, D.C., where April riots had inflicted damage to citizens and businesses. Vulnerability in the Capitol suggested no city in the nation was secure.

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<sup>332</sup> “Details of March: Dancing ‘Poor’ Continue Protest,” (Washington, AP), *JCL*, Mon, June 17, 1968, 16.

<sup>333</sup> “Downgrading Honest Labor,” *JCL*, Fri, May 17, 1968, 8a.



Communities feared the urban poor – whom they witnessed engaging in arson, violence and looting in the aftermath of the King assassination – would bring riots to peaceful American towns in the Poor People’s Campaign. People expressed these fears in the ways they exhorted the campaign to conduct its mission. President Lyndon Johnson urged PPC marchers to non-violence as they made their way to Washington. When addressing Congress about PPC demands, Johnson impressed members to seriously weigh proposals to help the poor that were made “lawfully and properly.”<sup>334</sup>

Some journalists framed the campaign within the context of the Memphis sanitation workers strike where King was providing support when he was killed. Describing the nine caravans of the PPC and their various paths through American communities in route to Washington, one reporter recalled how one of the Memphis marches quickly descended from order to chaos and violence.<sup>335</sup> A guest write-in for the *Clarion Ledger* framed the PPC as an extension of post-MLK assassination riots, violence, and looting to argue that a firm hand was required when dealing with protestors and activists. Even peaceable marches, claimed the author, planted the seeds for future riots.<sup>336</sup>

Victor Lawrence penned a column on the physical danger the PPC posed to the Washington business community. He connected the campaign to post-MLK-murder riots when he reported that a fourth business owner was slain in his place of business in fifteen days of unrest during the middle of May. Lawrence called on President Johnson to shore up protection in the face of the growing Poor People’s Campaign and adjured the President to assure the American public that he would mobilize police force to deter or confront violence. Such an

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<sup>334</sup> “LBJ Rakes,” *JCL*, Sat, May 4, 1968, 1

<sup>335</sup> “‘Poor People’ Prepare to Begin Capital Trek,” Marks AP, Mon, May 6, 1968, 1.

<sup>336</sup> “Makes Bad Situation Worse,” A Guest Editorial, *JCL*, Sun, May 12, 1968, 3.

assurance, implored Lawrence, would send a strong message to any bent on plunging the nation into a repeat of early April.<sup>337</sup>

Politicians perpetuated the idea that the Poor People's Campaign brought elements of urban unrest to peaceable, rural communities of the country, the foremost of which was Washington, D.C. Representative William M. Colmer of Pascagoula, MS warned members of the House Subcommittee on Public Housing and Grounds that the PPC represented little more than an invasion of poor threatening the security of the Capitol. He argued that the country's founding fathers intentionally selected "the wilderness which is now Washington" as the seat of government, rather than a big city or center of population, in order to ensure that Congress was protected against the kinds of pressures groups such as the PPC posed.<sup>338</sup> Colmer built his argument on the idea that Washington, D.C. persisted as a rural site insulated from many of the social and economic crises experienced by urban centers during the twentieth century.

The Capitol remained on high alert after the post-King-murder riots, and the presence of the PPC increased concerns from civic leaders and residents that violence may break out. In plans to welcome Thailand Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn to America for a May 1968 visit, President and First Lady Johnson planned a pyrotechnic show at the White House upon hearing of the Prime Minister's appreciation for fireworks. The White House issued a public statement, therefore, alerting D.C. residents not to be alarmed if they heard the sound of exploding gun powder. Given the April riots and the presence of the Poor People's march, one journalist explained, loud explosions may cause residents to fear full-blown combat.<sup>339</sup> Locals would have already noticed a dramatic increase in military presence throughout the District of

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<sup>337</sup> Victor Lawrence, "Washington Businessmen Fear for Lives, Property," *JCL*, Tur, May 23, 1968, 14.

<sup>338</sup> Mary Ann Pardue, "Colmer Warns Invasion Poses Threat to Capitol," *JCL*, Tue, May 7, 1968, 1.

<sup>339</sup> "Nation's Capitol is Jittery Place," *JCL*, Mon, May 13, 1968, 6.

Columbia as 8,000 troops, including paratroopers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, occupied areas around the Capitol for protection from an invasion of the poor.<sup>340</sup> The Poor People's Campaign represented for many a crisis in national and local security.<sup>341</sup>

Others argued that the PPC negatively impacted Washington's ability to entertain and profit from tourists visiting the city, citing a dramatic decrease in the patronizing of tourism-based businesses that critics attributed to the presence of poor people. Whereas the total revenue from tourism in Washington, D.C. in 1967 amounted to \$21.6 million, April and May of 1968 showed a \$1.5 million shortfall compared to the same months in the previous year. Victor Lawrence related the damage he perceived the PPC had inflicted on the District of Columbia hotel industry when he cited one tour company's complaint with the Visitor Bureau that they suffered cancellations for 2,300 visitors during the summer of 1968. The White House also recorded a 25% decrease in sightseers during April 1968 compared to April 1967. Lawrence asked where were the tourists, the shoppers, and the school children who visit the Capitol by the tens of thousands each year. The decline in tourism led some businesses to install payroll cuts and employee layoffs. One hotel laid off 125 employees in an effort to salvage \$45,000 a month. Another hotel laid off 116 workers and reduced its monthly budget by \$30,000. Due to the decrease of tourism in Washington, argued Lawrence, the Washington Convention and Visitors Bureau appealed to Congress for \$200,000 to start the new fiscal year beginning July 1 as a way to recoup the lost revenue.<sup>342</sup> Arguing that the Poor People's Campaign presented the city with economic hardship, the Washington tourism industry circumvented the needs of the American

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<sup>340</sup> "U.S. Alerts Troops To Guard D.C.," *JCL*, Sun, May 12, 1968, 2.

<sup>341</sup> "Crisis Comes To Town As Basics Break Down," *JCL*, Sat, May 11, 1968, 4.

<sup>342</sup> Victor Lawrence, Washington, "Tourists Neglect Capitol, Stay Away For Fear," *JCL*, Fri, June 7, 1968, 1d.

poor by beseeching relief from the same power complex that thousands of pilgrims traveled hundreds of miles to petition.

### **Populist Resistance**

Key public figures representing the religious community and populist nationalism used the Poor People's Campaign to clarify their platform or wage counter campaigns. Whereas Christian denominations issued statements underscoring the dignity of all people and calling for racial equality, dissenters within those traditions distanced themselves from their institutional affiliation and doubled down on segregationist platforms. Other religious voices, such as Billy Graham – who had risen to a level of public prominence that seemed to distinguish him from the religious tradition from which he came – expressed a privatized form of spiritual separatism that sought to divorce American Christianity from the social issues they believed were dividing the country. Graham avoided addressing social inequity, pointing instead to the responsibility of the individual to build personal character and live a moral life. Other religious commentators spoke about the social strife of 1968 with such ambiguity that audiences may have argued for or against civil rights legislation. Though leaders of the Poor People's Campaign fit their doctrine for pursuing economic justice squarely within their Christian faith, southern white Christians in the towns where the Mule Train passed represented a broad spectrum of support and rejection of the pilgrims' mission.

As religious organizations publicly avowed the pursuit of justice for all Americans, southern white Christians reacted to their institution's position and denounced the principles and methods of activists seeking equality. During the Poor People's Campaign, Southern Baptists gathered in Houston, Texas for the church's annual conference where two notable events

occurred. First, Dr. W.A. Criswell, pastor of Dallas First Baptist Church, was elected as President of the Southern Baptist Convention on the first ballot. Second, the Convention approved a statement addressing the social unrest in the nation and affirmed the church's commitment to advocate on behalf of racial minorities. The statement included five sections titled: "We face a crisis," "We review our efforts," "We voice our confession," "We declare our commitment," and "We make an appeal." In short, the corporate self-examination recognized Southern Baptist apathy toward racial issues in America and called on its members to strive "to obtain and secure for every person equality of human and legal rights."<sup>343</sup>

Criticism of the Southern Baptist Convention's public statement on race relations proliferated as folk from within the denomination took to pulpits and newspapers to condemn the position of the church.<sup>344</sup> Citizens wrote letters to their newspaper editors in mass. One disgruntled Baptist called the Resolution on Race "a disgusting mess of maudlin, hysterical hogwash" then championed a notion of racial purity he believed his faith supported.<sup>345</sup> A "Disgusted Deacon" from Vicksburg, Mississippi wrote to the editor about his disapproval of the Baptist statement, claiming Baptists had hit a new low by pandering to those seeking racial equality.<sup>346</sup>

In Mississippi, angry religious dissidents turned to popular columnist at the *Clarion Ledger* Tom Ethridge who was known for his race-baiting, Confederate flag-waiving opinion section.<sup>347</sup> Ethridge's column "Mississippi Notebook" both invited and amplified dissenting voices that expressed disenchantment with organized religion's effort to advocate for civil rights.

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<sup>343</sup> Wallace Henley, "Southern Baptists Elect Dr. Criswell," *The Birmingham News*, Thu 6 June, 1968, 28.

<sup>344</sup> "Baptists Make Public Text of Resolutions About Race," *JCL*, Thur, May 23, 1968, 6c.

<sup>345</sup> "Voice of the People: Resolution by South Baptist Group Draws Severe Criticisms," *JCL*, Tue, May 28, 1968, 8.

<sup>346</sup> "Voice of the People: Disgusted Deacon," *JCL*, Sat, May 25, 1968, 6.

<sup>347</sup> Rebecca Miller Davis, "Tom Ethridge" Entry, *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, edited by Ann Abadie, Charles Reagan Wilson, and Ted Ownby. Online version, [mississippiencyclopedia.org](http://mississippiencyclopedia.org), accessed October 20, 2020.

One Ethridge fan argued that evil forces produced disorder at the Southern Baptist Convention and influenced leaders to issue such an unfounded position as racial equality.<sup>348</sup>

Members of religious organizations with a longer record of support for civil rights joined disgruntled Baptists in rejecting activist methods. The day after the Mule Train left Marks, Ethridge wrote that the President of the International Council of Christian Churches Carl McIntyre opposed civil disobedience.<sup>349</sup> Clayton Rand wrote an article for the *Clarion* expressing one Methodist minister's dissent with his denomination on the race issue. Rev. Ralph C. Shea, Sr.'s opposition to Methodist sensitivity to race won such acclaim from readers that the article was reprinted two months later in the Citizen's Council journal *The Citizen*.<sup>350</sup>

By 1968, Christian evangelist Billy Graham had already gained an international audience that superseded his Southern Baptist roots. Though politically connected and often touted as a "Pastor to U.S. Presidents," Graham tended to avoid commenting directly on political issues, urging readers of his religious Q & A column published in papers around the nation to focus their attention on personal character development rather than social issues. Reducing faith to pithy principles and exhortations, Graham sidestepped questions on social rights and responsibilities. When asked about activist methods and mission he responded, "It always pays to speak out for what we believe," offering no clear path for religious social obligation.<sup>351</sup> Downplaying economic inequity, Graham gestured toward hardship and injustice as avenues for character-building: "Happiness is not freedom from pain, poverty, adversity, or even sorrow. It is

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<sup>348</sup> "Protest Baptist Group 'Confession of Guilt' On Eve of SBC Convention," in Mississippi Notebook by Tom Ethridge, *JCL*, Mon, May 27, 1968, 16.

<sup>349</sup> Tom Etheridge, "Noted Clergyman Refutes Theories of Liberals on 'Civil Disobedience'," *JCL*, Tue, May 14, 1968, 6.

<sup>350</sup> Clayton Rand, "Methodist Pastor Declares Dissent," *JCL*, Sun, May 12, 1968, p10. Ralph C. Shea, Sr., "Methodist Pastor Says, 'I Dissent,'" *The Citizen: Official Journal of the Citizens' Councils of America*, Vol. 12, No. 10, July-Aug, 1968.

<sup>351</sup> Billy Graham, "My Answer," *JCL*, Tue, May 14, 1968, 6.

found in a strength to rise above these and live triumphantly over them.”<sup>352</sup> Living above economic hardship amounted to spiritual grit to endure rather than overcome poverty. For Graham and those who adopted his philosophy, civil disobedience, while demonstrating courage, displayed resistance not only to public policy, but to a person’s own moral progress.

“The Country Parson” cartoon published in the Jackson *Clarion Ledger* sought to project the musings of a thoughtful rural clergyman, but its pithy one-liners were so shrouded in ambiguity that the line frequently left readers to determine their own meaning. Each daily depiction of The Country Parson portrayed a drawing of a minister walking in his black suit and broad-rimmed hat. The image remained the same each week, but the proverb attached to it often vaguely addressed a topic garnering attention in the media that week. The day the Mule Train departed Marks, The Country Parson stated, “Christ said we’d have the poor with us always – but he didn’t say the deprived.”<sup>353</sup> A few days later The Country Parson chided, “Don’t expect a man who is unhappy enough to revolt to be good natured.”<sup>354</sup> When a public fight over integrating a city pool in Jackson, Mississippi prompted city officials to close the pool entirely, The Country Parson commented, “Jesus washed his disciples’ feet – His followers today would more likely want to build them a swimming pool.”<sup>355</sup> The day before the Poor People’s Campaign held its mass Solidarity Day rally in Washington, the proverb asserted: “Christ encouraged folks to give to the poor – which doesn’t always seem to be the church in some communities.”<sup>356</sup> The latter demonstrates the tendency of the religious cartoon to raise more questions than it put to rest. Is the parson suggesting the church fails to resemble those who give

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<sup>352</sup> Billy Graham, “My Answer,” *JCL*, Fri, June 14, 1968, 18a.

<sup>353</sup> “The Country Parson,” *JCL*, Mon, May 13, 1968, 1.

<sup>354</sup> “The Country Parson,” *JCL*, Thur, May 16, 1968, 1.

<sup>355</sup> “The Country Parson,” *JCL*, Fri, June 14, 1968, 18a.

<sup>356</sup> “The Country Parson,” *JCL*, Tue, June 18, 1968, 1.

to the poor or fails to resemble the poor themselves? Does the parson advocate for integrated swimming pools or mock them? What, exactly, was The Country Parson implying? Though less defiant toward civil activism than outspoken opponents, ambiguous religious voices such as Graham and The Country Parson offered little support for helping folk articulate social responsibility motivated by religious conviction.

Perhaps no single voice prodded Americans to resist and despise PPC pilgrims more than radio celebrity and newspaper columnist Paul Harvey. Spinning hometown values with a sense of responsible law and order, Harvey leveled a direct smear campaign against the PPC and leaders within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Beloved in American homes around the country, Harvey's voice was easily recognizable for the sentimental stories, little-known facts, and romantic descriptions he recounted on his radio program *The Rest of the Story*. Harvey conducted a speaking tour during the PPC that brought him to the same state as the Mule Train. Prior to his address at Blue Mountain College in Blue Mountain, Mississippi, Harvey received a rousing introduction in which the host described him as a "burr under the saddle of the American conscience."<sup>357</sup>

Harvey expressed his commitment to law and order by seeking to control the public narrative, applauding political figures known for being tough on crime, and advocating police violence toward lawbreakers. Following the unrest many urban spaces suffered during April, Harvey attacked the press for offering protest groups a platform.<sup>358</sup> Chicago Mayor Richard Daley issued a directive for his police to shoot to kill arsonists and shoot to cripple looters when his city broke out in chaos during April. Harvey praised the mayor for being tough on crime and took the order one step further by suggesting, "Good Cops Shoot First." Harvey underlined his

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<sup>357</sup> "Paul Harvey to Address Blue Mountain Banquet," *JCL*, Fri, May 24, 1968, 8c.

<sup>358</sup> Paul Harvey, "Reporters Becoming Promoters of Riots," *JCL*, Thursday, May 2, 1968.



position on militant policing by cajoling the public, “Let me tell you how the West was really won.”<sup>359</sup> Harvey likened the need for law and order in urban spaces to wild west mythology where, he intimated, gun-toting Americans civilized areas formerly occupied by the savage indigenous through steady and persistent campaigns of violence.

Harvey appealed to Americans’ fears of disorder and protest to make a case for vigilantes and guns. In “Morningside: No Crime,” Harvey lauded one American community’s response to nationwide lawlessness: a citizen-initiated surveillance program.<sup>360</sup> Harvey also used the urban riots after King’s assassination as rationale for citizens to reject tighter gun control laws. He called gun laws silly and reasoned with the public, “You see, most of the recent crimes which have terrified our citizenry and panicked our Congress do not involve guns. Most recent crimes involve gasoline bottle-bombs, bricks, knives.” Harvey closed by encouraging readers to demand *their* right to own and use guns.<sup>361</sup> By highlighting Congress’s woes in the face of social unrest, the popular radio host and columnist drew attention to the Poor People’s Campaign who held Capitol Hill in its immediate purview. Harvey warned that the very meaning of democracy was at risk as activists in cities and on college campuses sought to circumvent the democratic process. He called protest activism tyranny and cautioned Americans around the nation to resist anything bearing semblance to this threat in their communities.<sup>362</sup>

Condemning those who sought to transform their economic situation, Harvey celebrated figures he believed represented fiscally-conservative American values. Harvey told the story in an early May column about an 87-year-old farmer named Champion Down who lived alone in a 127-year-old cabin in Leslie, Michigan. Down, said Harvey, was a true patriot; a hard worker

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<sup>359</sup> Paul Harvey, “Good Cops Shoot First,” *JCL*, Sun, May 5, 1968, 2f.

<sup>360</sup> Paul Harvey, “Morningside: No Crime,” *JCL*, Sun, May 12, 1968, 2f.

<sup>361</sup> Paul Harvey, “Urges Opposition to Tighter Gun Laws,” Paul Harvey News, *JCL*, Thur, May 16, 1968, 6.

