

Praxis International

"Integrating Theory and Practice"

"GOT TO THINKING "

How the Black People of 1960s Holmes Co., Mississippi Organized Their Civil Rights Movement

WORDS, IMAGES, AND INTERVIEWS
by Sue [Lorenzi] Sojourner

a Northern white civil rights organizer who lived
and worked with the Holmes County Movement
people for five years in the 1960s

On permanent display at the
Domestic Abuse Intervention Center
202 East Superior Street
Duluth, Minnesota

*Rural Technical Assistance on
Violence Against Women*



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"Fear of freedom. It is fear of or lack of faith in the people. But if the people cannot be trusted, there is no reason for liberation... the revolution is not even carried out for the people, but "by" the people for the leaders - a complete self-negation."

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Community Organizing Exhibits

This exhibit is a part of the Community Organizing Teaching Center created by Praxis, International*. The goal of the center is to document projects nationally and internationally that have met the challenges of violence, poverty and other forms of oppression through community organizing efforts.

The documented projects have developed a local response to a local problem, by involving community members affected by the problem, and by creating environments in which self-determination and decision-making power remain with the people as they work to improve their own lives. These methods help to raise the political consciousness of participants as they learn to see that many problems are caused by social and political forces rather than by personal circumstances.

Such organizing methods and principles distinguish service providers from social change activists. Service provision, generally, repairs damage, while social change efforts work to address the root cause of a social problem and prevent the damage from occurring.

Praxis hopes to inspire social change activism in both veterans of the battered women's movement and in newcomers by offering these exhibits on the organizing achievements of communities working to stop violence against women and other social problems caused by oppression.

*Created by Praxis in partnership with the Violence Against Women Office for recipients of grants under the Rural Domestic Violence and Child Victimization Enforcement Grant program

THE SYSTEM OF RACIAL SEGREGATION

In 1963, in Holmes County, an oppressive, white-over-black system sustained the separation of races that slavery had created in Mississippi and the Deep South. A cruel, rigid segregation permeated all life and activities. In the 1960s, the 19 thousand Holmes blacks were still the underclass for the 8 thousand Holmes whites. The rule of Southern whites, so often outnumbered by the blacks, depended on denying democratic voting rights to blacks.

The following is excerpted from a story written for the Holmes Co. Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) elections organizing and read aloud at the FDP Campaign Kickoff meeting in January 1967.

....Then, at that time,...meeting for anything other than the usual church meeting...just wasn't...done....

The certain few who ran affairs knew...the only way they themselves stayed up was by standing on the backs of those below and that it was necessary to keep those below quiet and still and unmoving—otherwise they themselves would topple....

So the rulers above had always tried to force the ones below to be quiet, unmoving, bent down, and denied. They made it dangerous for any of those below to try to move or stand up. They used force and fear and violence so that all knew that it was dangerous to even think about trying to get up.

In addition...the rulers tried to make those below believe they didn't really want to get up, they shouldn't want to get up, it was wrong for them to get up, it was God's plan for them to be down. And, they made some of the people believe they weren't fit to stand, they weren't good enough to be up, it was only natural and right for them to be down, bent, and stood upon.

...They gave rewards and let some of those below have it just good enough to think they were as good as the ones above and certainly better than those below. This served to split up those below....

The rulers made it so that the best way to get along to deceive the ones below behalf of the above. As time went on, most of those below learned to distrust each other. They believed they could do nothing together and certainly couldn't depend upon their brothers and sisters

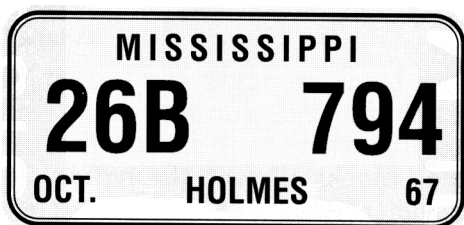
So... it was dangerous, really hard, in that time have meeting, to try to get people to get together talk about change or Freedom or organizing..

—from "The Some People of That Place"
by Sue Lorenzi 1966

MISSISSIPPI 26B 794 OCT HOLMES — 67

Civil rights working in early '60s Holmes County was driving—driving dirt roads, mud roads, no roads, or occasionally gravel. Pavement roads were only found in the white folks' parts of town, which you stayed out of whenever possible.

