

MURDER AND MAYHEM IN McCOMB

I don't remember exactly where I was when I heard that Herbert Lee had been murdered at the cotton gin in the town of Liberty in Amite County, Mississippi, on September 25, 1961. Lee had been working with Bob Moses on voter registration. But right after that news, Forman made the decision that we would have a SNCC staff meeting in McComb on October 4. McComb, Mississippi—that had to be the first time I had ever heard of the place. I had been working on my campus travel schedule for two weeks, but before I could leave on the tour I needed to know a lot more about SNCC. Forman said the best way to learn was to go to the staff meeting in Mississippi. Since Mississippi seemed to play such a large role in SNCC's current activity, I figured I better start there, so I did some quick research in the Atlanta public library—starting with McComb. I felt guilty going into a segregated library, but we needed the information.

McComb is in Pike County, located in the piney woods of south central Mississippi. Though I grew up in deepest darkest rural Alabama, I was afraid of Mississippi. My childhood was filled with blood-chilling stories of lynchings like that of Mack Parker, hung from a bridge in southern Mississippi, and Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Chicago child murdered in cold blood by supposedly grown Christian white men in Money, Mississippi, in 1955.

McComb, from its founding in 1872, always was a working-class and agricultural town. The town took its name from Henry Simpson McComb, magnate of the New Orleans, Jackson and Northern Railroad, which had its

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terminus in McComb. The new town was formed while south Mississippi was still in the potentially revolutionary grip of Reconstruction. About sixty-one years before I first laid eyes on McComb, a Southern white man arrived who would do the most to shape McComb and the surrounding piney woods. His name was Captain J. J. White, and he had just been released from the Federal War Prison. Though most would not speak of it, it was assumed that White had been convicted of war crimes committed during what became known (or mostly unknown in American history) as the Fort Pillow massacre. The slaughter occurred when rebel troops commanded by General Nathan Bedford Forrest (later to lead the Ku Klux Klan) overran the fort, which was defended mostly by uniformed black Union soldiers. When the African American troops surrendered to overwhelming force and numbers, they were summarily executed.

It was not reassuring to me to find that Captain White, a war criminal convicted of murdering black soldiers, was the one who built the sawmill south of town and the McComb Cotton Mills. Captain White's mills, along with the maintenance shops of the Illinois Central Railroad (successor to the New Orleans, Jackson and Northern) and the McColgan Brothers ice house, were the foundation of McComb's economy.

The decision to meet in McComb set a precedent for SNCC to go to wherever the hotspot of activity might be. There was no meeting in a safe reliable space in the rear—you held them on the front lines, and the meeting became part of the front-line activity. When we heard about Lee's murder, it confirmed what everybody had been thinking, that Mississippi was going to be a bloody affair—whites there weren't going to allow voter registration without people forfeiting their lives. Forman told us, "Staff needs to gear up, get to Jackson on the evening of the third, get a few hours sleep and go into McComb before daylight." With Lee's murder, the police and Klan vigilantes would be on the watch for our coming in, so we figured the best time to go in would be three or four o'clock in the morning. Forman said for safety cars would caravan together from Atlanta to Jackson. At the time, we had no new cars. Everyone had raggedy cars. I had already gotten myself

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a used car for the student traveler project. Anne Braden helped me, and it cost \$700. It was a green 1953 Chevrolet—raggedy, but a good fast car, with protective coloration.

The point of the McComb meeting was to have the whole coordinating committee ratify what the core staff was suggesting—yes, we can do voter registration, and yes, we can do direct action at the same time. Staff members were becoming policy makers, determining the direction of SNCC's work. They would then bring it to the coordinating committee for discussion, opinions, and a final decision. Events moved so fast that important decisions were being made in the field by the active staff, to be ratified later. The immediate decision was whether Moses and the others doing voter registration would do it as part of SNCC, and the answer was yes.

Nobody dreamed what that day in McComb would become.

OCTOBER 4, 1961, BEGAN for me when the Atlanta people drove from Tougaloo down to McComb. I was the only white person. Before daylight I could sit up, but by sun-up I had to be hidden, and I lay on the floorboard of the car. Every time we stopped for gas I'd be covered up completely. Once when I complained about the heavy, hot blankets—that we should have brought sheets, the others laughed and teased me about being a white cat feeling more comfortable in sheets.