<sup>362</sup> Paul Harvey, “Northwestern U. and Black Power,” Paul Harvey News, *JCL*, Wed, May 15, 1968, 9.

who, though entitled to an assortment of government pensions, refused Medicare, welfare, unemployment, or even retirement. Down received no farming subsidy, but eked out his own living on his land and minded his own affairs. Harvey argued Down offered a refreshing reprieve to the many who pled poverty in an effort to acquire property that belonged to others. “No beggar he; no man is more free,” Harvey intoned as he lifted up Down as an antidote to big government.<sup>363</sup> Harvey shamed those petitioning for assistance, called them cannibals, and accused them of bleeding the “hardworking majority.” If Americans were not careful, warned the media celebrity, the beggars of the country would consume the resources of honest, hardworking citizens.<sup>364</sup>

Harvey directly addressed the Poor People’s Campaign – or, what he referred to as the “so-called poor people’s march on Washington” – in an article in which he praised California Governor Ronald Reagan for navigating the discourse of law and order with “Churchillian candor.” Reagan had recently released a twenty-two-page booklet on law and order, education, public assistance, economic growth, job opportunities, and the quality of life in America. The Governor referred to civil disobedience as the seed of disturbance and blamed activists for inciting mass disorder, disrupting traffic, and interfering with the legitimate concerns of citizens.<sup>365</sup> Reagan’s statements on the need to restore order in the nation were refreshingly candid, claimed Harvey.

Harvey argued the Poor People’s Campaign, on the other hand, represented the antithesis of Reagan’s vision of a promising America. These marchers had become victims of their own leaders, said Harvey. He accused Southern Christian Leadership Conference officers with merely

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<sup>363</sup> Paul Harvey, “Champion Down One of the Richest,” *JCL*, Tue, May 7, 1968, 5.

<sup>364</sup> Paul Harvey, “Who Can I Turn To?” Paul Harvey News, *JCL*, Sun, May, 1968, 2e.

<sup>365</sup> “Reagan Denounces Legislation by Mob,” (Sacramento, AP), *JCL*, Thur, May 2, 1968, 17.

“passing the hat,” a euphemism for panhandling. Harvey placed the blame on campaign leaders who he said raised false hopes for marchers that this demonstration will offer relief for their financial problems. “It won’t,” he promised.<sup>366</sup>

As the Solidarity Day rally neared, Harvey amped up his rhetoric against the Poor People’s Campaign. In a commentary about the strife of the nation, Harvey grouped assassinations (primarily the murders of JFK, MLK, Jr., and RFK), urban riots, demonstrations, and student protests together in a single monologue to ask: “What has happened to our country?” He called PPC marchers “professional loafers” and warned again how dangerous these were for the hard-working majority.<sup>367</sup> The day before Solidarity Day, Harvey released a scathing expose of SCLC Chairman Ralph Abernathy. He accused Abernathy and the SCLC of not disclosing financial records and called the leader a professional protestor. Harvey, then, recounted the story about Abernathy fleeing the angry husband of a parishioner in 1958. Harvey had no respect for the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the face of the Poor People’s Campaign, and he worked to ensure that the American public felt the same.<sup>368</sup>

### **Counter-PPC Protests, Campaigns, and Actions**

The Poor People’s Campaign also faced adversity and defamation from protests waged in opposition to the SCLC project. Some political activists acted physically hostile toward the camp in Washington. Others – candidates for political office and sitting politicians – verbally attacked PPC principles and methods to leverage support from their constituencies.

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<sup>366</sup> Paul Harvey, “Gov. Reagan Hits Nail With His Head,” Paul Harvey News, *JCL*, Thur, May 30, 1968, 5.

<sup>367</sup> Paul Harvey, “American Must Throw Up Its Sickness,” Paul Harvey News, *JCL*, Fri, June 14, 1968, 8.

<sup>368</sup> Paul Harvey, “The Rev. Abernathy Not So Reverent,” Paul Harvey News, *JCL*, Tue, June 18, 1968, 2.

It is difficult to determine if the added number of police in Washington offered additional protection for marchers or increased threats to their presence in the Capital. Two weeks into the camp-in on the National Mall, an off-duty policeman threw tear gas over the border fence that lined Resurrection City. Residents of the temporary town quickly identified the perpetrator and security officers arrested him.<sup>369</sup> Within a day of this incident, police dispersed a group of neo-Nazis handing out “anti-Negro” leaflets across the street from a PPC march on Capitol Hill. Representing the National Socialist White People’s Party, the gang of ten wore brown shirts and swastika-emblazoned armbands over their biceps. Police ordered them away from the area for failing to acquire permission to protest from the city.<sup>370</sup>

Some political candidates felt attacking the PPC would help them garner more votes. Running for the House of Representatives from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District of Mississippi, Charlie Griffin purchased a sizeable, nearly full-page campaign advertisement in the widest-circulated newspaper in the state in advance of the June 4 election. In the political ad, images of several newspaper headlines lay strewn across the page touting Griffin’s doctrine. One headline announced, “Griffin Asks Curb in ‘March.’” Griffin campaigned for national public office on a platform that included shutting down the Poor People’s Campaign...and won the election.<sup>371</sup>

Ardent segregationist and former Governor of Alabama George Wallace leveled direct verbal assaults against the Poor People’s Campaign while campaigning for the 1968 presidential election. Within days of burying his wife, sitting Alabama Governor Lurleen Wallace, after her three-year bout with cancer, George Wallace reentered the national political arena as an Independent candidate. The night the Mule Train was scheduled to arrive in Atlanta, Wallace

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<sup>369</sup> “Marchers Vow Not To Move From Present Camp Site,” *JCL*, Fri, May 31, 1968, 7.

<sup>370</sup> “Poor People’s Drive Stalled in Mire of Mud,” *JCL*, Sat, June 1, 1968, 8.

<sup>371</sup> Charlie Griffin Campaign Ad, *JCL*, Sun, June 2, 1968, 6.

held a rally in the city. The Mule Train failed to arrive to Atlanta that night because Georgia Governor Lester Maddox had the entire caravan arrested in Douglassville for operating a nonmotorized vehicle on the portion of Interstate 20 that ran through his state. During his address before several thousand in attendance at his rally, Wallace rejected the idea that he espoused racist philosophy then criticized initiatives that promoted desegregation. Fed up with talk of integration and the breakdown of Law and Order, Wallace said, “I think our slogan in Georgia and the South is just going to be, ‘We’re tired of this mess.’” Newspapers reported that when Wallace visited Governor Maddox’s Capital office earlier in the day, the Governor greeted Wallace, “Hello, Mr. President.”<sup>372</sup>

Wallace laid out an “anti-poverty” plan for campaign audiences in North Carolina. Recalling the hard times of his boyhood, Wallace offered a formula during a stop on June 15 that combated poverty through education and private enterprise. He called for a decentralization of industry that he believed would broaden opportunities for citizens. Critics claimed Wallace could just have likely called his plan the “anti-poor people” project.<sup>373</sup> At a campaign stop in Virginia, Wallace announced a new slogan, “Southern Power,” in an apparent attempt to counter the popular PPC chant, “Soul Power!” Southern Power, for Wallace, represented a force that prevented southern black protesters from seeking change in their economic circumstances.<sup>374</sup>

Americans informed about the Poor People’s Campaign from public discourse found in local newspapers received a steady diet of information teaching them to fear PPC methods, dismiss PPC petitions, and reject PPC pilgrims for their campaign’s unreliable operation and

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<sup>372</sup> “Atlanta Thousands Roar for Wallace,” (Atlanta, GA, AP), *JCL*, Fri, June 14, 1968, 19.

<sup>373</sup> “Wallace Outlines Anti-Poverty Plan,” (Charlotte, NC, AP), *JCL*, Sun, June 16, 1968, 12a.

<sup>374</sup> “Wallace Acquires Slogan,” (Richmond, VA, AP), *JCL*, June 18, 1968, 1.

dangerous mission. By highlighting the voices of politicians, religious leaders, and populist figures the media created an impression of the PPC as a misguided mission doomed to failure. Rather than alleviate concern about the campaign, however, reports of PPC failures escalated to slander. Community leaders broadcasted the legal troubles of PPC officers and portrayed the PPC and SCLC as organizations comprised of disreputable characters. Journalists centered Mule Train activity and struggles in the broader context of social unrest and violence, and tied Resurrection City trials to health hazards that threatened the wellbeing of American cities. Conservatives ultimately interpreted the PPC as a political threat that endangered national security.

Critics focused on the medium of Mule Train travel as a way to dismiss the needs of the pilgrims themselves. Not only did the national and smaller community presses fail to portray the marchers as pilgrims, they failed to consider them as individuals possessing their own goals, experiences and perspectives. They seem rather to have considered the MT pilgrims as examples of things they already hated or feared. Indeed, the mules of the caravan garnered sympathy from the public as laborers for the campaign in ways marchers did not. Individuals making the pilgrimage, each compelled by ambitions of her and his own, suffered rejection from prominent public voices while facing the incapacity for petition characterized by the American power complex.

CHAPTER FOUR  
THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN PILGRIM, PART ONE:  
ANNIE RANKIN AND THE LAWS OF CHANGEABLE JUSTICE

Annie James Rankin was a 35-year-old wife and mother of five when she alone joined the Mule Train in Grenada, Mississippi.<sup>375</sup> Born March 1, 1933 on the Gulf Coast and raised by adoptive parents, Rankin had lived in Mississippi her entire life. She described her ancestors as Black Indians and told friends that her great, great grandmother and grandfather marched in the Trail of Tears to Arizona.<sup>376</sup> As an adult Rankin lived in Fayette and found a variety of ways to invest herself in civil rights initiatives throughout the South.<sup>377</sup> She wrote of her experiences with the Poor People's Campaign as she recounted her life of activism in the Black Freedom struggle for friends living in the North. Rankin found in the Mule Train a path for imagining a new iteration of herself and society, and her pilgrimage to Washington, D.C. became the medium through which she articulated her challenge of unjust social systems.<sup>378</sup>

The material in this chapter draws on the Annie Rankin papers of Tougaloo College held at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi. Rankin wrote three accounts of her experiences on the Mule Train. The first of the three she recorded during

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<sup>375</sup> In her Autobiography account Rankin said, "after we left Marks [MS]," suggesting she was with the caravan when it launched from Quitman County. In her Trip on the Mule Train account Rankin said she left home and went straight to Grenada to join the Mule Train May 18. Given the specific date and the likelihood that Rankin wrote Trip on the Mule Train within days of returning from Resurrection City, the latter is probably the more accurate account for when Rankin joined the pilgrimage.

<sup>376</sup> Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, authorizing President Andrew Jackson to negotiate the cession of Indian lands east of the Mississippi River. The Jackson administration employed any means necessary to obtain Indian lands, leading to widespread corruption during negotiations with tribal leaders. Theda Purdue & Michael Green, *North American Indians: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55.

<sup>377</sup> For more on poverty and black protest that pursued change by leveraging consumer power in the Fayette and Natchez areas of Mississippi, see Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, & Culture 1830-1998*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999).

<sup>378</sup> Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*, 44.

the pilgrimage itself. She had been writing down details of the journey as they occurred in a journal that Georgia police confiscated when the pilgrims crossed the state line. Governor Lester Maddox had the MT pilgrims arrested for operating nonmotorized vehicles on the portion of Interstate 20 that ran through his state. The memoir capturing Rankin's experiences on the way and shedding light on her thoughts and feelings as pilgrims traversed the most significant stretch of the journey through Mississippi and Alabama – four weeks of earnest struggle on the road to reach a hearing for poor Americans – is now missing or, worse, destroyed. Rankin later lamented to friends in another state that her journal had been taken from her.<sup>379</sup>

Rankin wrote two additional accounts of her Mule Train experiences on separate occasions. One account she aptly titled "Trip on the Mule Train." The second comprises the majority of a piece labeled "An Autobiography of Mrs. Annie James Rankin."<sup>380</sup> Both accounts belong to a collection of letters Rankin shared with a group of freedom struggle supporters in Rhode Island. From 1965 to 1980, Annie corresponded with Frank and Caroline Stewart telling about her and her family's lives in Fayette, Mississippi and describing their activities as freedom fighters in the Mississippi Black Freedom struggle. The Stewarts in return established a following of "Annie Rankin supporters" to whom they reported the Rankins' involvements.<sup>381</sup>

Since both accounts of Annie Rankin's Mule Train experiences are undated, there is no certainty which was written first or, given their chronological differences, which provides a more accurate account. The order of details, however, are less crucial to the goal of this chapter than Rankin's interpretation of her experiences. Therefore, though the two accounts depart at times in sequence, they align in purpose. This chapter considers the ways the two documents collaborate,

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<sup>379</sup> Annie Rankin, "Trip on the Mule Train," 3.

<sup>380</sup> From this point forward "Trip on the Mule Train" will be referred to in the shortened "Trip" and "An Autobiography of Mrs. Annie James Rankin" will be referred to simply as "Autobiography."

<sup>381</sup> *Annie Rankin Papers*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Collection Call No.: T1026.



along with Rankin's letters to the "Annie Rankin Supporters," to provide a clear account, mission, and memorial of the Mule Train. This chapter ultimately studies the way Rankin employed the Mule Train as a liminal interval of space and time – a pilgrimage – to define herself as an activist and to articulate her core belief that she was pursuing more than a set of new laws or policies. Annie Rankin searched for an alternative vision of justice.

The two extant records of Rankin's experiences on the Mule Train differ in notable ways, including the stories she told. The autobiography consists of thirteen pages, nine of which Rankin devoted to the Mule Train. This account offers specific dates, details and descriptions that correspond to the recorded historical sequence and situate Rankin's participation in the Mule Train within a broader life of activism. Prior to her involvement in the Mule Train Rankin attempted to integrate a local dime store, filed a lawsuit against a doctor who fired her for registering to vote, protested in several states, attended the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City as a Mississippi Freedom Democrat, and campaigned for MS Freedom Democratic candidates around the state. She had been fired from her job, jailed for participating in protests, and beaten for her defiance. Rankin often noted ongoing health problems, stemming from these experiences, that continued to impair her well-being. Rankin's account of the Mule Train, however, is the seminal event through which she interprets her ambitions within the freedom struggle. The autobiography ends abruptly, literally mid-sentence, teasing the researcher to pine for what originally followed in the incomplete archive.

Rankin's second account of the Mule Train, while less organized than her autobiography, offers a sense of visceral immediacy. This account titled "Trip on the Mule Train" has a clear beginning and end but only occupies four pages of handwritten record. While Rankin confuses the sequence of towns the Mule Train traveled through, she remembers and associates each place

with a particular episode of the struggle. It is during this brief account of the journey that Rankin laments losing her original journal of Mule Train experiences to Georgia State Troopers in Douglasville. This account reflects the emotional struggle someone exposed to trauma might express when seeking to make sense of an event that has very recently occurred. It lacks the objective distance characterized by the autobiography; that is, the Mule Train narrative centers around Rankin's personal experiences as a pilgrim but without the interpretation and commentary she provided in her autobiography. Rankin closes this account in the manner she closed her many letters to the Stewarts, promising Caroline that she would continue to write more as the memories surfaced. On the back of the final page a brief, handwritten health update suggests this is the earlier record: "I have been down with low blood pressure and nerves since I came back but I am better... while I was gone I lost 35 lbs....but I feel better without all that excess weight."<sup>382</sup> Perhaps her dramatic weight loss and illness help to explain Rankin's struggle to keep this particular account of events in chronological order.

While the two accounts differ in dramatic ways, they also provide convincing proof that they belong to the same author, provide the details and specificity of someone who actually took the journey, and offer compelling commentary for analyzing one another and the series of letters to which they belong. The two accounts share common themes of adversity, perseverance, hardship, and resolve. Both accounts offer dialogue, often between Rankin and a police figure. Each of Rankin's two accounts offers unique stories not included in the other, but four episodes find their place in both accounts: The first describes white adversity in Duck Hill. The second common episode features Annie driving the mules. The third recalls gunfire Rankin dodged from white opponents and details how the FBI sought to offer her protection. The fourth common

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<sup>382</sup> Annie Rankin, "Trip on the Mule Train," unnumbered page accompanying Mule Train account. *Annie Rankin Papers*, Box 1, Folder 11. Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Collection Call No.: T1026.

episode centers on the memorial service Mule Train pilgrims observed at Birmingham Sixteenth Street Baptist Church for Senator Robert Kennedy. All four of these events appear in both the Mule Train and the Autobiography account. Given that all four occurred prior to the pilgrim's detainment in Douglasville, it is highly likely that all four also occupied a prominent portion of the journal Rankin had kept until the time Georgia police took it from her.

This chapter examines the four common episodes appearing in Annie Rankin's two Mule Train accounts, observing the events unique to each account and exploring key words and expressions that shed insight on Rankin's understanding of her Mule Train experiences. By examining commonality, the research gains a sense of Rankin's overarching mission for Black Freedom and equity. Noting discrepancies or differences, on the other hand, provides insight for determining Rankin's more immediate agenda for writing. Each account arrives within a different context of her life as well as in the ongoing relationship she shared with the recipients of her letters, the Stewarts of Rhode Island. A brief look at the Stewarts and how they came to connect with this southern freedom fighter is, therefore, appropriate and necessary for understanding each party's interest in corresponding. Finally, this chapter will consider Rankin's language, word choice, and spelling to explore the nuances of her interior processing of the work to which she so fervently committed herself.

The Stewarts of Rhode Island established an open line of communication with Annie Rankin that allowed her the opportunity to write about her endeavors in the Black Freedom struggle in Mississippi during the sixties. Frank Stewart was a graduate of Princeton and Harvard who took a job teaching mathematics for Brown University in 1947. The Stewarts most likely became acquainted with Rankin in 1966 during a visiting professorship program Brown

University organized with historically-black Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi. Moved by the struggle for civil rights he witnessed in Mississippi, Dr. Stewart became enthusiastic about the fight for racial justice and returned to Tougaloo in 1969 for another semester of teaching.<sup>383</sup>

While Dr. Stewart's job helped the couple establish ties with Mississippi activists, Caroline Stewart's persistence in communicating with Rankin and forwarding Rankin's letters and updates to other interested parties broadened Rankin's influence with northern supporters. Their correspondence reveals that Caroline Stewart received Annie's handwritten letters, written in what Caroline referred to as Annie's "inimitable style," and transcribed Annie's letter in type. Stewart added instructions or further notations to clarify communication or processes for supporting the Rankins, mimeographed several copies of the transcription with notes, and sent them to a broad set of Rhode Island Annie Rankin supporters who offered financial support for the Rankins and other activists working in Mississippi. The Rhode Islanders stayed abreast of Mississippi local elections, injustices, and demonstrations. The relationship was one of emotional and material reciprocity. Annie often sent items with the letters – pictures, rain hats she made by hand, pecans, quilts sewed by unemployed Mississippi residents – making them available for sale among the Rhode Island supporters. Stories of Rankin's struggles inspired generosity in the "Annie Rankin Supporters," and she freely offered details that the interstate group relished.<sup>384</sup>

The first event Rankin recorded in both Mule Train accounts occurred in Duck Hill, Mississippi where black residents decided to join the caravan of pilgrims. Rankin recorded that

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<sup>383</sup> "Frank M. Stewart '39," Memorial, *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, April 4, 2012 Issue. "Frank Stewart, 93, Was Curious Professor," Obituary, *Vineyard Gazette*, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, Nov 9, 2011. The "Frank M. Stewart Civil Rights Recordings and Papers, Circa 1965-2000" reside in the Wisconsin Historical Society, Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections. These records include interviews with faculty and students at Tougaloo College, and specifically with Annie Rankin.