Driving meant flat tires every day, wishing for a two-way radio in your car, getting stopped by Andrew P. Smith (the sheriff) or his deputies or Moody (the state highway patrol), who were always out to get you.



Your car tag (license plate) was familiar, a symbol encapsulating that experience.

Number 26 designated Holmes County in Mississippi's total of 82 counties.

Every year, everybody's tag in the county (whether owned by a white or black) began with 26.

MISSISSIPPI 26B 794 OCT HOLMES —

HOW THE HOLMES MOVEMENT STARTED

Holmes County civil rights activities started in Mileston in early 1963. No other Mississippi county had as many independent black farmers as Holmes did—800 black farmers owned 50 percent of the county's land. None had as many owning rich Delta land as the 110 black Mileston farmers did. The Movement's first catalysts arose from these Mileston landowners.

In the '40s and '50s, some Mileston farmers had gone to the semi-secret NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) meetings in other parts of the state—women like Alma Mitchell Carnegie and men like Ralthus Hayes, a sharecropper who became a very successful farmer.



Alma Mitchell Carnegie

In 1960, Southern black students started sit-ins and freedom rides—direct action demands for service at white-only lunch counters and bus facilities—that spread throughout the South and inspired blacks all over the nation. They formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, "Snick") in that year to sustain the momentum and to publicly and dangerously confront white supremacy.



Ozell Mitchell

In 1962, SNCC organized Freedom Meetings in Greenwood in the county next to Holmes. Driving the 30 miles to see what was going on in Greenwood was a bold act for Mrs. Carnegie's younger brother Ozell Mitchell. He and other Mileston farmers had to journey on remote roads where being seen and identified with organizing could bring physical and economic harm.

The danger increased when they invited the SNCC organizers to set up a meeting at Mileston. In March 1963, Mitchell and others got the Sanctified Church in Mileston to allow meetings in their building—a great risk in

the face of increasing church burnings throughout the South.

They housed John Ball and four or five other SNCC organizers. Mrs. Carnegie opened her home to the outside workers, just as she had, in the late '30s, to the Southern Tenant Farmers Union organizers working in Black Belt counties. For most of the other Mileston families, housing outside organizers was a new and brave act.

HARTMAN TURNBOW SPEAKS

A Mileston farmer and fiery orator, Hartman Turnbow inspired people during the Movement's first stage. He gave rousing talks in Mileston and at the early Countywide meetings. Encouraging those already active, he also moved to action many who were deeply afraid of white segregationists' violence.

In a 1967 interview, Turnbow described how he saw change happen in Holmes and Mississippi:

That lynching I was telling you about—that one with the burning with the 'cetylene torch—that'n was a turning point. It just...made a Negro mad, got to thinking he'd rather die any way but to be all burnt up with a torch while he's still living....

The Negro ain't gonna stand for all that beating and lynching and bombing and stuff... They found out, when they tried to stop us from redishing that every time they bombed or shot or beat or cut credit..., it...just made him angry and more determined to keep on...and get redished.

The reason that Negroes have stood up...is...they's not scared. The lynchings and killings frightened the Negroes and kept them scared for a long time. But the lynchings were different from now. A lynching was just one.....Negro dead. Each one that got lynched was just one Negro gone.

But this now, this is something that we is in together. We was all together trying to do something. So every time they come shooting or bombing it just made us all mad and more determined to go on.

July 1967

TRYING TO "REDISH" (REGISTER)

At their meetings, the Mileston farmers learned about registering (pronounced "redishing") and voting. At that time, blacks in Mississippi and throughout much of the South could not exercise these basic constitutional rights. After several meetings, they decided to take their first public step to claim those rights.

One April morning after several weeks of meetings, 14 men and women gathered at Ozell and Annie Bell Mitchell's farm on the highway between Mileston and Tchula to drive the 20 miles to the county Courthouse in Lexington. Courageously, they would each ask for an application to register.

They knew registration was critical to gaining their rights and that, for whites, the registration application was more a formality than a "test" to pass, as it was for blacks. But interpreting a section of the state constitution was part of the form and definitely a test graded by the circuit clerk. They knew that, even after filling out the 21-question form, it would take 30 days for Clerk McClellan to let them know if they passed. As it happened, none got registered that day (or that month or even that year). The circuit clerk rarely "passed" African-Americans.