Driving to Mississippi, I remembered my recent trip to Atlanta from Alabama and found I was having an emotional reaction to the big houses we passed. I hadn't seen those houses when growing up. They were the seats of powerful people, and I felt the same way about those houses that the average black Southerner did—they were totally alien, symbols of illegitimate power that I viscerally opposed. And they exercised that power over not only black people, but also poor white people. I had already developed a strong sense of populism—of being in favor of the little guy, and I realized I was off to do battle against the “big house.”

On the way into Mississippi, I was also feeling the difference between my home state and Mississippi. In Alabama you would be wary and some-

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what on guard, but that didn't compare to everybody's apprehension and tension the closer we got to Mississippi. The welcome sign at the state line depicted big magnolia blossoms, and it said, "Welcome to Mississippi, the Magnolia State." The magnolias are redolent of the antebellum South and the big plantations. We also saw the signs on the edge of small towns—for Rotary and Civitan clubs, and there was one of a saw blade with a man on a horse, saying, "The KKK welcomes you to . . ."

Whenever SNCC people went into Mississippi, there was a good bit of gallows humor. On this first time, I remember the feeling of quietness and the kind of tightening up. It was like girding for battle, then pulling within yourself so you wouldn't be so exposed—putting on some psychological armor. In the car, it would manifest itself when an experienced veteran would say, "We have to be careful here. Watch the rearview mirror. Definitely do not exceed the speed limit, and don't go obviously too slow." Someone would joke, "Yeah, you know what a Mississippi liberal is? . . . It's a man who will hang you from a low limb." Then someone said, "Listen, if we really cared about living, we wouldn't be in this situation to begin with." There was always that kind of camaraderie. We were all in it together.

From Atlanta to Jackson took us around eight hours. We left Atlanta in late morning and got into Jackson by dark. We went straight to Tougaloo College, an all-black college that became a favorite place for movement people to stay. It wasn't exactly free territory, but it was relatively free—like sanctuary. There were three cars in our group, another couple that had gone on earlier, and another couple that were joining us later. In all, there were six or seven cars. We were pretty worn out by the time we got to Tougaloo. We met in the cafeteria for a little while, and then we all went to bed.

It was an hour and a half to two hours to McComb. To get there by five, we must have left about 2:20 in the morning. The instructions were for the cars not to all go in one line but to always have two cars together. It was pretty quiet all the way into McComb, because people were continuing their sleep. I slept in a corner of the back seat so I could slip down on the floorboard very easily if need be. I put my head back, and it seemed that five

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minutes later we were coming into McComb. I remember wanting to see what it looked like, but the others put me under the blanket even though it was still somewhat dark. Looking out occasionally, I could see we were in a black section called Burgland, on a gravel road. There were shallow ditches on both sides of the street and little picket fences, and there was a little store with pool tables on the first floor of the Masonic Lodge where SNCC had reserved the upstairs meeting room. I was anxious to get to our room, so I zipped out of the car and up the outside steps into the room which was about thirty by sixteen feet. It had four windows on the long side and no windows on the other side and one each at either end. The spare, austere room was furnished with several folding chairs and a couple of tables in one corner, an American flag and a Masonic flag, and several small cabinets. Somebody brought in some breakfast. I had no idea it was going to be one of the longest and most terrifying days of my life.

PEOPLE STARTED COMING IN and gathering in little knots to say hello. “Oh, I haven’t seen you since Highlander.” “What’s this about so and so?” “What’s happening in Albany?” “Where’s Cordell?” “What’s Reggie doing?” “He’s on the way?” There was a lot of catching up. The few who I remembered meeting at various times, I went over to and greeted. They responded in such a way that I could tell they had heard a fair amount of discussion of me. Someone asked if I really thought I would be able to talk to white students about the movement. One comment really set up what happened later in the day. “You’re gonna have to be cool. You’re gonna have to stay out of things if you’re ever going to get anything done.” Bernard Lafayette always had a wry sense of humor. He said, “The white people are going to string you up, boy. They’re gonna be on your ass like white on rice. You better lay low or you’re never even gonna get to a white campus.”