<sup>384</sup> *Annie Rankin Papers*, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Collection Call No.: T1026.

white residents put the possessions of those who joined the caravan outdoors, exposing household goods to the elements. In “Trip,” Rankin wrote about the possession turnout as if it was something whites did after residents joined the Mule Train: “[Duck Hill, MS] is where we had people to leave with us and when they left the white people there put there[sic] things out into the street.”<sup>385</sup> The new pilgrims, therefore, would have learned that the contents of their homes had been emptied into the street from other Duck Hill residents after they had already left town. In her Autobiography, however, Rankin suggested whites put black residents’ “thing out in the yards and told them to leaves [sic],” as if the possession turnout preceded their joining the Mule Train.<sup>386</sup> Whereas the “Trip” account indicates whites *reacted* to blacks leaving on the Mule Train by placing the possessions of the new pilgrims in the street, the “Autobiography” infers that when white community members put the possessions of black residents in the yard and ordered them to leave, the act *prompted* some locals to join the Mule Train.

Rankin does not explain in either account how white Duck Hill residents acquired access to the possessions of black Duck Hill residents. One can speculate that when black tenants of white-owned properties left with the Mule Train, white landlords moved the belongings of pilgrims out of their rental properties. This would explain why in her Trip account Rankin told of whites moving the possessions of those who joined the Mule Train all the way into the street rather than just outside the house in the yard as she had recorded in her Autobiography. The act of removing the possessions of tenants after they have vacated a property is no less hostile, of course, than ordering someone to leave for fraternizing with civil rights activists and may have created an even more problematic scenario for those already out of town. It is also fair to consider that though Rankin described the two-fold action of whites removing contents and

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<sup>385</sup> Rankin, “Trip,” 1.

<sup>386</sup> Rankin, “Autobiography,” 5.

telling residents to leave in that order, the verbal command and the content removal could have happened in reverse sequence and fit both versions of the Duck Hill possession turnout. Regardless the exact details for *how* it happened, Rankin bears witness to a hostile reaction by the white community to both the Mule Train caravan that passed through their town and to their black neighbors who entertained the message of the Poor People's Campaign. Joining the Mule Train carried devastating ramifications for those living in communities where the Poor People's Campaign caravan passed.

A second episode appearing in both of Rankin's existing Mule Train accounts involves her personal experience driving the mules several miles as the caravan neared or crossed the Alabama state line. As in the Duck Hill experience Rankin offered details that differ, such as the distance and the stretch of road she drove. Rankin maintained consistency, however, when she framed each account in terms of the adversity pilgrims collectively faced from PPC opponents and when she noted personal attacks she endured while driving the wagon. She described both her fear and her perseverance, revealing a tenacity that drove Rankin to make such a journey.

Here is how Rankin described her experience driving the wagon team in "Trip on the Mule Train":

Then we left for the Ala. line and that is when I drove a pair of train horses 40 miles until they could get a driver who was not afraid of them[.] And when we entered Ala. I was called all kinds of black bitches and was told by the local whites to take my black ass back to Miss and go to work[.] Some of them said I should be thrown off of that wagon and somebody should drive the horses over me. But I still drove them.<sup>387</sup>

Here is how Rankin described the same experience in "Autobiography of Mrs. Annie James Rankin":

And then we moved on to Columbus, Miss. And on our way there we were abused very bad by the state Trooper and when we enter[ed] the city limits the City Official[s] they

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<sup>387</sup> Rankin, "Trip," 1-2. Punctuation has been added to the text with [ ] for clarity.

were saying we should be dead[.] They said we were disgracering [sic] the state of Mississippi with covered wagons[.] And they put us off in a real dark place and they tried to turn our mules lose [sic] but we were watching[.] On that trip everybody worked. And I drove a pair of train red horses 27 miles one day and the next day I drove 32 miles. The same team and it took me until 12 midnight to get to Starkeville[.] Miss[.] And the outside white people call me everything dirty but I made [it].<sup>388</sup>

After leaving Duck Hill, MS the Mule Train traveled south on Highway 51 to the larger community of Winona, MS approximately fifteen miles down the road. The pilgrims rested for the night in Winona then headed west on Highway 82, staying one night at each community along the way – Eupora, Starkville, and Columbus, MS – before crossing the Alabama state line. These three communities sit roughly thirty miles apart and the state line lies another ten to twelve miles down the highway. Rankin indicated that upon leaving Mississippi the Mule Train increased the distance pilgrims trekked each day, many still traveling on foot.<sup>389</sup>

While her accounts do not offer the detail necessary for determining where she took up the reins and where she put them down, Annie Rankin's two accounts indicate she drove between forty and sixty total miles over two days, and crossed the Alabama line to the sound of hostile heckling. She named communities where pilgrims encountered resistance but confused the order they traveled through them, leaving the reader to speculate where Rankin received such vitriolic threats. According to "Trip," Rankin began driving the mule-drawn wagon when the caravan left Columbus, MS. The forty miles she said she drove in this account would have included crossing the Alabama state line and would have kept her in the driver's seat beyond the Mule Train's next overnight stop in Reform, Alabama. In "Autobiography," on the other hand, Rankin reported driving for two days, traveling twenty-seven miles the first day and thirty-two

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<sup>388</sup> Rankin, "Autobiography," 6-7.

<sup>389</sup> Winona, MS to Eupora, MS = 32 miles; Eupora, MS to Starkville, MS = 28 miles; Starkville, MS to Columbus, MS = 32 miles; Columbus, MS to Alabama State Line = 11 miles; Columbus, MS to Reform, AL = 27-29 miles.

miles the second. Given that one of those nights was spent in Starkville (presumably the first), Rankin would have driven all the way from Eupora, MS to Columbus, MS, covering nearly sixty miles of road but ending ten or so miles from the Alabama state line.

Important questions arise given the contradictory details between the two accounts: Did white Alabamans call Rankin “all kinds of black bitches” and suggest she be trampled by horses, or did white Mississippians hurl these threats? Did the city officials of Columbus accuse the pilgrims of disgracing the state and declare that death was more befitting the activists, or were these officials from Starkville? Did Rankin hear city leaders make disparaging comments from the road, or did she hear reports of this later?<sup>390</sup> These questions and observations, however, speak to the preference of an observer to document details instead of understand the participant. Rankin’s accounts suggest the hostile encounters characterized the full journey rather than distinguish individual communities.

Rather than undermine her claim to have driven the mules and wagon, Rankin’s varied accounts underscore features of her Mule Train experience as one associated with driving or leading the campaign. Rankin’s primary objective revolved around communicating her experiences on the Mule Train to a certain group of people: her friends and supporters in Rhode Island whom she depended on to remember her role in the Poor People’s Campaign. It is also important to recognize that Rankin wrote these accounts at different times; she sought to make sense of her experiences at different moments or seasons in her life. Rather than present a liability, Rankin’s disparate stories demonstrate the meaning-making process at work in her remembering.

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<sup>390</sup> The latter question stems less from a contradiction in the two texts and is based more on a desire for more information.



Rankin demonstrated how easy it was for southern communities as well as southern states to *run together*, so to speak, in experience *and* narrative. Reports about the antagonism of political leaders or the aggression of state troopers do not reveal as much about the particular location in Rankin's story as they do the betrayal and distrust pilgrims felt on the way. Rankin argued that city officials supported and joined the verbal harassment that rang out from street curbs and neighborhood lawns. Having police and political figures join in the hostile rhetoric – much of it noted in Chapter Three exploring PPC opposition in the media – surely had a fortifying effect on those spewing aggression from the sidelines. Rankin was careful to pair these feelings of insecurity along the journey with the absence of public protections most middle- and upper-class white citizens enjoyed. Police, she says, were present but often untrustworthy and sometimes aggressive.

In the two accounts Rankin spoke to her own fears at play in driving the horses of the Mule Train, described the peril pilgrims encountered when crossing community boundaries, and revealed ways these two seemed to inform one another for her. In "Trip," the fear she confessed to having was linked to the horses she was driving. "That is when I drove a pair of train horses 40 miles until they could get a driver who was not afraid of them," Rankin wrote. Her fear of the horses seems not to have deterred her ability, however, given the long stretch of road she covered. It is unclear why the Mule Train needed her to drive this portion of the journey. The number of pilgrims continued to fluctuate over the course of the pilgrimage as the caravan picked up some participants and lost others. One newcomer-pilgrim picked up as recent as Duck Hill identified Columbus as the place of his early departure from the Mule Train for Resurrection

City. He, too, cited what a hostile reception they received there.<sup>391</sup> Perhaps Rankin filled a vacancy left behind by a wagon driver.

Regardless the reason for taking up the reins at this point in the trip, Rankin clearly associated driving with the peril pilgrims faced when crossing community borders. Though the two accounts differ as to what border was actually crossed – a state line or a city limit – driving the horses seemed to heighten Rankin’s awareness that certain stretches of the road were more firmly fixed within the grip of local power structures who resisted the mission of the PPC. Approaching a new community or social space presented pilgrims with new opportunities for being received or rejected. Rankin’s nervous anticipation of crossing civic borderlines became most apparent when she wrote about her time driving the wagon.

In Rankin’s accounts, driving the horses and crossing civic lines were marked by vigilance and resolve. She did not credit the hateful vituperations spewed at pilgrims with causing her fear. According to Rankin, the hateful name calling only deepened her resolve to continue driving the horses, which she actually did fear. White resistance galvanized Rankin’s resolve to face her fears rather than diminish in the face of adversity. Likewise, having antagonists covertly attempt to free the mules – presumably during the night when the animals were kept in barns and pastures while the Mule Train pilgrims slept – only emboldened PPC participants to work diligently together. Rankin identified these attempts at thwarting the Mule Train mission to further illustrate the way pilgrims looked after one another and worked toward a common goal.

The third common episode in Rankin’s two Mule Train accounts involves a shooting near a railroad track and describes how the FBI responded. Unlike the previous two episodes, Rankin

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<sup>391</sup> Interview with Jimmy Davis Avery conducted by Al White, Fall 2017. Video archived at *Action, Communication, and Education Reform*, nonprofit organization, 610 Headstart, Duck Hill, MS 38925.

named the community with consistency in both accounts and pointed out geographical traits in the landscape that offer details of her traumatic experience. While the *amount* of detail Rankin offers about this episode differs in “Trip” and “Autobiography,” the two descriptions align completely, offering relative certainty that her memory of the events associated with the shooting near the railroad tracks in Eutaw, Alabama remained lucid long after the event occurred.

Rankin told the story briefly in “Trip”:

And then we left for Eutaw Ala. And that is where I was shot at down by a railroad track[.] The shot came from a hillside and I didn’t see know[sic] one. So after that I was kept under close guard by FBI.<sup>392</sup>

Rankin shared the same story with much more detail in “Autobiography”:

Then we moved on to Eutaw, Alabama and that is where I was shot at 2 times. I was taking the station wagon that was carrying the medication to a colored shop to have some repair work done ... when I got down by a train track 2 box cars came across when I had to cross ... they stop[ped] and then I had to stop and 2 shots from a shotgun was fired at the car ... when the first one was fired I fell down on the floor of the car ... then another shot was fired and that time the FBI had made their arrival ... they said, “Are you hurt Mrs. Rankin?” ... I said, “Know[sic] I am not hurt” ... he say, “Are you afraid to go on?” I said “no” and that time they ran up a hill to a tall building and found two white men ... they had to chase them and they caught them but I had gone to the shop. Then they brought me back and carried me to a private home and put me to bed for a few hours of rest and didn’t no one know where I was but the FBI and the lawyers.<sup>393</sup>

The latter retelling of the shots fired in Eutaw offers specific information about why Rankin was driving a vehicle, where she was going, and why she was delayed in this mission. Travelling among the mule-drawn wagons, various vehicles of purpose accompanied the caravan. Trucks loaded with food and diapers, hay and feed, and even portable toilets provided essential services for the pilgrims on the way.<sup>394</sup> On this occasion, Rankin identified one of the

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<sup>392</sup> Rankin, “Trip,” 2.

<sup>393</sup> Rankin, “Autobiography,” 7-8. Some punctuation and edits have been added for clarification.

<sup>394</sup> Gerald D. McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King, Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People’s Campaign* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 97.

vehicles as a station wagon that carried medical supplies for the group. Rankin was driving the car, apparently alone, to an auto shop owned by a black Eutaw resident for minor service or repair when she was delayed at a railroad crossing.

A story emerges around the details she offered, and though Rankin does not suggest it in her narrative, she seems to have become strategically positioned as a sitting duck, vulnerable to the aims of violent mischief-makers who fired two shots from a shotgun in her direction. Rankin wrote that someone moved two box cars into the intersection just as she approached the tracks, suggesting that the circumstances requiring her to stop were unusual and unrelated to a stop associated with daily train traffic. When the first shot was fired, Rankin dropped to the floorboard of the station wagon. She described the shot as the unmistakable blast from a shotgun. A second shot rang out and soon after, says Rankin, an unidentified number of FBI agents appeared at her car window to inquire about her wellbeing. They called her by name and asked her if she had been wounded: “Are you hurt, Mrs. Rankin?” She told them she had not been hurt and that she was not “afraid to go on.” It is unclear if the FBI agents’ expression “afraid to go on” referred to Rankin’s immediate task of delivering the station wagon to the auto shop or to the broader mission of the PPC travelling to Washington, D.C. Regardless the meaning implied, understood or re-conveyed, Rankin persisted on all accounts.

Following her interaction with the FBI in which she assured them she could continue the journey, Rankin attributed great agency to federal officers as she described how they responded to her perilous circumstances. A chase ensued whereupon the agents pursued two white men, presumably the shooters, up a hill in the vicinity of a tall building. While Rankin delivered the station wagon to the black-owned auto shop the FBI arrested, or at least detained for questioning, the men they believed to be the shooters. At this point the narrative took a curious turn. Rankin

described her following experiences in very passive language: she was “brought,” “carried,” and “put to bed” in a private home. Granted, she had no means of transportation after delivering the automobile used in the service of the PPC to the mechanic, and she probably needed a ride. She punctuated the initiative of the officers who directed her retreat to a private residence, however, by emphasizing that no one knew where she was, only the FBI and the [SCLC] lawyers.

Rankin did not specify if she enjoyed this treatment or if she experienced a heightened level of insecurity associated with her anonymous whereabouts. On one hand, she had been looked after and offered a level of comfort and reprieve from the journey. Officers had arrested those who sought her harm. She rested in a bed free from the scrutiny of a potentially hostile public. On the other hand, Rankin had been separated from the other pilgrims who did not know where she was being kept. Though this scenario highlighted the protection FBI agents offered, not all of Rankin’s interactions with federal officers were amicable during the campaign. As she mentioned at the close of “Trip,” the FBI kept a close watch on her following the shooting, perhaps helping to cement the reputation police officers attached to her as a troublemaker.<sup>395</sup> Had she not named the SCLC lawyers among those who knew about the location of her retreat in a private home, Rankin’s experience there easily could be interpreted as rendering her vulnerable, yet again, just following the situation she barely escaped at the railroad tracks.

This episode speaks to the experiences of Rankin and other Mule Train pilgrims and how they moved fluidly between moments when they asserted absolute autonomy and agency as emboldened activists, but found themselves, at other times, subject to situations in which they had little to no control. Participating in the Mule Train forced pilgrims to become active *and* passive agents; they were always both acting and being acted upon within stressful

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<sup>395</sup> Rankin, “Trip,” 3. Rankin writes, “And when I got in jail in D.C. the policeman said to me, ‘Well, lady, they tell me you have been making trouble all the way up.’”

circumstances. Whether performing the grand procession of public theater or fulfilling the menial responsibilities associated with a travelling community, Mule Train activists cloaked themselves in vulnerability as pilgrims of primitive means who journeyed along American highways of commerce and expediency. This vulnerability, however, was not merely a hazard of communicating the message of the Poor People's Campaign, *it was the message*.<sup>396</sup>

The final episode that appeared in both of Annie Rankin's written Mule Train accounts recorded the pause of the Poor People's Campaign caravan at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. By this time the Mule Train pilgrims had travelled more than 300 miles for three and a half weeks. They had enjoyed festive, carnival-like atmospheres where the campaign was celebrated in places like Marks and Grenada. They had been led and inspired by charismatic leaders, such as Hosea Williams and Willie Bolden, who through their dynamic oratory persuaded additional numbers to join the cause. The Mule Train had weathered the elements, enduring long and heavy rain showers at the outset of the journey followed by heat and humidity of the early southern summer. The pilgrims had also endured adversity in the form of dangerous behaviors and threats. Drivers of cars sought to provoke and unsettle the mules by swerving in and out of the wagon line. Youth threw cans and bottles from pick-up truck windows at the Mule Train.<sup>397</sup> Some fired guns to scare the mules and horses.<sup>398</sup> Pilgrims received disparaging shouts and comments from the road: "Go home and go to work!"<sup>399</sup> The

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<sup>396</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), p 7: "...the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology." I would add to this quote, "or any *old* technology."

<sup>397</sup> Thomas Corpora, UPI, "Mule Train Heads for Grenada," *Daily Sentinel Star*, Thursday, May 16, 1968. Panola County Sheriff Forrest Tuttle identified the group as Kenneth Avant, Roy Smith, Jerry Self, and Billy Winters, all of Panola County, MS.

<sup>398</sup> Hilliard Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train: Marks, Mississippi – Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Origin of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign Mule Train*, (Xlibris LLC, 2014), p84.

<sup>399</sup> Rankin, "Trip," 2.

Birmingham stop galvanized marchers by providing space to reflect on the sacrifices of those who had gone before them in the struggle for civil rights.