But those first 14 knew they had to take the steps to the Courthouse, whether or not they "passed." The organizers had prepared them well and notified the Justice Department of their plans.

They arrived in Lexington that morning, parked away from the Courthouse, and walked quietly by twos and threes—but not an organized march, so as not to be inflammatory to the whites. The Justice Department or someone had notified the sheriff, for he and nearly 30 "auxiliaries" confronted the 14 at the Courthouse door, demanding to know what they were doing.

Hartman Turnbow, with no prior plan, stepped up and said, "We's come to redish."

Because Turnbow spoke up first, he was the first to be let into the Courthouse—into the circuit clerk's office. The others waited their turn under the big tree on the Courthouse lawn near the Confederate monument.

Turnbow didn't get the forms to fill out before the office closed for noontime dinner. When it re-opened that day, and for the next two days, they were called in one at a time to speak with and be tested, and berated, by the circuit clerk. Taking such steps—and living through them without getting killed—was a heady victory.

Soon after the first Courthouse attempt, nightriders drove onto Turnbow's farm and firebombed his home where he, his wife, and teenaged daughter were sleeping. In unprecedented actions, Turnbow leapt up, grabbed his rifle, shot back. The whites scattered. The Turnbows were uninjured, but the sheriff arrested him for arson of his own home. SNCC got Movement lawyers in Jackson to help them get him out of jail.



Hartman Turnbow

THE WHITE NEWSPAPER COVERS "THE FIRST 14"

The White Citizens' Council's weekly newspaper, the **HOLMES COUNTY HERALD**, gave the first day's events front-page coverage in its Thursday, April 11, 1963 edition. With big headlines and photos, the paper ran interviews of most of the First 14 blacks who attempted to register to vote.

Such coverage was not positive publicity or "good press." It was dangerous business for these beginners in Movement action. Everyone's name was printed in the news story. From then on,



Holmes County Herald gave the first day's events front page coverage.

every week, a circuit clerk's list was printed of all who tried to register, thus announcing to the local whites just who the new troublemakers were—who should be targeted for reprisals.

Despite the danger, fear, and harassment, the Mileston "first movers" felt victory in taking those steps together. They had planned and carried out an action—meeting in Mileston and driving to Lexington together to try to register. The replication of such actions throughout Holmes and the South, piece by piece, brought state-sanctioned segregation to an end.

MEETINGS AND SONG ARE ESSENTIAL

In 1963-64, establishing the right to meet was the crucial first step in getting organized. Meetings are the glue that holds a community together, and throughout the South white segregationists did their utmost to sabotage meetings among blacks organizing. For more than a year after the September 1964 opening of the Holmes County Community Center at Mileston, the highway patrol and sheriff staked out it and whatever other places the Movement was using for "opening up" new communities.

The police harassed with tickets and fear but were only initially and partly successful. By the end of the second year of organizing, 20 communities were meeting weekly and there weren't enough patrolmen to cover the widespread Movement activity.

Song and music protected, cradled, and inspired all those in the Struggle. Every meeting began and ended with song, and often the music was able to bring the participants and the community through difficult times.



Singing at the April 1969 Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) countywide meeting.

The photograph of singing at the 1969 Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) countywide meeting was taken inside the Holmes County Community Center at Mileston. The most recent Countywide was held 3rd Sunday in April 2000 in the Howard Bottom community.

EARLY MILESTON

The community meeting at Mileston in March 1963 was the first Movement meeting in Holmes. It became a regular Wednesday night meeting and was one of the first activities to move into the Community Center in fall 1964.

Caladonia Davis, Alma Mitchell Carnegie and Mileston women gathered there in early 1965. Possibly, they are waiting for the regular meeting to commence. Or, perhaps they are having their own meeting.

They are the older women of the community. All of them are farmers. At that time, they are in their fifties and sixties, with Mrs. Davis in her seventies.