Annie Rankin described the Mule Train's interval in Birmingham in both written accounts of the Mule Train, expressing strong sentiment in each that this was a place for remembering the four girls killed in the church bombing and a place to memorialize Senator Robert Kennedy who was recently shot on his presidential campaign trail. Rankin described the mood at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as sad. Here is how she narrated this portion of the Mule Train journey in "Trip" and "Autobiography," respectively:

Then we left for Birmingham, Ala. and there we went to the church where the 4 little girls got bombed and it is so Sad on the inside. And that is where [we] had our Memorial Service for Senator Kennedy. And we stayed there 4 days and then we left...<sup>400</sup>

And then we moved on to Birmingham, Alabama and that is where I had a chance to see the church where the [4] little girls got bombed. That is where we had a Memorial Service for Sen Robert Kennedy and was it sad.<sup>401</sup>

Rankin used the word "sad" in each account to describe her experience at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In "Trip," Rankin used the word to refer to the building where the four girls were killed. She seemed to describe the physical atmosphere as sad, perhaps as it still bore the material effects that marked the building as a site of tragedy. There may have lingered tributes to the deceased posted by members of the congregation or Rankin may have observed structural disrepair that lingered from the explosion five years earlier. Remembering what happened to the four girls rendered the very edifice "sad," according to Rankin. In "Autobiography," on the other hand, Rankin reserved her use of the word "sad" for describing the Memorial Service for Senator Kennedy. The "it" of "was it sad" modified the service. It is clear from Rankin's two accounts

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<sup>400</sup> Rankin, "Trip," 2.

<sup>401</sup> Rankin, "Autobiography of Mrs. Annie James Rankin," 9. In this version of her experiences, Rankin mistakenly recorded the church as the place where 2 little girls died in the bombing.

that the Mule Train paused at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to give space for reflecting on martyrs lost in the struggle, both past and present.

In addition to the four common episodes that appeared in Rankin's handwritten accounts, dialogue occupied an important place in her narrative. While she often told what she or another person said at different points in the journey, Rankin actually quoted other speakers in six conversations of significance. Furthermore, five of those six conversations involved police and three took place during Rankin's time in jail. The first conversation appears in Rankin's preface to her account of the Mule Train in "Autobiography." The conversation occurred in Jackson, Mississippi where Rankin was arrested with other demonstrators for marching on the State Capital in 1965.<sup>402</sup> Rankin wrote about the second conversation she shared with the FBI when gunfire rang out near the train tracks in Eutaw, Alabama. A third conversation involved a black farmer in Bessemer, Alabama who resisted an encouragement from pilgrims to join the Mule Train. Rather than respond to the activists he turned to the local sheriff to ensure protection. Rankin, also, recorded words she had for the Justice Department when the caravan was arrested in Douglasville, Georgia and revealed what State Troopers told the marchers as they left the jail that day. A fifth conversation in Rankin's account of her Mule Train experience included the reaction of folk who anticipated the arrival of the mule-drawn wagons when the pilgrims arrived in Alexandria, Virginia. The people of the Mule Train and the mules of the Mule Train had been separated for this leg of the journey, and Rankin shared her response to those who inquired about the procession. The final conversation Rankin recorded occurred in the context of her incarceration in Washington, D.C. following a demonstration on Capitol Hill. This quote

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<sup>402</sup> This conversation is recorded in her Autobiography during the preface to the Mule Train account where she provided context for understanding her life as an activist. Though it appears outside of the Mule Train journey, the dialogue sheds light on Rankin's character and tenacity in the struggle for black freedom.



appeared in the form of a monologue in which Rankin simultaneously addressed imprisoned PPC activists and framed her personal philosophy in the fight for justice. The following will examine these conversations in context, highlighting ways Rankin sought to express herself both in the moment of speech itself and in the instance of writing about these conversations to the Stewarts.

The first conversation Rankin documented took place in Jackson, Mississippi where Rankin was arrested with other demonstrators for marching on the State Capital in 1965. Though this episode occurred prior to her Mule Train experiences, the dialogue demonstrates ways Rankin addressed injustice and indicates ways her experiences on the Mule Train may have impacted her understanding of human rights. Rankin begins the encounter by describing the inhumane conditions she endured in jail, particularly at meal time. During the seven days of her imprisonment, Rankin said she only ate full meals for two of them, standing in solidarity with “two old ladies” who only ate soup and crackers the other five days. The following dialogue occurred at one of those meal times as prisoners performed clean-up detail:

When they would fix our food they would put a box of pepper to one person[’s] plate and they would stir our food up like dog food. They would mix white potatoes and grits and eggs together. And we had real large garbage can[s] sitting out in the yard with gas burners running under them. And we would have to wash the trays in them and the water was boiling...I was sticking my tray down in one and I was letting one end cool....

The police said to me, “You, red-eyed n---r, turn that dam tray on around and wash it!”

I replied back to him, “I am a human[.] I don’t have no tongs on my body... I am going to let it cool, you hear?”

And he said to me, “If you don’t go on and dip that dam tray I will hit you on your ass!”

And I said, “Yes, if you hit me I [will] scarle [sic: ‘scald’] your got dam eyes out!” Then they [at]tempted to punch me in my side with their billy stick and I told them, “Yes, if you punch me with that stick, your mother won’t know you when she see you, old white Honkey!”<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Rankin, “Autobiography,” 2-3.

Rankin's interaction with the police officer includes the use of racial epithets, threats of violence, and an argument for the dignity of humanity. When the white male officer perceived that his black female prisoner was not cleaning the dinner tray as efficiently as he desired, he castigated Rankin, called her a "red-eyed n----r" and implored her to get busy cleaning. When she defended her method of washing the tray due to the extreme heat of the boiling water, the officer escalated his reprimand to a threat, promising Rankin he would beat her into submission. Rankin defied his authority, however, countering his weapon of sanctioned abuse, the billy stick, with the very material she sought to protect herself from in the encounter: the boiling water she was required to use to clean her tray. Presumably, the tray itself also became a medium by which Rankin proposed to defend herself as it offered the means for Rankin to distribute or splash boiling water from the garbage can to the face of the officer. By the end of the story, the one officer had become plural – "then *they* tempted to punch me in the side with *their* billy stick" – but Rankin continued to address the man who first threatened her, wielding her own threat of violence with a racial appellation. "If you punch me with that stick, your mother won't know you when she see you, old white Honkey!" The dialogue and the story end on Rankin's counter-threat and the autobiographical narrative quickly advances to a different scenario that same year when she joined a protest against racial violence in Louisiana. In this subsequent account she and others demonstrated for ten days against the Klan murder of a black policeman.<sup>404</sup> Rankin's trials in her written accounts seem not to end or resolve so much as continue in new places, transferring dialogue and conflict from site to site in the recorded narrative.

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<sup>404</sup> Rankin identifies the murder victim as "one of the first Negro policeman" in Bogalusa, Louisiana. The Southern Poverty Law Center records the shootings of Washington Parish Deputies Oneal Moore and Creed Rogers in June 1964 that left Moore dead and Rogers blind in one eye. The crime was never solved. "Klan Murder Shines Light on Bogalusa, LA," *Intelligence Report* (Summer, 2009), Southern Poverty Law Center website, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2009/klan-murder-shines-light-bogalusa-la>. Accessed June 1, 2020.

Rankin's immediate response to the police officer helps to frame her rationale for defending herself against the threats of her jailer and offers insight into how she appropriated the language of the Poor People's Campaign for remembering and recording previous conflict with police. In response to the officers' instruction and racial slur, Rankin recorded that she asserted a mantra of the campaign in Washington, D.C. Rankin broadened the "I Am A Man" slogan that Memphis sanitation strikers had printed on broadsides and that Jesse Jackson heralded in Resurrection City to a more gender inclusive version of the declaration: "I am a human." To illustrate the many layers of meaning at work in constructing memory, consider this description when applied to the previous sentence: Rankin recorded in 1969 a conversation that took place in 1965, inserting language into her own mouth that became meaningful for her in 1968.

Rankin's use of the "I am a human" phrase communicates both human dignity and limitation in the context of her recorded interchange with Jackson police. She clearly responds to the racial slur from the officer with an affirmation of her humanity, but pairs it with her rationale for why she did not dip the entire tray in the boiling water. Rankin chases "I am a human" with "I don't have no tongs on my body," further explaining the danger her body faced when expected to follow the instructions from the jailer. While she feared scalding her hand, however, Rankin conveyed fearlessness when faced with police retaliation. In her story, police brutality did not hold mere potential for her as a prisoner, it was built into the very relationship of captor and captive, oppressor and oppressed. Her story of resistance in the face of police brutality, thus, opened the way for her to tell additional stories in which she spoke out against injustice on behalf of others. Therefore, though the story that followed this interchange in her autobiography involved a black policeman who suffered violence, the underlying message remained the same: Annie Rankin defended the dignity of human persons in the face of suffering, recognized the

limitations and frailty of human life, and confronted powers that sought to disavow human dignity and exploit human vulnerability – both when that person was herself and when it was another.

Rankin's account of an interchange with a black farmer in Bessemer, Alabama discloses the peril local blacks faced when propositioned to align themselves with Poor People's Campaign members passing through their town. During the course of a potential business transaction the pilgrims encouraged a man with two mules for sale to join them on the journey. Rather than respond to the activists, the man – presumably a black Alabaman – cursed and found the sheriff to assure local authorities that he was not interested in joining the ranks of the Poor People's Campaign. By directing his words away from the pilgrims who addressed him and to the county sheriff, the man rendered the conversation with PPC pilgrims rather one-sided. Here is how Rankin recorded the story:

Then we pulled out 2 days later for Bessemer, Alabama, another little shag town. And we offered to buy a pair of mules from a man and he said he wanted \$800.00 dollars for his pair mules. And we told him, "Come on, brother, go with us!"

And he curst [sic] and ran and told the Sheriff and said he didn't want to go. But we were still carrying on Dr. King's Dream. And we had to go.<sup>405</sup>

Rankin does not offer a reason for why the Mule Train sought to purchase additional mules, though she does give specific details about the negotiation. Reports of mule deaths circulated in the press and accusations of animal mistreatment beset the campaign for much of the journey.<sup>406</sup> Whereas the Mule Train pilgrims extended a conciliatory hand to the farmer – they "offered to buy" his mules and extended an invitation to join them – Rankin indicated the mule owner resisted associating with the campaign by gouging the price of the mule team and

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<sup>405</sup> Rankin, "Autobiography," 8-9.

<sup>406</sup> Kent Gardner, "Attention Cast on Mules' Welfare," *The Commercial Appeal*, 24 May, 1968.

rejecting their offer to join the campaign. While the sale itself does not seem crucial to Rankin's storytelling – for she omits further information about the transaction, which most likely was aborted given the way the negotiation played out – the reaction of the farmer to PPC pilgrims offers clues for understanding how some local residents bargained with local powers to preserve their livelihood.

Rankin implied that the black farmer from Bessemer faced peril if he associated with the campaign as a resident in a community with other white residents and white law enforcement. Rankin gestured to Bessemer as a racially-mixed community by her description of the community as “another little shag town,” and she distinguished it as a site of resistance from the “all negro area” where pilgrims enjoyed “a big mass meeting out in the wide open” on their next stop. The next stop, said Rankin, was in Anniston, Alabama, though she situated the story between Bessemer and Birmingham. Bessemer lies fifteen miles southwest of Birmingham and Anniston lies sixty miles due east of Birmingham toward Atlanta. The Mule Train travelled through Bessemer, Birmingham, and Anniston in that order. Rankin seemed to confuse the chronology in order to clarify a point about resistance and acceptance of the campaign mission. According to Rankin, the black farmer of Bessemer suffered pressure from the community to disassociate himself from the campaign when he appealed to the sheriff. She contrasted this against the reception of the Mule Train in an all-black area near Anniston. Here, she said, “a rich northerner” freely joined the pilgrimage. “We didn't have very much trouble there,” Rankin described about their stay in the black section of Anniston.<sup>407</sup>

In addition to Rankin's dispute with police in a Jackson, Mississippi jail, her exchange with the FBI in Eutaw, Alabama, and the Bessemer farmer fleeing to the white sheriff, Rankin

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<sup>407</sup> Rankin, “Autobiography,” 9.

also recorded words she reserved for the Justice Department when the Mule Train caravan was arrested in Douglasville, Georgia. A United Press International telephoto captured images of the Georgia State Troopers leading the Mule Train off the exit ramp of Interstate 20 in Douglasville, depicting police as field hands who corralled the wagons away from commercial traffic.<sup>408</sup> Rankin reported that police detained all 126 pilgrims for eight hours, demanding a \$12,600 fine from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for the Mule Train's infraction of the law forbidding nonmotorized vehicles on the highway. Rankin recorded how she drew the attention of the Justice Department to the indiscretion State Troopers exercised when handling minors:

We then moved on for Georgia and when we got to Douglasville, Georgia, that is where we got eggs thrown on us and also that is where we went in jail for 8 hours and that is where they even charge[d] a little 8 month old baby a \$100.00 on [a] Hundred Dollar fine. That [is] when I [took] action on Governer Maddock [sic].<sup>409</sup> I call[ed] the Justice Department and ask[ed], "Was it leglar [sic] to fine a baby \$100.00 who had to depend on its mother?" And they took quick action.

The ... State Troopers said they was going to turn us over to the Georgia boys and they would handle us. Then we moved on to Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>410</sup>

While Rankin did not offer specific information about how she gained access to the Justice Department or whom she contacted within it, she recognized her complaint as a battle she waged personally against Governor Lester Maddox. Known for his segregationist platform, the Georgia Governor represented the ideology that produced roadways designed to restrict Black Americans from fully participating in society.<sup>411</sup> Rather than attack the racist platform of the

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<sup>408</sup> "Moving Mule Train – Douglasville, GA," *Call and Post (1962-1982) City Edition; Cleveland, OH*, UPI Telephoto, June 29, 1968, 1b. Caption: "GA State Troopers lead the MT off the ramp to the Interstate highway here June 14. 126 members of the Poor People's connected to the Mule Train, were arrested when they refused to obey the law stating that nonmotor driven vehicles were not allowed on the highway."

<sup>409</sup> Georgia Governor Lester Maddox.

<sup>410</sup> Rankin, "An Autobiography of Mrs. Annie James Rankin," p 10. Rankin mistakenly called the State Troopers the "Alabama State Troopers" in this story, even though they are clearly in Georgia.

<sup>411</sup> See Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, for demonstrating how the mapping of highways sought to physically separate blacks from whites.

Governor, Rankin pointed out that the fine included minors, one as young as eight-months old, and thereby broke federal laws that protected minors from legal responsibility.

Rankin's record of the arrest and release acknowledges federal intervention for PPC pilgrims and gestures toward the threats state police wielded at marchers when discharged. We may surmise that her query to the Justice Department preceded the release of the pilgrims from prison by her description of the response from the federal officers: "And they took quick action." As the members of the Mule Train left the confines of jail to continue the journey, however, state troopers assured pilgrims they had not escaped the ubiquitous presence of southern white power. Troopers aligned themselves with white vigilance against perceived black criminality when they told the Mule Train that though police were freeing them from jail, they were turning pilgrims over to "the Georgia boys" who would handle the activists moving forward.

The Mississippi marchers were familiar with such tactics to thwart activists' mission to shed light on injustice. In 1964 police in Philadelphia, MS conspired with local Klan members to arrest three Freedom Summer activists on a trumped-up traffic violation. While James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner sat in a Neshoba County jail, white supremacists mobilized themselves to do violence to the activists when police released the three. The "Mississippi Burning" case, or MIBURN file for the FBI, documents corruption in the southern police department that ended in the deaths of the three CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] workers.<sup>412</sup> Annie Rankin suggests that in the case of the Mule Train, State Troopers also threatened such retaliation for engaging in civil rights work.

Two final conversations embedded in Rankin's account offer insight into her personal motivation for engaging in the Poor People's Campaign. Rankin included her response to folk

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<sup>412</sup> For more on the Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner case see Seth Cagin's *We Are Not Afraid*, Florence Mars's *Witness in Philadelphia*, and William Bradford Huie's *Three Lives for Mississippi*.

who anticipated the arrival of the mule-drawn wagons when the pilgrims arrived in Alexandria, Virginia, and shared a rousing monologue before a group of PPC workers after being arrested in Washington, D.C. Leading up to the first of the two addresses, Rankin described her journey with two other women and one man of the Mule Train as they travelled from Atlanta to Virginia by station wagon. The marchers had been separated from the mules of the Mule Train for this leg of the journey, but they continued to broadcast their mission by writing phrases on the side of the car as they had done on the wagon canvases throughout the pilgrimage. Rankin said she personally wrote the messages, “You killed the dreamer but you haven’t killed the dream,” and, “We are the dream.”<sup>413</sup> Rankin recorded that the travelers received both supportive and antagonistic reactions. Here is how she described her interaction with folk who seemed disappointed by the lack of mules and wagons with the arrival of pilgrims to Resurrection City:

People were everywhere asking, “Where is the Mule Train?”

I replied, “It is on its way.”

“Well, what [happened]?” they ask[ed].

I said, “Well, it was rough, and it was so good to be able to make [it]. I have always had it hard and I can take it. You see, I [am] not one of those kind who will send you and I sit back. I don’t send you, I lead you. I go first and you follow. If there is something bad, I enter first.”<sup>414</sup>

Similar to the words she inscribed on the sides of the station wagon, Rankin communicated her conviction that the people of the pilgrimage represented the Mule Train and the broader Poor People’s Campaign in spite of the absence of mules and wagons. “*We* are the dream,” she wrote on the car. Now in Washington, she seemed to reinforce the message *we* are the Mule Train. Rankin unveiled her approach to activism for those anticipating the spectacle of mules and wagons. The trip was difficult, she admitted, but she was used to adversity, and she grounded her participation in the Poor People’s Campaign in her philosophy to engage in the

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<sup>413</sup> Rankin, “Autobiography,” 10-11.

<sup>414</sup> Rankin, “Autobiography,” 11.



freedom struggle. “I am not one of those kind who will send you and I sit back. I don’t send you, I lead you,” Rankin wrote, putting to rest any notion that the Mule Train pilgrims were latecomers to the Poor People’s Campaign. Though residents of Resurrection City may have demonstrated in Washington, D.C. for several weeks, Rankin reminded PPC activists of her and the Mule Train pilgrims’ continual arrival to potentially hostile territory as they entered the many towns and cities throughout the South: “I don’t send you, I lead you. I go first and you follow. If there is something bad, I enter first.” Make no mistake, promised Rankin, she and the Mule Train were leaders in the Poor People’s Campaign, not followers.

The final conversation Rankin recorded occurred following her arrest on Capitol Hill June 20, the day after Solidarity Day rallies at the Washington Monument.<sup>415</sup> Rankin’s five days in jail served as the backdrop for an address she directed to her fellow workers. It is unclear if this monologue took place in prison or represents words she shared upon reuniting with other activists after her release. Regardless of the scenario, Rankin used the context of imprisonment to narrate her personal philosophy of the fight for justice for poor Americans in her correspondence with the Stewarts.

I did not come here for the sweet name I would have. I did not come here just to be seen but to help our race overcome. I did not come here to say what I didn’t mean and mean what I didn’t say. But I came here to say what I mean and mean what I say. I came to speak not only for myself but for the many poor people back in the Mississippi valleys where I have lived for all my life. And not just for one race but for all poor people regardless race or creed. Poor people is my motto because I am poor. I [am] not like some people who are black and are wearing white hearts. The meaning of that: feeling like these White Honkies love them, helping them to destroy the poor. That [is] not right. I am for Justice and the only way it will happen we have got to get together. I am still fighting for freedom although it doesn’t seem like I am doing very [much], but I still try to fight

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<sup>415</sup> A unique feature of Annie Rankin’s spelling renders the word solidarity in Solidarity Day to appear and, thus, sound when spoken, much more like solitary: spelled both “soltaire” and “soltarie.” Given that Rankin’s misspellings tended to reflect colloquial pronunciation [Example: Rankin spells the word “scald” with an ‘r’ – “scarle” – reflecting the way she pronounced the word], it is quite possible that every time Rankin referred to the June 19 – or Juneteenth – celebration at Capitol Hill, she called it Solitary Day instead of Solidarity Day, rendering a very different meaning for the occasion.

more. Sometime I gets some very good answers. And I am going to keep on until I get the right answers. And let me say I don't want my living to be in vain. I am working hard to help build a wall of peace and Justice. This is my motto.

There is no escape through Law of man or God from the inevitable. The laws of Changeable Justice bind oppressor with oppressed; and close as sin and suffering, joined, we are marching against Hate.<sup>416</sup>

Rankin's final address speaks to her desire to see an end to poverty, to witness a fresh start in racial collaboration for ending poverty, and to envision a justice that restores those who have been oppressed as well as their oppressors. Rankin expressed a desire to end poverty for the poor, regardless of their race or belief system. "Poor people is my motto," said Rankin, indicating that the plight of the poor motivated her activism. She counted herself among the poor and vowed to continue fighting for justice. To neglect engaging in the struggle for overcoming poverty would have amounted to an abdication of responsibility for Rankin. She repeated that this was her motto and expressed a curious statement about her efforts to eliminate poverty: "I am working hard to build a wall of peace and justice." Given Rankin's contributions to the Black Freedom struggle, the latter sentence about "building a wall of peace and justice" – rather than tearing down a wall that prevented peace and justice – reveals her mindfulness that overcoming poverty requires more than the elimination of obstacles. Something had to be built. Perhaps it became clear to Rankin that as southern institutions failed to fully integrate, language about tearing down walls remained insufficient. A just society required new structures and she was willing to help build them.

During the short speech Rankin recorded she blamed a particular kind of racial collaboration with undermining cooperation among people that would usher in true change for

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<sup>416</sup> Rankin, "Autobiography," 13. Rankin's Autobiographical account ends with this monologue. The final sentence is incomplete and the remaining text is missing from the archive. The account ends, "The laws of Changeable Justice bind oppressor with oppressed; and close as sin and suffering, joined, we are marching against Hate,..."

the poor. She called out black people who wore “white hearts,” arguing that these provided the means for whites bent on exploiting the poor to continue in their ruse. Black folk wearing white hearts had been fooled, said Rankin, by persisting in the belief that the “White Honkies” loved them. She reiterated that justice was the mission, not love, and that working together in the mission provided the solution.

Rankin credited “the laws of changeable justice” with binding the oppressed with their oppressors in the fight to overcome poverty. Borrowing from language Dr. King employed as early as his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Rankin emphasized the need for judicial reform concerning economic inequity. King wrote in 1963 that the oppressor would not voluntarily offer freedom to the oppressed, but that the oppressed must demand freedom from the oppressor – an idea consistent with the notion motivating pilgrims to petition a power complex for change.<sup>417</sup> Rankin rearranged King’s words to assert the idea that the laws supporting justice not only needed to change, but that society’s notion of justice itself required reform. Rather than work for changeable laws, Rankin worked toward “changeable justice.” She was fully aware that in order to meet the needs of the poor, Americans’ ideas about justice required a transformation. Until American citizens and politicians viewed poverty as unjust, Rankin argued, changing laws will only produce different versions of inequity.

The Mule Train accounts Rankin recorded offer a unique window into the daily travel of a pilgrim who recounted her personal fears, her hostile interactions with police and community members, and her mission to overcome poverty. Rankin’s relationship with the Stewarts of Rhode Island provided an exchange built on trust and mutuality that allowed her to share her

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<sup>417</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute website, Stanford University, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf).

experiences with a broader public. Their correspondence included a host of other features about daily life in Mississippi and the hardships she and her family faced in Fayette. Rankin openly shared about her declining health and the tenuous nature of her relationship with husband Judge. She regularly reminded the Stewarts of expenses associated with her five children.

Rankin's journey on the Mule Train, however, provided a liminal passage that she employed to both consider and present herself as a freedom fighter waging war on poverty. Joining the Mule Train as a pilgrim granted Rankin the space and time to express herself as an individual free from the responsibilities and strictures associated with daily life at home and to articulate her personal mission to overcome racialized injustice. The pilgrimage served as the context for Rankin's personal journey toward change as well as the backdrop for narrating her passion to transform the lives of Black Americans suffering in poverty.

CHAPTER FIVE  
THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN PILGRIM, PART TWO:  
EDDIE LEE WEBSTER, JR. AND THE PROMISE FOR NEW OPPORTUNITY

Two years prior to the start of the Poor People's Campaign, Dr. King traveled to Marks, Mississippi and surveyed the living conditions of Quitman County residents. King visited school classrooms and talked with children while he was in the area to discuss their experiences in life, their dreams and ambitions. During one visit King asked a student what he wanted to do with his life. The young man told King he did not have much hope for achieving his dreams. In fact, the youth concluded, his future would hold more promise if he had been born white.<sup>418</sup> While the student who expressed deep discontent for life prospects as a black youth remains unnamed, a host of young southerners shared his dilemma.

When King spoke with the young man in Marks in 1966, Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. was fifteen years old. He lived with a godmother who raised him as her own in a small Mississippi community that bore the deep fissures of racial inequity. The young man who told King his opportunities were limited due to the color of his skin articulated young Webster's circumstances as clearly as Webster could have expressed them himself. Webster's account of the Poor People's Campaign forty-eight years later demonstrates that by the time he left home with the Mule Train for Washington, D.C. in 1968, he hoped to expand his opportunities by joining the SCLC journey promising potential for young, black Mississippians. Participating in the Mule Train, according to Webster, offered an escape to the immediate strictures of daily life in

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<sup>418</sup> Hilliard Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin and the Mule Train: Marks, Mississippi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Origin of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign Mule Train*, (Xlibris, 2014), 14, 21.

Quitman County, allowing him opportunities to visit new places, to encounter a variety of people, to consider new and different ideas, and to begin to articulate in himself values that might guide his life.

This chapter is based on two interviews the author conducted with a member of the Mule Train forty-eight years after the Poor People's Campaign.<sup>419</sup> In March and April, 2016, I sat down with 65-year-old Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. who was seventeen years old when he joined the Mule Train from Quitman County, where he lived with his family. Considering the length of time between the actual event and the interviews, Webster's account of his Mule Train experience offers important components for understanding ways he sought to make sense of the pilgrimage. Unlike the study of Annie Rankin's meaning-making process in her retelling of the Mule Train, Webster's retelling includes passages through various life stages and includes reflection on his youth. Webster's account of the Poor People's Campaign intermingles notions of youthful ambition with the nostalgia he came to embrace about his boyhood and, therefore, serves as a valuable case study in memory studies in addition to its capacity to shed light on certain facets of the experience shared by the community of pilgrims. A brief comparison of the Rankin accounts and the Webster interviews follows to demonstrate ways Webster created unique meanings when telling his story and to emphasize the importance of memory studies for examining the Mule Train as a pilgrimage.

Though Annie Rankin and Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. spoke to their experiences of a shared event during May and June of 1968, the accounts of the two pilgrims differ dramatically in form and constitution. In addition to the fact that nearly fifty years lay between the telling of their

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<sup>419</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster Jr. by Chet Bush, conducted March 16, 2016 and April 14, 2016 in Marks, MS. "A Story of the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train," *Mississippi Stories* website, Center for the Study of Southern Culture. <https://mississippistories.org/story/a-story-of-the-poor-peoples-campaign-mule-train/>. Accessed, January 30, 2021.

stories, the accounts vary with regard to audience, medium, and how the historic event fit into the life context of each individual. Whereas Rankin wrote her accounts for out-of-state supporters with whom she had built a personal relationship – the Stewarts of Rhode Island, who shared with Rankin emotional and financial investment – Webster recited his story face to face before a student whose relationship to the source remained limited to Mule Train research. Though Rankin wrote both her accounts within one to two years of the event, discrepancies in the two written accounts reveal ways she sought to represent and remember herself during and shortly after the Poor People's Campaign. Webster, on the other hand, presented no internal discrepancies in his two interviews yet deviated in dramatic ways from public accounts of the episode. These discrepancies reveal ways he sought to make sense of his personal experiences during the forty-eight years he ruminated on them. Finally, Rankin fit her account of the Mule Train within a broader personal engagement with the Black Freedom struggle around the state and beyond while Webster indicated that the Poor People's Campaign and the events in Marks leading up to it remained his only form of activism. Though he talked about the campaign as belonging to a broader civil rights crusade for black uplift, Webster said he personally never participated in another act of public demonstration on behalf of the movement. The differences in form deserve attention not only for considering the contexts that impacted how each pilgrim recounted a meaningful episode, but also for revealing the ways those meanings, once adopted, came to govern the very act of remembering.

Webster made two significant assertions during the oral interviews that contradict the public record yet provide insight into the meaning he came to attach to his experiences over the years. Webster's first assertion posits Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Mule Train narrative as a real and interactive human presence even though the SCLC leader was killed one month prior to

the launch of the Poor People's Campaign. In his second assertion, Webster claimed that he did not merely drive the mule-drawn wagon to Atlanta, where the public account documents the caravan disassembling the wagons, shipping them and the mules to Virginia, then taking a train to Alexandria where they reassembled the convoy to ride into Washington. Rather, claimed Webster, he drove the wagon all the way to D.C., insisting that in spite of the public record he had completed the entire journey in the slow but persistent manner that characterized the fortitude of Mule Train pilgrims. The first assertion reveals that Webster confused the timeline concerning King's life and the Poor People's Campaign. He makes the second assertion, however, cognizant of the public narrative but intent on correcting the story according to his memory of it. Both accounts speak to ways Webster came to attach to his experiences on the journey notions of nurture from leaders and perseverance in pilgrims.

Memory studies scholar Alessandro Portelli appreciates discrepancies between fact and memory for the way history becomes enriched by new knowledge generated in the imaginative and creative enterprise of oral history. Whereas Portelli concludes, however, that "memory manipulates factual details and chronological sequence," I argue, here, that memory itself becomes limited or even manipulated by adopted truths and meanings one has attached to a historical moment.<sup>420</sup> My examination of Webster's recollection of easily debunkable assertions illustrates that, over time, his commitment to make sense of his encounters moved him to make claims that might undermine his credibility even as he seemed to want to strengthen the veracity of his story when making those claims. Discrepancies, as Portelli argues, often enrich history, and it seems clear that Webster's memory served the meaningful story he crafted over time. Webster remembered events that did not happen in order to tell a story of presence and

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<sup>420</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991), 26.



perseverance that he did experience. Pilgrimage studies fortunately provides the appropriate venue for considering and taking seriously the meanings pilgrims attach to experiences and how, in the meaning-making process, they can imagine and create new encounters for themselves that impact how they remember significant moments in their journeys.<sup>421</sup>

In addition to the meaningful contributions Webster's deviations from the public record offer for understanding one pilgrim's interpretation of his journey, his description of personal experiences in the campaign also enrich the broader Mule Train community narrative. Webster's story reminds us that the contexts from which pilgrims departed are as important to the narrative as those they entered. The remainder of this chapter now turns to Webster's childhood and early life experiences, followed by a brief nod to his life stage as a senior at the time of the interview and how it may have impacted his reflection on his youth, and, finally, the chapter closes with Webster's memories of the wagon journey.

The early life of Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. illustrates the important relationship he enjoyed with the woman who raised him and her influence on the choices he made. Born March 15, 1951, Webster spent short stints with his biological mother and father in Missouri, Arkansas and Tennessee before settling in Quitman County, Mississippi with his godmother following his parents' divorce. Webster's godmother Arizona Bradford adopted him as a toddler, along with his brother, his sister, and a young girl from another family who was close in age to the Webster children. Already in her forties, Bradford raised her four children on an eight-acre farm owned by Webster's maternal grandfather in Lambert, about three miles south of Marks. Bradford

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<sup>421</sup> A theme of Robert Orsi's book *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* deals with "the realness of sacred presence in the imaginations and experiences of religious practitioners and its fate in the modern world" (p 10). Orsi contends, "The saints, gods, demons, ancestors, and so on are real in experience and practice, in relationships between heaven and earth, in the circumstances of people's lives and histories, and in the stories people tell about them" (p 18).

married a man with four children of his own soon after Webster and his siblings moved to Mississippi. One of the ways Bradford cared for all eight children was to train them to work on the farm.

By the time he became old enough to attend school, Webster began contributing to the family labor on the small Quitman County farm. Though the property yielded a variety of crops and supported several livestock, Webster described his childhood, “I was raised in the cotton field.”<sup>422</sup> Upon arriving home from school each day, the children changed clothes and promptly tended to the needs of the farm. Chores included cutting wood, feeding chickens, milking cows, and shucking corn, but Webster’s more vivid memories belonged to the cotton field. He first picked cotton with his mother around the age of six. Bradford fastened a shoulder strap to a small flour sack so her son could stow the cotton he picked in a container suited to his size as he worked beside her. When young Webster filled his one-foot-deep sack he emptied it into the nine-foot bag his mother dragged behind her. As he grew, Webster graduated to larger cotton sacks and became more competitive as a worker. In his words:

I'll say this right here: I liked picking cotton, but I hated chopping cotton. I hated [it] because most of those rows be so grassy and full of weeds and they holler at you, “Well, come on!” [I’d say,] “Somebody come help me with this row!” Now, I love to pick cotton. I could pick cotton. I had an uncle, now, he could really pick some cotton. I used to race with him. We'd be side by side, you know, see who going to pick the fastest. Who going to fill up the sack the fastest. So I sort of enjoyed picking it. But that chopping it, nah!<sup>423</sup>

Recreation for the children came sparingly in and around responsibilities with school and farm work. Webster described the kids rushing to finish lunch during the middle of a summer work day so that they could play before returning to work in the fields. For a basketball goal they pulled the spokes out of an old bicycle wheel and mounted the rim on a tree. On Saturday nights

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<sup>422</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>423</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on April 14, 2016.

they felt lucky when an adult took them to town for ice cream. Bradford gave Webster strict instruction to remain and play near the drug store where they bought their ice cream, and to avoid the “low end of town” where the juke joints rocked. The enticement to observe adult recreation, however, lured the kids down the street. “Every now and then we’d sneak off to see the folks dancing,” Webster recalled.<sup>424</sup> Local juke joints offered an attractive alternative to a work-centered schedule, even for children.

Until he was able to afford purchasing a Ford tractor around 1966, Webster’s grandfather plowed the eight-acre farm with two mules. Webster recounted the unique personalities of the mules from his childhood as he reflected on his own participation in the Mule Train:

A little before I started driving the mules they got a tractor. [Until then] they had two mules, Buddy and Kate. Buddy was the type of mule they could let him out [of the barn, and] he would walk to the field and go up to the plow. Twelve o’clock he’d go back to the barn or lay down in the field. One o’clock he was ready to come back. Five o’clock he was ready to go home. He knew exactly what time to work and what time to quit. Kate just went along with Buddy. He was the lead. Wherever he went Kate went. I can’t remember what happened to those two once they got the tractor. I never knew what they did with those two mules. They were the only two mules that he [worked] the eight acres of land with.<sup>425</sup>

Though the children worked on the farm during the school year, Bradford emphasized the importance of a good education. She required them to complete homework in the evenings after chores and supper. After her kids became a little older, Bradford worked to ensure other children received educational opportunities by providing the resources to support their involvement. When local churches, Green Hill and Pleasant Ridge, began providing Head Start for young children, Bradford transported children to the program in her station wagon then prepared food for them from the vegetables she grew in her garden. She volunteered and invested her personal

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<sup>424</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on April 14, 2016.

<sup>425</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on April 14, 2016.

resources toward children's educational development for several years before government subsidies supported Head Start expenses.

Bradford found additional ways to work for change in the community. Known around town by her nickname, "Nu," Bradford and a friend named Nellie Mae campaigned for new leadership to represent the black community of Quitman County. One of their success stories involved their work to help a recent college graduate named Manuel Killebrew get elected as the first black County Supervisor in Beat 4.<sup>426</sup> Killebrew remains on the Board of Supervisors for Quitman County to this day in 2021.

Webster's progress in school prior to joining the Mule Train reflected the struggle black students endured as southern states resisted the United States Supreme Court *Brown v. Board* decision calling for integration of public education. Though records indicate Quitman County public schools remained racially segregated until the start of the 1968-1969 school year, Webster recounted integrating a white school in Lambert during his childhood.<sup>427</sup> He described his experience at the white school:

When I was going to Lambert school and they first integrated I think there was nine of us who crossed the track to go to the white school. We had to fight just about every day. We couldn't get caught by ourselves or we'd get beat up. During lunch, we'd sit at one table. In the playground we'd all go together. First day, you got stuff throwed at you, books knocked out of your hands, push you, trip you up. Later on things got to settling down.<sup>428</sup>

Webster attended school until the ninth grade, when he was expelled for fighting. Somehow, he managed to keep the information from his mother. To avoid going home during the school day,

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<sup>426</sup> Manuel Killebrew participated in the Poor People's Campaign by riding the Freedom Train bus from Marks to D.C. He stayed in Resurrection City until the Mule Train arrived five weeks later.