THE OLDER WOMEN OF MILESTON

From left are Mrs. Carnegie and Annie Bell Mitchell (married to Ozell Mitchell), both part of the First 14; in a white hat C. Bell Turnbow (married to Hartman Turnbow); Caldonia Davis (seated sideways, facing Mrs. Carnegie); Mary Turnbow (a Turnbow daughter) caring for children; Florence Blackmon; and Maude C. Vance.



From left: Mrs. Carnegie, Annie Bell Mitchell, C. Bell Turnbow, Caldonia Davis, Mary Turnbow, Florence Blackmon, and Maude C. Vance.

The California carpenter who built

the Community Center at Mileston for the Holmes County Movement had been a political radical in the 1930s, aware of how critical meeting places are to community organizing. The first Mileston young adults who worked with the Community Center director and managers included Rosie Head and El ease Gallion of the two women on right, standing in the front doorway of the Center. The two on the left are sisters who were not Center staff.). The occasion was an FDP Countywide Meeting on the Third Sunday in April 1969.

Rosie and El ease were in their twenties when the Movement and outside workers sparked their hearts and minds. Rosie was living with her children and parents and El ease was living on her father's farm when the Greenwood meetings started. El ease attended those, worked with the COFO volunteers in 1964, and then trained to run the Center.



Rosie Head and El ease Gallion

Both of them shared the load with three other local staff. All five handled day-to-day Center programs for the children—a kindergarten, library, and social events—as well as coordinating health, clothing, welfare programs, and responding to harassment, legal, emergency issues, and voter registration education for adults.

THE BLACK CANDIDATES IN THE 1967 ELECTIONS

In the 1967 county elections, black candidates ran for the first time since Reconstruction 100 years before. Twenty-two county offices were open—from constable to sheriff to Mississippi state representative. Twelve black candidates sought to win 12 of those offices.

Ten of the 12 had been Movement leaders since before 1966. The other two were Robert Clark and Robert Smith, both schoolteachers who became active in the Movement in 1966.

They were reaching for the highest offices—those of state representative and sheriff.



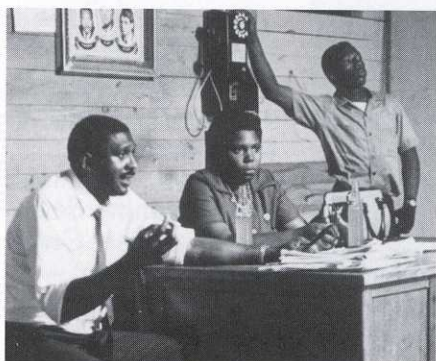
Leaflets/campaign cards of 12 black candidates.

Eight of the 10 candidates were farmers—T.C. Johnson, Ed McGaw Jr., Ward Montgomery, John Malone, Willie James Burns, John Daniel Wesley, Griffin McLaurin, and Ralthus Hayes. They sought positions like supervisor, justice of the peace (JP), and constable in the county's five districts, or "beats."

Unlike many Delta counties, Holmes had only one female candidate. She was Mary Lee Hightower, a town dweller, running for county circuit clerk, scraping a living with her laboring husband and young children. JP candidate Vernon Tom Griffin had no land, but ran his brother's rural store.

Of the 12 candidates, two were elected—~~Ed McGaw Jr.~~ ^{Griffin McLaurin}, a young constable, and Robert G. Clark, the first and only black in 1967 to sit in the Mississippi House of Representatives.

ROBERT CLARK WINS BIG



Robert Clark, seated with Mary Lee Hightower and Walter Pitchford.

Robert Clark was a popular schoolteacher and coach before he ran and won the position of state representative in 1967. Coming from a large well-respected, school-teaching, landowning family in the hills, he was one of the first professionals to be stirred with political aspirations. He made overtures to the county Freedom Democratic Party (FDP)—declaring

interest, regularly going to FDP meetings, then listening with respect to what the grassroots could teach him.