<sup>427</sup> Hilliard Lawrence Lackey, *Marks, Martin, and the Mule Train: Marks, Mississippi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Origin of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign Mule Train* (Xlibris, 2014), p. 29.

<sup>428</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on April 14, 2016.

he hung out at the building that housed the Youth Commission on Anderson Street in Marks where the Southern Christian Leadership Conference made inroads into the community.

Webster credits his mother with introducing him to local efforts for black uplift that had gotten underway at the Youth Commission. Rather than leave her kids home at night, said Webster, Bradford brought them to evening rallies where SCLC leaders exhorted local residents to confront racial inequities. Webster first heard Ralph Abernathy speak at a rally held on First Street. Following the meeting, Webster recounted that he and his mother had a conversation about his involvement in a SCLC strategy called the Poor People's Campaign. When he expressed interest in joining the cause, she implored him to do so with conviction. Webster assured his mother he would. By the time he reached seventeen years of age, Webster proudly bore the title of Vice President of the SCLC Youth Commission in Marks, Mississippi.

When the two oral interviews took place in 2016, Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. was forty-eight years removed from his experiences on the Mule Train and several more years removed from his childhood on the family farm. Recounting his early days positioned the sixty-five-year-old Webster to interpret various facets of his experiences through multiple layers of life phases. Webster returned as a senior adult to the area where he was raised after working manual labor jobs in several states. Subsisting on disability benefits due to a fourth heart attack at age 54, Webster found life more affordable in Marks than in New Orleans where he last worked. At the time of the interview, Webster continued to pay taxes on a vacant acre of his grandfather's property where Bradford raised him and his siblings, cherishing the land as "the only thing I

have of theirs to remind me of them or what it was like at one time.”<sup>429</sup> Bradford passed away at age 95 within a year of Webster’s return to Quitman County in late 2005.

Given Webster’s life stage at the time of his narration, it is important to consider how nostalgia or sentimentality might impact his recollection of his youth. This consideration does not undermine his testimony as a credible member of the Mule Train, but serves to explain the ways he narrates a meaningful story. Returning to Alessandro Portelli’s scholarship on oral history, it is important to remember that “memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings.”<sup>430</sup> Webster fashioned a story in 2016 that interpreted the ways his pilgrimage of 1968 had become meaningful for him.

Webster’s nostalgia in 2016, on the other hand, reveals clues for understanding the inspiration he witnessed in the community of travelers. Webster’s contemporary circumstances do not completely alter the episode he engaged in during 1968. In the same way memory is not a passive depository of facts, the present does not completely supplant the process of remembering. Recollection, rather, is an enterprise in reciprocity between past event and present narration. Pondering on the Mule Train may evoke sentimentality in Webster toward modern-day Marks just as his current one-acre family lot may cause him to become nostalgic for his childhood. Because something is meaningful at sixty-five does not mean it cannot be or was not meaningful at seventeen, or vice-versa. A brief overview of the ways Webster reflects on his early days, therefore, follows before entering into his account of Mule Train experiences.

Eddie Webster interpreted the early years of his life – that were marked by hard work on the farm, struggles in school, and a dearth of resources – as the best of days. Life was hard and

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<sup>429</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on April 14, 2016.

<sup>430</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?” Ch 3 of *The Oral History Reader, Second Edition*, Edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998, 2006), 37.

times were tough, said Webster, but looking back they were good days marked by tight social units of accountable community in which people looked after one another. Webster contrasted the memories he had of bonds between neighbors when he was a child against the cases of isolation he knew some people endured at the time of his interview.

Seems like nowadays people don't look out for each other no more. Back then people looked out for each other. Your mother or father got sick, these old men going to come out here, they're going to help the dad out, they're going to kill hogs for him, they're going to get the crops out. The women are going to go in, they're going to take care of your momma, clean the house and cook, do a round [of laundry]. And this was an everyday thing. Now people don't even look out for each other.<sup>431</sup>

As a male in his mid-sixties, Webster linked community assistance to an era characterized by strict gender role norms in which women and men performed work typified by their sex, and he disassociated links between poverty and crime by ignoring ways impoverishment during his boyhood era continued to limit current youth opportunities in the area. He pointed to violence, therefore, as a sign of moral breakdown, free from economic implications. "It was nice then," he continued. "But things change and people change and now everybody want to carry a gun, everybody want to shoot everybody. I would rather be back in those days," Webster concluded.<sup>432</sup> The cultural demise Webster named in his analysis of change fails to account for a continuity between past impoverishment and present economic limitations that might bear themselves out as an increase in crime.

Webster did gesture, however, toward opportunities he once found available in a local economy that drew its primary source of revenue from local farms and he lamented the absence of resources associated with the vanishing of agricultural day labor. By pointing to the prevalence of available work during his youth, Webster argued for the ease with which a person

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<sup>431</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>432</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

could obtain pay for their labor, even though it was severely limited. He described a kind of mobility that existed for workers between farms in need of extra labor even as the system exploited workers with menial compensation. “You could go anywhere,” he claimed. “[If] people needed help picking cotton, it wouldn’t pay a whole lot of money, but you could make money.”<sup>433</sup> In his analysis of the differences between the economic opportunity during the days of his childhood versus current forms of agency youth asserted in the area, Webster championed the mobility of laborers to choose work between farms over the capacity of residents to abandon agricultural work for its exploitative demand and discriminatory compensation.

Webster’s nostalgia for what he interpreted as a simpler time during his youth undergird his current thoughts on poverty as a condition from which people have the power to will themselves free. He described idyllic scenes between him and his mother to frame an environment in which hard work provided the space conducive for personal and social fulfillment. On the other hand, and perhaps in contradiction to his current beliefs about poverty, when not reminiscing about details of the past Webster was quick to point out inequities at work in society that motivated people to participate in catalytic events like the Poor People’s Campaign.

Telling the story about the unique relationship he enjoyed with Bradford allowed Webster to frame ways her influence became a dominant theme for interpreting his own career that manifested itself in various forms of manual labor. In addition to reminiscing about their times together in the cotton field, Webster described the way he sat near the feet of his mother while she patched and sewed pants, dresses, and quilts at her pedal-powered sewing machine. “I sat there many evenings. She’d be sewing and I’d sit on the end catching the material so that it

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<sup>433</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.



didn't pile up," Webster reflected.<sup>434</sup> He learned to sew by watching her work, he said, and eventually this knowledge paid off when he got a job working for a company in Illinois that sewed jeans for the Levi Strauss Company. Though he continued to name an assortment of jobs that he worked over the years – maintenance, cooking, job corps openings, and carpentry – Webster framed his labor in the context of his mother's domestic care for the family and in the way he managed to occupy a unique position near her, whether in the cotton field or at the sewing machine, in a family of eight children.

As early as the Marks marches Webster reveals that he engaged in public acts of protest with one eye open toward home. He frequently reflected on the praise or repercussions he might experience from his mother based on his involvement. At the youth office, after he had been expelled from school, he indicated fear that his mother might find out. In the Marks march to the courthouse, he expressed concern with other students who feared their parents would discover they had cut school to participate in the protest. Leaving with the Mule Train initially proved to be a way to fulfill something in his relationship with his mother. She had told him in effect, "Don't just go to do it, but do it because you mean it." Webster really wanted to mean it in this trip and his story displays ways he drew richly from his experiences in the journey in honor of his mother's admonition.

Webster's account of the Mule Train features him as both a leader in the campaign and as an observant adolescent taking in new and foreign experiences. His narrative positions him as the Vice President at the Youth Commission office, as a voice guiding the student marchers to remain calm at the Quitman County courthouse prior to the Mule Train launch, as a wagon driver during the journey who looked out for his riders, and as an activist who went to jail with key

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<sup>434</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on April 14, 2016.

leaders of the campaign. During his retelling, however, there are glimpses of the boy Webster who referred to “the adults” of the movement and who ran with the other students when pandemonium broke out at the courthouse.<sup>435</sup>

He reflected on humorous anecdotes that revealed his youthful perspective toward grownups. One such story involved an older man he and his classmates called “Pops.” Pops always wore tennis shoes and walked with the support of a cane. When Webster and the other students ran across the railroad tracks to flee police aggression in the courthouse dispersal they found Pops sitting with his cane in front of a local business, waiting for the rest of the crowd to return to the side of the tracks where the African American community resided. Remembering that Pops was also at the courthouse sit-in Webster mused to himself, “How did he beat me across the tracks?! I know he picked up the cane and run that day. He beat me across the tracks.”<sup>436</sup> Webster moved back and forth in the narrative between his experience as an observant boy watching the goings on and an authority figure leading the charge, a reflection of this liminal season during and after which he wrestled with how to understand and present himself.

Webster recognized that the Mule Train journey spun out of a Black Freedom movement that sought to address several issues coalescing around economic inequity. His commentary moved fluidly between the movement and the Poor People’s Campaign, suggesting that participation in this march was one expression of the greater Black Freedom struggle. He grounded the interests of the Mule Train in a movement that included a variety of demonstrations, protests, and assemblies. Central to the aims of The Poor People’s Campaign, said Webster, was its emphasis on education in the black community, teaching Black History and providing the resources for children to learn. As an expression of the Black Freedom struggle,

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<sup>435</sup> This feature contradicts his claim that he was jailed at the courthouse dispersal.

<sup>436</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

the Poor People's Campaign emboldened Black Americans to assert their voices and rights in the public arena.

The songs of the Black Freedom movement demonstrated black resolve to assert a voice in the public sphere and fortified pilgrims in the journey. "That was the whole movement," Webster argued, "The songs and what the words were about, that's what the whole march was about. It wasn't just about being poor or whatever. It was about standing up and not letting no one turn you around. It was about the will to accomplish something."<sup>437</sup> For Webster, the public arena that black protest unsettled first centered around interracial relationships in his local town.

In spite of white resistance to the Poor People's Campaign, Webster expressed the position that many who opposed local black uplift efforts in Marks secretly hoped the movement would succeed. He argued that many whites sought to make personal amends when interacting individually with figures in the campaign. Webster interpreted the private encouragements he received from whites as more truthful displays of their intentions than the ways they publicly spoke out against Black Freedom. They succumbed to the pressure of the majority at the time, said Webster, revealing ways he has sought to reconcile painful memories with a sense of community – or, perhaps, good memories with painful expressions of community at present. This interpretation possibly reflects interactions Webster has had with white Marks residents who fought against black uplift in the sixties but have, in the years since the campaign, sought to distance themselves from overtly racist activity. Additionally, and perhaps just as important for analyzing the meaning-making process, is the fact that Webster reflected on his experiences in an oral history interview conducted by a white Ph.D. student.

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<sup>437</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

As previously noted, Webster deviated from the public record by making assertions about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s presence and the length of the journey Mule Train pilgrims traveled. Webster positioned King as a real and interactive human presence in his Mule Train narrative by locating the SCLC leader and national figure in the Marks movement during the days leading up to the launch of the campaign, by placing him at sites along the way, and by recalling the ways King watched out for the pilgrims on the journey. Webster's narrative aligned with the public record when he noted that King had come to Marks prior to and in early 1968, speaking in churches and visiting schoolrooms of children. Webster accurately identified one of the churches where King had visited, the Queen Valley Missionary Baptist Church.<sup>438</sup> He deviated from the public record, however, by pointing to King's involvement in the student sit-in at the Quitman County Courthouse on May 1, twenty-seven days after King's assassination. It would be a stretch to speculate that Webster had simply been unaware of King's death at the time of the Marks marches in early May and somehow confused King with another leader. Webster's story comes marked more by conviction than confusion. His memory of the courthouse demonstration accommodated the belief that King was actually with them in their local struggles. In spite of national coverage of King's death four weeks earlier and the local expressions of grief in Marks that Webster could not possibly have avoided understanding at the time, Webster recalled how "Dr. King spoke, a few others spoke" at the courthouse just before the "dam burst," his description of the rush of demonstrators fleeing the scene to escape police violence.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> The March 19, 2016 interview in which Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. told about King's presence on the Mule Train actually took place in the pastor's office of the Queen Valley MB Church. This was an arrangement that Quitman County Supervisor and local leader, Manuel Killebrew, set up for the interview. I had contacted Killebrew in an attempt to connect with Mule Train participants. He not only gave me Webster's contact information, he organized a neutral space for us to meet and hold the interview. When I arrived in Marks, Killebrew introduced me to Webster in the Queen Valley MB Church parking lot and unlocked the building for us to meet.

<sup>439</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by the author on March 19, 1968.

Webster also located King in the journey to suggest that the SCLC leader continued to offer leadership and protection for the caravan. On the day the Mule Train left Marks, May 13, Webster said King traveled ahead to make preparations. “Most of the stops we made, he would be there...,” claimed Webster, “...him and a few others they watched over us.”<sup>440</sup> While consideration may be given that Webster confused Dr. King with other leaders – King’s brother, Rev. Alfred Daniel King, spoke at a Marks courthouse demonstration on May 2, where he introduced Rev. Ralph Abernathy to the community as Dr. King’s successor in SCLC leadership – Webster identified other leaders separate from King’s presence previously in his record of the events.<sup>441</sup> According to Webster, Ralph Abernathy spoke at the event that led him to make the decision to join the Mule Train. A more credible explanation for Webster’s account of King’s presence in Marks and on the Mule Train journey lies in the capacity of pilgrims to reflect on their experiences and to draw meaningful conclusions about their encounters in those passages.

Webster offered more than a chronological discrepancy; he pointed to the formative encounters a pilgrim can experience when entering the liminal space that pilgrimages, as rites of passage, offer. On one level, King’s presence before and during the journey tie Webster’s involvement in the Mule Train to successful campaigns that belong to the growing national mythologization of the civil rights movement. The Mule Train, and, thus, the entire Poor People’s Campaign, might garner more credibility as a piece of public history when interpreted in light of King’s leadership. According to Webster’s account, Abernathy may have encouraged Webster to join the Mule Train, but King went before the caravan and watched out for the travelers on their way. On another level, however, the very language Webster adopted to describe King’s presence in the journey – “went on ahead” and “watched over us” – reveals his

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<sup>440</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by the author on March 19, 1968.

<sup>441</sup> Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission report, May 2, 1968. (9-31-791) Digital archives, MDAH.

deep affinity, if not reverence, for the leader.<sup>442</sup> Summoning biblical themes rooted in the story of the Exodus of Hebrew slaves from Egypt, Webster grants King the divine attributes Israel witnessed in their God's provision for mass liberation.<sup>443</sup> Whether Webster found strength in a narrative that included King's presence for the sake of rooting the campaign in a broader national story of civil rights gains or took comfort in a narrative that included King's watch and care, it is clear that encountering King, though from a distance, galvanized the pilgrim's sense of purpose and mission on the Mule Train.<sup>444</sup>

In addition to his deviation from the public record regarding Dr. King's presence in the Poor People's Campaign, Webster recognized and seemed to want to set straight the public record that accounts for the pilgrims' passage by railroad from Atlanta, Georgia to Alexandria, Virginia. Local newspaper articles and United Press International syndicates documented the leg of the trip Mule Train pilgrims traveled by railway. Photographer Roland L. Freeman provided a thorough account of the disassembling of the wagons in Atlanta, the boarding of the train, and the reassembling of the wagons in Alexandria in his reflections on the journey and the photographs he took as a member of the caravan.<sup>445</sup> The following dialogue taken from the

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<sup>442</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>443</sup> According to the biblical record in Exodus, the LORD's presence appeared in elemental forms that clarified the path to freedom for the travelers escaping enslavement: "The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people." Exodus 13:21-22, NRSV.

<sup>444</sup> Again, I am drawing from Robert Orsi's notion of encounter as formative experience that produces the same impact on a person's life as a *real*, or collaborated, encounter.

<sup>445</sup> "34 mules and 13 wagons of MT loaded aboard a Southern Railway freight train for shipment to Washington area. 130 passengers of MT board buses for trip to Alexandria. To be reassembled for entry in Washington. Plans to parade from Alexandria to PPC grounds Wed, June 19." In article, "Po' Mules To Ride Awhile," (UPI), *The Daily Sentinel-Star*, Grenada, MS, 17 June, 1968, Vol. cxiii, No. 244.

"The MT of the PPC finally reached Washington after a five-week, 1,100 miles journey from Marks, Miss. that was plagued by trouble along the way. The MT arrived in nearby Alexandria, VA, by rail from Atlanta June 16." In article, "Journey's End: Mules Free At Last," *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 29 June, 1968: 15. Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 64-69.

interview with Webster, however, demonstrates his interest in correcting the narrative that members of the Mule Train rode an actual railroad train to finish the journey:

Interviewer: “You made the entire trip to Atlanta driving the mules and then you all took a train from Atlanta to D.C.? Is that how that happened?”

Webster: “No.”

Interviewer: “No?”

Webster: “We drove the train *all the way* to D.C. Like I said, a few people caught the bus and things. They had everything set up when we got there, you know, places to stay. But we took the long journey. We rode the mules, took the wagon train *all the way in*.”

Interviewer: “And when you arrived you came to the campsite, Resurrection City?”

Webster: “Yep.”<sup>446</sup>

Webster clearly believed he had driven mule-drawn wagons from Marks, Mississippi to Washington, D.C. and his repeated emphasis on driving “all the way” speaks to the importance finishing the journey had for the pilgrim. At the pace the Mule Train traveled from Marks to Atlanta, however, the caravan would not have reached D.C. for another two months had they continued all the way to the Capitol in wagons. Webster’s very testimony of participating in Resurrection City – which police evacuated June 23, a mere week after Mule Train participants arrived in D.C. – prevents the possibility that he drove the entire stretch from Marks to Washington in a mule-drawn wagon. His claim of finishing the journey speaks to a deeper desire for remembering the Mule Train pilgrimage as an accomplishment. For Webster, success lay in journeying to Washington, not in achieving a particular aim once there. He interpreted leaving the Capitol for Mississippi by bus during the Resurrection City evacuation as a stroke of luck. Rather than arrest him, police officers delivered Webster to the bus station and bought him a ticket to go home. According to Webster, he could return to Mississippi without feeling he had

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<sup>446</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016. Italics added to reflect speaker’s emphasis.

abandoned his mission. He had already reached his goal of making it *all the way* to D.C. in the Mule Train.

Webster reflected on his time with the Mule Train as an opportunity to visit new places, encounter a variety of people, consider new and different ideas, and begin to articulate within himself the values that might guide his life. A key theme in Webster's account involves the ability to collaborate with others who were different from himself in scenarios that were foreign to his daily experiences in Quitman County. Though people and problems presented obstacles for the Mule Train along the way, Webster found that the caravan cooperated as a team and overcame adversity by working together. Beginning with his initial days hanging out at the SCLC Youth Commission Office and concluding with the Mule Train's arrival in Resurrection City, Webster emphasized the importance of entering alternative spaces for fostering dialogue and exchanging ideas.

As a Wagon Driver, seventeen-year-old Webster navigated adversity situated squarely within the middle of the caravan. Recalling that his wagon numbered fourth in the line of fifteen mule-drawn vehicles, Webster recounted the resistance that buffeted the Mule Train on the road the entire length of the trip. He recalled drivers speeding past the caravan, passengers throwing things out their windows at the mules, yelling slurs, and calling the pilgrims pejorative names. Though some ruffians fired guns into the air to scare the mules, Webster surmised the presence of state troopers may have prevented detractors from shooting at the pilgrims. Many travelers decided to turn for home in the face of violence, said Webster. He, on the other hand, persevered in the journey and found ways to disassociate himself from the adversity. Webster pointed to the mules in his narrative to typify the slow but persistent nature of the Mule Train, crediting the



hard-headedness of the animals with galvanizing the caravan's perseverance in the face of persecution.

Maneuvering a wagon pulled by mules on public roads presented Webster a number of logistical challenges on the way. He found himself continually struggling to either motivate or restrain the mules. The ride, itself, proved quite rough as hard metal-rimmed wheels conveyed the shock of every pock and patch in the pavement. Wagons grew rickety with all the constant jostling and demanded constant care and repair. Webster described his struggle then recalled a potentially dangerous incident during the first two weeks of the journey:

I had about eight people in the wagon with me. Sometimes it was hard to get the mules to stay in line. He might get in his own mind to take off. You got to pull him back and stop him and get him back in line or you got to wrestle with him for a little while. Once you get him straightened out you can just about keep them like you want them. Then the wagons' iron wheels, you can just imagine bouncing down the road in iron wheels. The bounce there made plenty of noise so everybody knew you was coming because they could hear you coming.

I believe we were down near Duck Hill [when] one of my wheels came off! I think I lost about two riders because it fell so fast. Didn't nobody get hurt.<sup>447</sup>

Though the incident could have ended in disaster, Webster laughed at their misfortune many years later. When the caravan arrived to each day's destination, designated handlers unhitched the mules, watered them, bed them down, then had them hooked up to the wagon the next morning so drivers were free to rest from a long day of travel.

Travelers experienced anxiety upon arriving in a new community and negotiated new spaces with caution by staying together and adhering to rally points. Given that separating from the group could prove detrimental to the safety of a pilgrim, each member of the Mule Train vowed to stay with the team and watch out for one another. Poor People's Campaign supporters provided fixed sites for pilgrims to stay collected as a group as churches opened their doors to

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<sup>447</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

hold meetings, services, and dinners. Marchers' schedules became naturally bound to that of the entire group as they traveled, ate, attended group meetings, slept, and regrouped in tandem with one another. Though tired, sleep did not always come easy under the threat of harassment. "You didn't really get a lot of rest because you had to sort of watch," explained Webster, "Somebody might come and throw a firebomb or anything, so you had to sort of keep an eye open. You couldn't just go in and go to sleep."<sup>448</sup> Members heeded warnings from leaders not to wander off alone and, in fact, avoided becoming separated from the group at all costs.<sup>449</sup>

Receptions of the Mule Train fortunately came with grand receptions from local residents who had organized themselves to welcome the pilgrims. Supportive crowds often met the caravan several blocks from their resting station for the day, celebrating the arrival of the travelers with fanfare and singing. "When people met us in certain towns there might be a thousand people," said Webster, "and they're all singing the songs when we get there, and going to church singing."<sup>450</sup> Webster depicted a growing procession that increased as the throng of supporters joined the Mule Train, taking on a unique iteration of the Poor People's Campaign peculiar to each town and its residents.

Though police presence may have prevented violence on the road, pilgrims faced opposition from law enforcement in several states and towns. Webster interpreted the multiple arrests officers made along the way as tactics to discourage marchers from continuing the march. Pointing to Georgia Governor Lester Maddox's roadblock and arrest of the entire caravan at the

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<sup>448</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>449</sup> Annie Rankin reflected on her experiences becoming separated from the group when FBI officers placed her in a protected location following a shooting in Eutaw, Alabama. Though she was not alone, separation from fellow pilgrims created anxiety that she expressed in her account of Mule Train travels. Rankin, "Autobiography," 7-8.

<sup>450</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

Georgia state line, Webster declared, “Matter of fact, some of the babies got arrested!” He described the strategy police implemented to discourage pilgrims from continuing:

You knew that this would happen. It wasn’t surprising. Somewhere down the line, some city you got to, you were going to go to jail. Some of us were going to go to jail. You aren’t going to be there that long, but you were locked up. You were detained. Detaining of people then was to try to deter everybody to think, “This ain’t worth this; let me turn around and go home.” They weren’t beating you up. It was just the idea they were trying to use psychology on you. Then it still went on. Some people went home, but the majority of us went on.<sup>451</sup>

Webster detailed the way an SCLC attorney negotiated the freedom of prisoners and paid any fees they might have acquired in the local precinct.

They’d keep you until the lawyer for the SCLC come and get you or make a call to the judge. You might stay a night or sometimes you might be there a couple days. It all depends on how they feel, the sheriff the judge. They might let you sit there. Once they got you in there, they try to break everybody’s spirit. When they let you out we got right back. Wasn’t going to turn us around.<sup>452</sup>

The final confrontation pilgrims faced with police occurred when Washington, D.C. police officers and the National Guard cleared Resurrection City on Sunday, June 23. In the melee, police shot tear gas and swung clubs at campers. Bull dozers pushed over the A-frame shelters and knocked down tents. Campaign marchers panicked and ran aimlessly. Some marchers snatched press passes from nearby journalists to try to blend in with a contingent who seemed immune from police targeting. Webster counted himself lucky for escaping arrest and avoiding police violence. Though Mule Train records indicate that the SCLC provided pilgrims with tickets to return home, Webster recalled that he acquired his bus fare from city police.<sup>453</sup> “They

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<sup>451</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>452</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>453</sup> Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*, edited by David B. Levine, (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 112.

told us, ‘Git!’ So we headed back,” said Webster.<sup>454</sup> And with this sudden closure, Webster’s participation in the Poor People’s Campaign came to an abrupt and unceremonious end.

Though Webster completed his journey to Resurrection City, he experienced the ambiguity associated with a pilgrimage that lacked the provision for change. Anthropologist Victor Turner describes the importance that reunion or reincorporation holds for the pilgrim following the liminal phase. Social dramas present a crisis that widens a breach in society, Turner explains. Liminal passages conclude with either a reintegration of the disturbed group or reveal an ongoing irreparable schism.<sup>455</sup> Resurrection City may have provided the means for pilgrims to reunite with the larger body of PPC pilgrims pursuing change, but true social transformation for the individual would require a reckoning welcomed by the rest of society. Webster found Marks unphased by the petitions for which pilgrims appealed to the highest order of authority in the nation.

Webster described returning home after his time in Resurrection City as “spooky” and expressed concern for how he might be received by the town as a member of a national campaign seeking change. When the Mule Train left Marks in early May, pilgrims departed from a context fraught with tension. The campaign had produced during the span of a week three courthouse marches in Quitman County, one of which ended with police inflicting violence on students and educators. Before the Mule Train departed town, hundreds of Memphis marchers saturated the town in preparation for the Freedom Train bus caravan, attended training sessions for nonviolent confrontation, and gathered for rallies under big revival tents in open fields. Webster wondered how local law enforcement, or even average citizens, might retaliate against

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<sup>454</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>455</sup> Victor Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1979), 63.

activists for the ways they helped to bring national attention to their community. By the end of June, however, the Marks conflict seemed less fresh on the minds of local folk than for Webster who had recently experienced the expulsion of marchers from Resurrection City. When he arrived in Marks, Webster found much of life carrying on as usual. “It wasn’t as bad as a lot of people thought it would be. [We] come back to loved ones and life went on.”<sup>456</sup> Webster’s relief, however, betrays a deeper truth about local resistance to anti-poverty programs and ways local beliefs have a way of shaping those bound by its systems.

Over the years Webster adopted a philosophy about economic conditions that linked poverty to an individual’s will for change. Poverty will always exist, Webster concluded. To overcome poverty, he argued, people need to cultivate strong minds so that they can make decisions that will lead them out of their circumstances. Webster compared escaping poverty to quitting cigarettes, then turned his attention again to fond memories of his childhood:

Like smoking cigarettes, I don't care how many patches you got. That's the way poverty is. It's a mind thing. You've got to make up your mind not to want this. A lot of people still haven't made up their mind not to want [poverty]. Like me, when I was little, I always said, when we was out across all kinds of fields, getting our butts whooped picking cotton, chopping cotton, I said, “Lord, if I can ever get grown I will never come to this again.”<sup>457</sup>

With his return to Marks, however, Webster distanced experiences of his hard-scrabble childhood from impoverishment that afflicted rural black families in Mississippi through the fifties and sixties.

I stayed gone for many a years before I came back. Really, I came back after I got older and got sick. But now I stop and look at those days back there and they make me lonesome. It made a better person out of me. I thought mom and Dad was being rough on me but they wasn't. I'm glad they did this and they did that because it made me become a better person.<sup>458</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>457</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>458</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

Webster worked to overcome resentment about his childhood impoverishment by investing agency in his caregivers who, in his interpretation, created the conditions that made him a hard worker and a person of strong moral character. The longing he felt toward his parents translated to nostalgia for the life they lived together under the pressures of a severely inequitable society.

Webster resumed school after returning from the Poor People's Campaign, offering him a thoroughly integrated school experience. In the midst of sluggish county-wide integration efforts, Webster described racism as something individuals have the capacity to resist, declining in his interview to attribute racism to the broader economic system that privileged white students in obtaining jobs over black students with the same degree. "It [racism] is something that's taught, not born. They train them as kids. We still got a racial problem. I guess as long as the world [exists] you have it. You can't change everybody," resigned Webster.<sup>459</sup> He emphasized the value that dialogue between black and white students offered the school for overcoming racial conflict, a tenet that played a prominent role in his experience on the Mule Train journey.

At sixty-five years old, Webster interpreted the primary contribution of the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train to his life as an educational opportunity. Going on the pilgrimage meant a chance for Webster to leave home, experience areas of the country he had never seen, meet people from various walks of life, and discover new ideas. "You got a chance to meet new people with different ideas," said Webster. "You got a chance to sit down with other people and talk about things and see how you can make things, their ideas and your ideas, come together and work."<sup>460</sup> He rooted his opportunity for new educational experiences in relationship and geography, perhaps reinforcing the significance that his two earlier discrepancies from the public record bore on his life: seeing Dr. King on the journey and driving the entire stretch of land

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<sup>459</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

<sup>460</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

between Marks and Washington. For Webster, the greatest education lay in the people and the places of his life whether at home or on the way to Resurrection City. When asked if he felt the Poor People's Campaign produced the kind of change it intended, he simply responded, "I would do it again. Maybe now I can gain more knowledge."<sup>461</sup> Or, at least, meet new people, see new places, and consider new ideas.

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<sup>461</sup> Interview with Eddie Lee Webster, Jr. conducted by Chet Bush on March 19, 2016.

## CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF THE MULE TRAIN

The Poor People's Campaign Mule Train used the contested spaces of interstate roadways to protest ways southerners sought to enforce racialized inequality similar to two journeys in 1947 and 1961 that the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized to display incongruency between United States Supreme Court decisions and southern practice.<sup>462</sup> The PPC Mule Train also highlighted episodes such as the 1963 March on Washington and the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March by geographically attaching itself to those sites and, in some fashion, reenacting these occasions that elicited acclaim from much of the American public. Following the campaign in Washington, however, Abernathy clung to mule train symbology as a way to advocate for poor Americans moving forward, even as his persistence landed on deaf ears and faded from public attention. The new SCLC Director's fixation on the mule train medium for contesting economic disparity and the failure of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign to secure additional wealth-building provisions for impoverished Americans have helped obscure the record regarding ways the campaign and particularly the Mule Train pilgrims have been remembered. The Poor People's Campaign Mule Train shared philosophical roots with historic groundbreaking initiatives that resulted in civil rights gains and intersected with key marches that signaled a change in public reception of the freedom movement's cause. Abernathy's vision for change, however, became mired in mule and wagon kitsch following the Washington campaign,

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<sup>462</sup> Near the completion of this dissertation, Mia Bay published a history of travel that examines African American experiences in segregated spaces and passages. Bay's book excites me for ways her subject intersects with aspects of my research, but I lament not having more time to ruminate on her study while organizing and writing my material. See Mia Bay, *Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021).



leading to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's abdication of the prophetic voice that once helped to frame a vision for equitable justice in America.

In addition to ways the Mule Train served the Poor People's Campaign as a medium to perform a message about poverty in the South, the caravan modeled an emerging trend of the traveling citizen-turned-activist at the close of the twentieth century. When understood in light of pilgrims' paths for observing historic freedom struggles and their persistence to seek change, it becomes apparent that the Mule Train served as an early iteration of an emerging era marked by commemorative journey associated with civil rights tourism. If Dr. King, indeed, served as a drum major for justice and for peace, the Mule Train functioned as a drum major for civil rights commemoration, leading a parade of pilgrims and forging a path for pilgrimages determined to achieve long-lasting change through tours of sites and attention to stories central to American civil rights mythology.

The Mule Train shared ideological underpinnings as a performative demonstration with two Congress of Racial Equality campaigns that employed public roadways: the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation and the 1961 Freedom Rides. Both CORE-initiated demonstrations involved pilgrims who challenged segregation de facto by centering the locus of struggle on spaces associated with public interstate travel. One focused on integrating public transit vehicles and the other focused on integrating facilities and sites that supported transit passages. Though travel and the spaces associated with it occupied center stage for all three performances, pilgrims of the Mule Train brazenly pursued change with little predication. Riders of the 1947 and 1961 journeys moved to integrate American travel spaces with confidence in recent decisions ruled by the United States Supreme Court. Poor People's Campaign pilgrims, on the other hand, sought to

secure legislation to help poor Americans build wealth with little promise for securing such policies.

Barely five years old as an organization, the Congress of Racial Equality relied on the tenacity and experience with nonviolent protest from its parent affiliate Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) to stage a demonstration that reinforced the 1946 United States Supreme Court *Morgan v. Virginia* decision ruling that segregation on interstate buses was unconstitutional. CORE paired black and white passenger teams to defy ongoing segregation policies that continued to be practiced and enforced by local police, bus companies, and drivers. Riders participating in the Journey of Reconciliation later reflected on the educational role their actions offered the transportation industry and law enforcement. “As the trip progressed,” CORE reported, “it became evident that the police and the bus drivers were learning about the Irene Morgan decision as word of the ‘test cases’ was passed from city to city and from driver to driver.”<sup>463</sup> Pilgrims of the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation not only challenged unjust policies, they understood their actions to serve as teaching techniques for the American public.

Patterning a second demonstration after the earlier 1947 protest of segregated interstate travel, CORE launched the Freedom Rides to challenge segregated transportation facilities ruled unconstitutional in the 1960 USSC decision *Boynton v. Virginia*. Concerned about racial integration in waiting rooms, restrooms, and restaurants associated with the travel industry, southerners continued to enforce Jim Crow policy as passengers disembarked buses at stations embedded in racist power systems. The 1961 Freedom Riders consisted of CORE workers as well as representatives from a host of national civil rights organizations. When they integrated these travel spaces they suffered the wrath of violent mobs who beat them, set their buses on fire,

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<sup>463</sup> Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52.

and handed them over to police who sent them to prison. By the end of the summer, more than four hundred volunteers participated in the 1961 Freedom Rides, many fully realizing that their eventual destination would be prison and not the facilities they sought to integrate. Varying in race, age, sex, and religious background, each sought to overcome racial inequality associated with commercial spaces by traveling public roads with a purpose. The members of one Freedom Ride comprised of Episcopal ministers referred to their September journey by bus as a “Prayer Pilgrimage.”<sup>464</sup>

The 1947 and 1961 demonstrations offer a path for thinking about the kind of *protest en route* that the Poor People’s Campaign sought to dramatize in the Mule Train. In 1961, the public road became for participants a necessary passage for protesting racial segregation in facilities. Rather than travel separately or by any available means to spaces that resisted integration, pilgrims opted to travel together. Traveling together over concrete commercial circuits that linked contested public sites – better known as highways – was as important to the mission of Freedom Riders as comingling in the sites themselves. How they got there mattered to their mission. In a similar vein to the Freedom Rides, the Mule Train embraced the philosophy that how they traveled was as important to the Poor People’s Campaign as the petitions demonstrators presented on Capitol Hill.

Pilgrims of the Mule Train also embarked on their journey in the spirit of key marches that represented successful bids for legislative change. The 1963 March on Washington helped prompt the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Though tragic in outcome, the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March and the violence the American public witnessed surrounding it helped to

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<sup>464</sup> Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Editor’s note by David Hackett Fischer and James M. McPherson. This Freedom Ride occurred September 13, 1961. Its destination was Jackson, Mississippi.

ensure passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Both locations figure prominently in the Mule Train pilgrimage in addition to the many locations where pilgrims paused in their journey: Memphis, TN, where sanitation workers united to strike against a negligible municipal utility program and where a sniper sought to eliminate King's impact; Grenada, MS, in the wake of its public school desegregation battle; Montgomery, AL, and particularly Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where the Montgomery Bus Boycott worked to overcome public transit racial discrimination; Birmingham, AL and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where obstinate city officials faced a movement that refused to overlook its violent expressions of control. The journey to Resurrection City modeled on a large scale the many marches down city streets, across a public bridge, and in procession to government buildings that took place in communities throughout the South. In doing so marchers, or pilgrims, sought to remember those whose lives were stolen from the community in their pursuit of change.