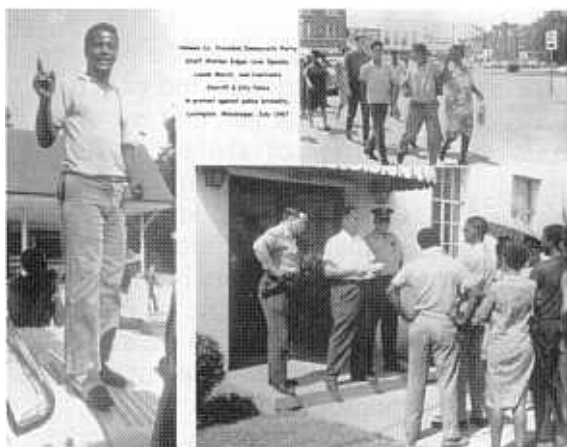
His intense energy and drive, personable character, sharp mind, and vast personal/family/FDP connections launched him into the highest elected position for a black in the state in 1967. Today, in 2000, eight four-year terms later, Clark continues in the Mississippi House, second in power only to the Speaker and in a special position with the dozens of blacks now seated there.

EDGAR LOVE

Edgar Love, who had lived and worked on a Delta plantation with his family for most of his 21 years, agreed in late 1965 to be part of the voter registration campaign that the Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) was broadcasting over the local radio station.

The Voting Rights Act had just become law, and Edgar read the FDP script aimed at plantation folks, preachers, schoolteachers, and others who still hadn't tried to register.

"Hello," he read. "I'm Edgar Love, and I live on a plantation...and I'm going to register to vote..." When he got home after the broadcast, he found his white owner had kicked him off the plantation.



Edgar Love

In some ways, it was a relief to be told to leave, as it was impossible to get out from under each year's constant, overwhelming debt to the owner. Only death, running away, or being kicked off brought debt relief.

Edgar immediately

started as a full-time FDP organizer, initially focussing on plantation workers and then becoming a key countywide staff person.

In the summer of 1967, the campaign for electing the black FDP candidates (who were running as Independents) involved Edgar for a good portion of his time, as did the long-running boycott to force the firing of a bad Lexington cop.

On a hot July day in 1967, Edgar spoke to a crowd gathered in front of a truck. Then, concerned about boycott progress, he and Mrs. Davis (with umbrella), a local Lexington leader, led a march around the Courthouse to City Hall where they confronted Sheriff Andrew P. Smith, Deputy Billie Joe Gilmore, and a white town policeman. It was just one of many attempts to remove the brutal policeman from the force.

BERNICE PATTON MONTGOMERY

By 1967, the Movement had created a significant number of antipoverty programs and had obtained federal funds to support them. Bernice Patton Montgomery of the hill community of Poplar Springs-Sunnymount was a prime Movement leader who took on Holmes's first large federally funded development, the Milton Olive Program for Children.



Bernice Patton Montgomery, standing. From right: Mrs. Tate, Howard Taft Bailey, Walter Bruce, Matilda Julia Burns, Lugertha Wright and Elase Gallion.

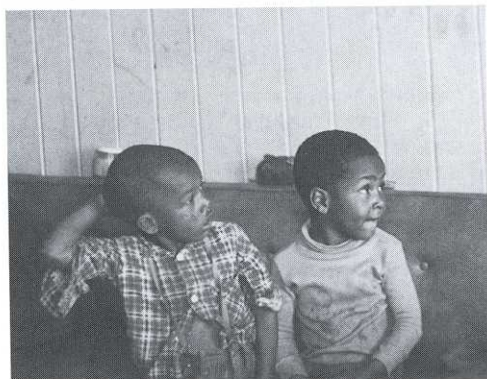
Mother of nine, on land she and her farmer husband owned, she was the only Holmes County schoolteacher involved in the Movement in the early '60s sixties. She went to the Courthouse to try register in late 1963 and persistently continued trying until she "passed the test" in late 1964.

The other teachers all watched her at contract time to see what the county was going to do with such a rebel. In late 1964 she was the first teacher to "pass the test." Fortunately and exceptionally, Mrs. Montgomery did not get fired. None of her colleagues took the same risks with their livelihood.

She directed the large child and health services program from 1966 until she left Holmes in the mid-'70s to develop elderly care services in Jackson. She continued working in Jackson, even though suffering ill health in her late seventies, until a stroke in the spring of 2000 stopped her work, though perhaps just for a while.