Following the dispersal at Resurrection City, however, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's vision for prophetic demonstration for the poor descended into kitschy performance as Abernathy continued to appear at venues in the guise of poverty but lacking the perseverance and tenacity displayed in the journeys of impoverished Americans searching for change. After his release from the Washington prison, Abernathy employed the mule and wagon symbol at both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in August. In the fall of 1968 Abernathy launched a Get-Out-The-Vote campaign among black electors by employing mules and wagons to draw attention to the message in large cities across America. The SCLC's symbol of the mule-drawn wagon persisted in unusual ways in the public eye. As it became disassociated from the pilgrims who walked and rode from Marks to Atlanta then on to D.C., the mule train ceased to serve as a medium, much less an enduring message, of change for the poor.

During his time in a District of Columbia jail following his arrest in Resurrection City, Abernathy strategized ways to broadcast the campaign to additional cities. He announced an “indefinite fast” that lasted an unknown length of time. He then planned forty economic boycotts in cities around the country. Abernathy’s scramble in the face of PPC defeat led many to disregard further SCLC initiatives as continuations of the campaign. The editor of the African-American distributed *Chicago Daily Defender* surmised that with the loss of Resurrection City and the Mule Train, the lack of legislative victories, and the absence of a Bull Connor or Jim Clark figure to battle in the civic limelight of the Capitol, the national tour was a way for Abernathy to demonstrate his way out of D.C.<sup>465</sup>

After stopping in St. Petersburg, FL to lend support to sanitation worker protests in that city, Abernathy traveled to Miami Beach where the Republican National Convention was held August 5-8, 1968.<sup>466</sup> On the second day of the convention, Abernathy parked a single mule-drawn wagon in front of the Fontainebleau Hotel where the RNC headquartered for the week.<sup>467</sup> Joined by about 50 denim-wearing marchers, Abernathy entertained the press who scurried to question him in the lobby of the hotel. “Poor people will no longer be unseen, unheard, and unrepresented,” vowed the SCLC Director.<sup>468</sup> Abernathy and the demonstrators displayed a banner declaring themselves delegation representing the “51<sup>st</sup> State of Hunger.”<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> “Boycotts in 40 Cities Next Move By Poor Peoples Unit,” NPI, *Chicago Daily Defender*, Big Weekend Edition, 6 July 1968, 2.

<sup>466</sup> Paul W. Wyche, “Poor people’s Campaign Headed for Miami Beach,” *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 3 Aug 1968, 1.

<sup>467</sup> “Rags and Riches at Miami Beach,” *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 17 Aug 1968, 9.

<sup>468</sup> Ethel Payne, “Poor People Hit GOP Parley: Delegation Shocks Onlookers,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, Daily Edition, 7 Aug 1968, 1.

<sup>469</sup> Ethel Payne, “Poor People Hit GOP Parley: Delegation Shocks Onlookers,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, Daily Edition, 7 Aug 1968, 1. “‘Soul Power’ On Parade at GOP Confab,” UPI, Miami Beach, *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 10 Aug 1968, 1. “Another Show Comes to Miami,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 8 Aug 1968, A3. “SCLC To Enter Political Arena,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 08 Aug 1968, A2.

Though Abernathy vocally rejected the leading Republican candidate Richard Nixon as the qualified leader Americans needed to address poverty and injustice, members of the party pooled their spare tickets to seat several of the demonstrators. Ohio Chairman Ray Bliss, Illinois Senator Charles Percy, New York Representative Ogden Reid, and Chairman Clarence Towns of the GOP Minorities Committee together produced 43 tickets for Abernathy and many of the marchers. They entered the convention hall during the speech of House Republican Leader Gerald Ford.<sup>470</sup> Despite Abernathy's claim that he remained undecided about which candidate to support, he took his seat in the convention hall wearing a button declaring "Rockefeller for President." It would be a sad day for the Republican Party and all Black Americans, said Abernathy, if the party nominated Nixon as the Republican candidate.<sup>471</sup> He then warned that he would call for a "black election vote-out" if neither the Republicans nor the Democrats produced a candidate who fit the criteria to fight for poor people, suggesting he would call on African American voters to boycott the election.<sup>472</sup>

One reporter credited Abernathy's early absence from the convention with tipping the party toward Nixon when the SCLC leader suddenly left the proceedings to address racial unrest that had erupted in California. Justine Priestley was a white female graduate of Brown University who regularly contributed to a black paper called *The New York Amsterdam News*. Writing under the pseudonym Gertrude Wilson, Priestley described how she crossed paths with the Mule Train on her way to the RNC.<sup>473</sup> She was riding in a car through Miami traffic when she heard Hosea

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<sup>470</sup> "'Soul Power' On Parade at GOP Confab," UPI, Miami Beach, *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 10 Aug 1968, 1.

<sup>471</sup> "Poor People Invade GOP," *Call and Post*, City Edition, Cleveland, OH, 10 Aug 1968:1A. Nelson Rockefeller was a latecomer to the Republican candidacy. Many believed Rockefeller had the best chance of winning the office over Democratic frontrunner Hubert Humphrey. Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Greatest Comeback: How Richard Nixon Rose from Defeat to Create the New Majority*, (New York: Crown Forum, 2014).

<sup>472</sup> Faith Christmas, "Abernathy Threatens 'Boycott' of Election," *Chicago Daily Defender*, Big Weekend Edition, Aug 17 1968, 1.

<sup>473</sup> Justine Priestley, *By Gertrude Wilson: Dispatches of the 1960s From a White Writer in a Black World*, (Vineyard Stories, 2005).

Williams call for supporters from a mule-drawn wagon. “Which side are you on, man, which side are you on?” Williams cajoled. Persuaded by Williams’s summoning, Priestly left the comfort of the air-conditioned automobile to walk behind the wagon with other marchers in the August heat. As a member of the press, Priestley watched Abernathy get seated in the convention then leave along with California Governor Ronald Reagan to quell a riot in the governor’s home state. After Abernathy left the hall, Priestley said the delegation moved toward more conservative principles. “They nominated a two-time loser for President, and accepted his big deal with Governor Spiro T. Agnew of Maryland for the VP. In my opinion they killed the two-party system,” Priestley wrote as Gertrude Wilson.<sup>474</sup>

Three weeks later, Abernathy, Williams, and several marchers traveled to Chicago with hopes of securing seats at the Democratic National Convention held August 26-29. Marchers in the Chicago Mule Train considered parading through Mayor Richard Daly’s neighborhood, but instead attended a rally in Grant Park that turned calamitous when police reacted violently to Yippie activists protesting the Vietnam War.<sup>475</sup> Mule Train marchers successfully navigated the melee and by late Wednesday afternoon, August 28, Abernathy and his 9-year-old son Ralph III rode up to the Conrad Hilton Hotel in the first of three wagons smiling and waving to a crowd of onlookers.<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> Gertrude Wilson, “Tired, Bone Tired,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 Aug 1968, 13.

<sup>475</sup> Faith Christmas, Staff Writer, “Convention Fray Provokes Sober Thought: Reporter Expresses Relief, Disquiet After Battles,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, Daily Edition, 03 Sep 1968:1. For more on the Grant Park Protests that occurred during the 1968 Democratic National Convention involving the Young International Party (“Yippies”), the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (MOBE), and including several other groups, consider the documentary *Chicago 10* (2007) written and directed by Brett Morgan. For a brief synopsis of the protest, violence, and trial see Peter Joyce and Neil Wain, “Chicago Democratic National Convention Riot (Chicago) 1968,” *Palgrave Dictionary of Public Order Policing, Protest and Political Violence*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 72-94.

<sup>476</sup> Faith Christmas, “Poor Marchers On Way To Demo Convention,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, Daily Edition, 29 Aug 1968, 2.

During the convention Abernathy continued to send conflicting messages about the goals of his campaign in Chicago as he had in Miami. Abernathy told reporters it was time for the Democratic Party to nominate an African American President or, at least, Vice President. When pushed to name a candidate, however, the SCLC director told the same press corps that he and constituents were prepared to campaign for Ted Kennedy, a white Senator from Massachusetts.<sup>477</sup> Abernathy seemed more concerned by the failure of the DNC to recognize this latest iteration of the Poor People's Campaign. Frustrated by the way police had treated one of the truck drivers carrying wagons to be used in the Mule Train, Abernathy and Hosea Williams complained that they received better treatment at the Republican Convention earlier in the month.<sup>478</sup> Abernathy told the press that he turned down 5 VIP passes and 15 seats to the convention in defiance of the way their party of marchers had been treated.<sup>479</sup>

Two months after appearing at the Democratic National Convention, Abernathy employed the mule and wagon symbol to wage a campaign against third-party candidate George Wallace and to encourage African Americans to vote. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference launched its "Get-Out-The-Vote" campaign Monday, October 21, at the location where Wallace rose to national fame as an ardent segregationist: Montgomery, Alabama. Abernathy led thirty marchers with two wagons about three miles through the unpaved streets of the historically black section of town, up Dexter Avenue, and before the Capital building.

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<sup>477</sup> A.S. "Doc" Young, "Abernathy Calls for Negro Pres," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 29 Aug 1968, A8.

<sup>478</sup> Faith Christmas, "Poor Marchers On Way To Demo Convention," *Chicago Daily Defender*, Daily Edition, 29 Aug 1968, 2. According to Williams, a truck driver carrying four wagons to be used in Mule Train demonstrations was arrested when he tried to drive onto a police-restricted boulevard. Police impounded the truck with the wagons still loaded.

<sup>479</sup> Faith Christmas, Daily Defender Staff Writer, "Police Can't Stop Us, Says Abernathy: Poor Group Joins Yippies at Park Rally," *Chicago Daily Defender*, Daily Edition, 31 Aug 1968, 1, 2.



Referring to Wallace's resistance to the 1963 integration of the University of Alabama, Abernathy called on black voters to "push Wallace aside from the door of the presidency."<sup>480</sup>

The SCLC promised to hold rallies in eleven additional cities around the country that included Marks, Mississippi alongside metropolises such as Houston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Newark, New York City, Detroit, Pittsburgh and Atlanta.<sup>481</sup> In addition to campaigning in religious spaces, the "Get-Out-The-Vote" Mule Train traveled to "ghetto" areas to meet local black folk on street corners and in pool halls.<sup>482</sup> The SCLC was pleased when the Mule Train successfully drew large crowds and within one week Abernathy began to promote Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey.<sup>483</sup> Building on the repertoire of material he created during the PPC Mule Train, Abernathy named the two "asses" that pulled the campaign wagon "George Wallace" and "Tricky Dick." He told the 800 in attendance at a rally in Philadelphia, "We will elect Hubert Humphrey and then we'll build a fire under him. I'll be at the Inaugural Ball – I've already bought a new dungaree suit. We'll dance on the inside and march on the outside."<sup>484</sup> Abernathy's design to buy a new set of overalls for Humphrey's anticipated inauguration speaks to ways the symbols of poverty had become detached from the poor in America in the weeks following the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train.

Mule Train symbology long outlasted the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's strategy to petition Congress for reform on behalf of poor Americans. Abernathy's persistent employment of mules and wagons at party conventions, in an anti-Wallace crusade, and in a get-

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<sup>480</sup> Roger Hammer, UPI, "Mule Train Leads Anti-Wallace March in Montgomery, Ala.," *Chicago Daily Defender*, Daily Edition, 22 October 1968, 4.

<sup>481</sup> "John Harlan Law Club Lists Preferences," *Call and Post*, City Edition, Cleveland, OH, 02 Nov 1968, 4D.

<sup>482</sup> "Abernathy Brings His Vote Drive to Houston, Tex.," UPI, *Chicago Daily Defender*, Daily Edition, 24 Oct 1968, 4.

<sup>483</sup> Rufus Darpoh, "Visiting Newsmen Feels Fear Here," *Afro-American*, Baltimore, MD, 02 Nov 1968, 32.

<sup>484</sup> Pamala Haynes, "Abernathy Endorses Humphrey; Reminds Crowd Lincoln Is Dead," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 2 Nov 1968: 29. "Mule Train Passengers," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 2 Nov 1968, 3.

out-the-vote campaign became disconnected from the immediate aspirations of southern pilgrims making procession over southern roads and through southern communities. Though additional iterations of mule trains continued to appear in communities to represent local efforts for black uplift, some depictions of the mule and wagon represented comedic relief toward the hardships of poverty.

One community in Virginia honored a bishop with a mule train to acknowledge his life work and ministry. On September 22, 1968, a mule train procession carried the body of Bishop William Henry Powell through the town of Newport News, Virginia. Bishop Powell founded Lily of the Valley Church, began broadcasting his sermons in 1938 over radio station WLPM, and participated in the Ministers' Council as the only holiness tradition preacher. Powell proudly held membership in both the Ministers' Alliance and the Independent Voters' League. The achievements of the Bishop merited well-attended services and a mule train cortege from Cooke Funeral Chapel to Rosemont Cemetery.<sup>485</sup>

Across the channel in Norfolk, Capital Advertising, Inc. employed the symbol of the mule train to design a series of Christmas cards. Four designs illustrated the theme "Black is Beautiful," touted the advertising company. One card pictured a black snowflake with a black fist in the middle, another portrayed a black Santa, and a third depicted a tenant farmer's house decorated for Christmas. A final design displayed a mule train parked on the roof of a broken-down shack. Members of the Black Liberation Action Council (BLAC) reportedly sold the cards to raise funds for ghetto projects in the community. Icons of a mule train had garnered enough

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<sup>485</sup> "Mule Train Cortege for Bishop William H. Powell," in Suffolk, VA, *New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, VA, 28 Sep 1968, C3.

public recognition to replace Santa's reindeer and sleigh in a black-themed Christmas card series.<sup>486</sup>

The mule train continued to appear in marches led by officers in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference after 1968. As late as 1975 Hosea Williams found ways to incorporate a mule train in a demonstration he led in protest of Rich's Department Store in Atlanta. During the march to draw attention to hiring discrimination at Rich's, Williams called to pedestrians over a megaphone from a mule-drawn wagon. Ever the enthusiastic recruiter, Williams identified people watching from across the street by describing the clothes they wore, then asked them whose side they were on by appealing to their racial alliances. "Are you black or are you Uncle Toms?" Williams hollered.<sup>487</sup> He dared them to throw a fist into the air and yell, "Soul Power!" When they did, Williams rewarded them with affirmation. "You are part of God's children! You are somebody!" he assured.<sup>488</sup> Whereas Abernathy frequently alluded to the mules and wagons in his speeches and interviews by making metaphorical references to politicians or circumstances, Williams used the medium for attention alone. Once people looked in the direction of the mule-driving, megaphone-wielding activist, Williams found ways to engage their passion for change in service to his purpose.

The more enduring legacy of the Poor People's Campaign Mule Train exists as a journey of change whereby pilgrims traveled significant geographical distance to transform society, moved through and observed sites that held significance for an emerging narrative of change, and paid homage to those who lost their lives in the struggle. The Poor People's Campaign

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<sup>486</sup> "Black Christmas Cards Produced in Norfolk," *New Journal and Guide*, 21 Dec 1968, B2.

<sup>487</sup> "Mule Train March on Rich's, 1975," Audiotape, Series 11, Subseries D, Box 3, Folder 13, Hosea Williams Collection, Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>488</sup> "Mule Train March on Rich's, 1975," Audiotape, Series 11, Subseries D, Box 3, Folder 13, Hosea Williams Collection, Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

followed a circuit of stops in the Mule Train caravan that not only fed and nourished the story of the Black Freedom struggle for demonstrators in 1968, but offered a model for paying homage to civil rights memory that continued through the rest of the twentieth century and gained momentum into the twenty-first century. Such commemoration figured prominently in accounts pilgrims shared immediately after the journey as well as those recounted fifty years later.

The 1968 pilgrimage modeled for an emerging generation of civil rights observer-activists a way to move through sites central to the story and reflect on the sacrifices suffered for change. Americans continue to aspire for change by visiting places to learn about past struggles associated with a site. Today, tours of the South built around museums and historic sites fuel a civil rights master narrative, offer supporters paths to commemorate martyrs in the struggle, and challenge modern-day pilgrims to deepen their commitment to the pursuit of human rights. In addition to individuals who embrace civil rights tourism as a means for pursuing change, communities welcome the opportunity to host pilgrims as a wealth-building enterprise.

Marks, Mississippi – like many small and large towns around the country – has turned to civil rights tourism as a path for revitalizing its economy. To this day in 2021, the community struggles to secure a permanent grocery store. Numerous revitalization efforts – including volunteers from state educational institutions as well as philanthropic efforts from private businesses – have targeted the town as a place to offer relief and invest in its future. Quitman County administrators, meanwhile, have highlighted the importance of the community to the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign and celebrate the recent establishment of an Amtrak station in the center of town for bringing in visitors. The Quitman Tourism Economic Development (Q’TED) division is a non-profit arm of the county government that has taken the lead in promoting the community as a place for tourism. Q’TED articulates its mission for economic growth and

development on the county website where it explicitly states ties between tourism and local uplift: “[Q’TED] has been organized to help create economic growth and development; promote tourism, help improve public education opportunities, promote positive social and cultural transformation.”<sup>489</sup> The division of economic development has found a resource for enriching the city through federal grants preserving African American civil rights history. On March 12, 2018, Q’TED announced that The Marks Mule Train and MLK’s Poor People’s Campaign Interpretive Trail received \$50,000 from the Interior and National Park Service to highlight the role of the city in the historic event.<sup>490</sup>

Each year Marks hosts the Quitman County Mules and Blues Fest as part of its commitment to community uplift through tourism. The annual festival emphasizes the historic Mule Train and the location of the city on the Mississippi Blues Trail in an effort to attract tourists to the area. Visitors enjoy live music and good food, children take rides on mule-drawn wagons, and vendors spread their wares on the Quitman County Courthouse lawn. The site where a crowd of high school students and teachers gathered to protest the arrest of SCLC officer and MT wagon master Willie Bolden in April 1968 becomes a place where residents and out-of-townners gather to simultaneously rehearse and transform the narrative and experience of the county. Marks has transitioned from sending pilgrims to receiving them, all in an effort to secure the socio-economic transformation poor people of the area have pursued for over fifty years.

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<sup>489</sup> “Quitman Tourism Economic Development,” Quitman County Government, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://quitmancountymn.org/government/quitman-tourism-economic-development/>.

<sup>490</sup> “Interior and National Park Service Grants,” Quitman County Government, accessed June 17, 2021, <https://quitmancountymn.org/interior-park-service-grants/>.

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