In the 1969 photograph of a meeting on federal programs, Mrs. Montgomery is standing to present information and materials to local leaders and staff. From the right at the table is Mrs. Tate, staff in the Holmes Co. Health Research Program; Howard Taft Bailey, longtime Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) leader from Old Pilgrim's Rest and Beat One Supervisor elected for many terms in the '70s and '80s; Walter Bruce, veteran FDP worker and leader from Durant, who continues today as chair of the Holmes Co. FDP; Matilda Julia Burns, from Mileston; Lugertha Wright, from Cruger; and Elease Gallion, from Mileston—the last three on the staff of the Milton Olive Program.

MOVEMENT CHILDREN — THE BEDDINGFIELD BOYS



The Beddingfield boys - Frank and Nathaniel.

Frank and Nathaniel, were two of Claudie and Lou Beddingfield's six children. The Beddingfields ran the Co-op Store in Mileston, where the Holmes Movement began. The store in the early '60s was a poorly stocked shadow of its early '40s, originally created with the co-op cotton gin to serve the "project"

farms newly opened up to black ownership.

In 1964, the store's stock shrank when its white suppliers withheld goods from Mr. and Mrs. Beddingfield because they were selling to the COFO workers. In 1964, Beddingfield children were attending Freedom Schools.

Frank and Nathaniel are shown here, in 1969, in the living room of the small house owned by the co-op on the highway next to the store. They are surrounded by images fairly typical of decorations in Movement homes at the time—the Last Supper and framed photos of Martin Luther King and family and the Kennedys.

THE CHILDREN

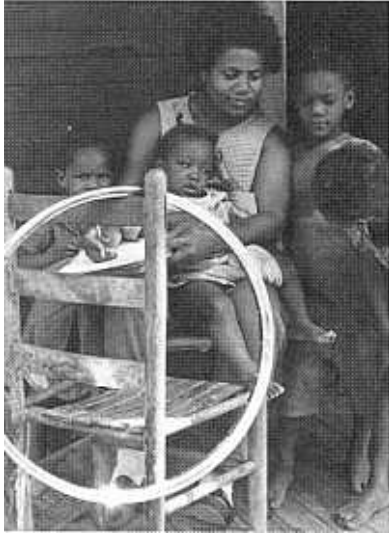
Young people played a significant role in the Holmes Movement. During the Freedom Summer of 1964 (when the three civil rights workers were murdered in Neshoba County), more than 500 outside white and black college students came from all over the country to work in Mississippi.

The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was the umbrella group created by SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), and the SCLC (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) to run the Summer Project. Thirty-five COFO students came into Holmes, with a high priority to work with young people.

They created Freedom Schools for hundreds of Holmes youngsters. Learning history, politics, singing, and poetry, the children also sometimes canvassed with the volunteers, knocking on rural doors before most Holmes towns were "safe" to the Movement, or "opened up." They spread information about meetings and urged adults to go to the Courthouse to try to register to vote.

In 1965, nearly 200 Holmes black children in the first through fourth grades took the clearly dangerous path to enroll in and integrate the white-only schools. And in the following years, more enrolled as the higher grades were gradually added.

PECAN GROVE



The "Hoop" family.

The photos of the "Hoop" family (for lack of their actual name) and the Pecan Grove kids running at the camera give a feel of the Pecan Grove neighborhood, a black settlement on the southern edge of Lexington.

Otha Lee, the child in the center squatting and mimicking the photographer in the "Pecan Grove Kids Running..." photo is typical of the spirit of the children who hung out amidst the action at the Holmes County Freedom Democratic

Party (FDP) office.

In the winter of 1964-65, the last few COFO organizers dared to open the office in Lexington, in "the Grove," in a three-room shotgun shack. To operate in town, near whites, was



Pecan Grove kids running at the camera.



Organizers open office in "the Grove."

much more risky than in the security of black rural areas where the FDP had taken hold and spread. The Lexington FDP office became the hub of the county Movement, the resource for political, legal, and economic development in the geographical center of the county. From the porch of the tiny, usually

busy, office a white outside organizer is talking with a local leader.

Otha Lee and his friends were neighbors of the office and always underfoot—giving spirit, headaches, and laughter to the workers and local people at the office.

None of these children nor the family pictured on their porch with a hoop was a Movement actor. Like most black children and families, they lived, played, worked, and struggled to eat and survive without ever going to civil rights meetings or actions.

Still, the Movement was theirs. It was for and of them. The children and the Movement were the hope of the future.

for more information

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