It was obvious that they all loved each other—these were the veterans who had already spent time in jail together, and I remember thinking, they are not at all full of themselves—just going about their business, completely open and doing what has to be done. This was the core of the movement,

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and I was a part of it. I had gotten some idea of their bravery in Montgomery where I had visited Jim Zwerg in St. Jude hospital. I remember saying to him, "Your freedom ride is over." And he said, "Oh, no, as soon as I am able to get back on my feet, I'll go back to the bus."

That was an incredible memory for me. If a soldier gets wounded, sometimes he or she will say, "Okay, I did my duty, I'm gonna go to the rear now."

SNCC life for me really started at that staff meeting on October 4, 1961, in McComb. I already knew that Jim Forman was going to be very important in my life, but I didn't know what to make of Robert Moses at first. All I knew was the immense mystique that surrounded him (and that grew ever larger with the years). That day in McComb when I first came face-to-face with him. I was what? Enchanted, mesmerized, astounded? Yes. He was quiet. He was roaringly quiet. Here he was standing stolidly, equal weight on both feet, peering intently into my eyes. His eyes were deep brown and clear white, hooded slightly behind round gold-rim glasses. He had on a short-sleeved plaid shirt and was built a little like a boxer. He looked me directly in the eye and said simply, "I'm glad you came. Thanks for taking my messages."

People were coming into the room in ten- or fifteen-minute intervals. Bob said, "We may not have much time so we'd better get started. Everybody here doesn't know each other," and he started introductions. "We all know Chuck McDew, our SNCC chairman. Charles Jones, Reggie Robinson, Marion Barry . . ." and so on around the room.

Moses then gave a quick rundown of the local situation. Herbert Lee, a farmer who had been helping Moses organize in the black community in Amite County, had been shot to death on September 25 by E. H. Hurst, a white Mississippi state legislator from Amite County. Hurst, Lee's next door neighbor, had followed Lee to the cotton gin near Liberty. After parking behind Lee, Hurst got out of his pickup truck, walked up to Lee's truck and threatened him with a gun, telling him, "Get out of that pickup, nigger."

Lee said he wouldn't get out of the truck until Hurst put the gun away.

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Hurst refused to leave or put the gun away so Lee got out of his truck on the opposite side to leave. Hurst walked around the front of Lee's truck and shot him in the head. The body lay in the dust at the cotton gin for over three hours. A quickly-assembled coroner's jury found no cause of action against Hurst. Two black witnesses to the murder were forced to testify that Lee attacked Hurst with a tire iron. After Moses convinced them to tell the true story to the FBI and to John Doar of the U.S. Justice Department, the information was passed to the local police and the sheriff broke the jaw of one of the witnesses. (The other witness, Lewis Allen, was later shotgunned to death in December 1963 as he locked his front gate on his way out of the state.) That was more or less the report from the voter registration wing of the SNCC staff in McComb.

McDew stood up to make the report of the direct action project. "Hollis [Watkins], Curtis [Hayes], Brenda Travis and the others have just been released from over a month in jail for trying to use the white waiting room at the Greyhound bus station in McComb," McDew reported matter-of-factly. "Brenda," he continued, "returned to school yesterday and was refused admittance by the principal. Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes are going over there today with her to try to get her reinstated. If that Tom principal don't let her back in, the kids are going to walk out on that handkerchief head."

I thought later how much like a movie it was when Chuck suddenly stopped talking, and everyone in the room held their breath because of an eerie sound. I didn't know what it was at first because I was not that familiar with the civil rights anthem, but soon the words were unmistakable. I was listening to young voices lustily singing "We shall overcome." The singing got louder and someone in the room said quietly, "Holy Jesus!" Then the students, who were from McComb's Burgland High School, noisily tramped up the stairs. Without hesitating the students flooded into the small meeting room and, in my memory, they immediately sprawled on the floor. Poster boards and magic markers materialized, and they started making picket signs.

Their plan was to march from McComb to Magnolia, the county seat, to protest the murder of Herbert Lee, the August arrests of the McComb

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students, and the expulsion of Brenda Travis. This was six miles through hostile countryside! Actually, I felt fairly calm, considering the circumstances. I didn't realize at first that this march would be the first of its kind in Mississippi since Reconstruction a hundred years before. At that time, marches in Jackson were black marches of jubilation celebrating the 1870 election of Hiram R. Revels, the first black United States Senator. I remember thinking that Mississippi in 1866 refused to ratify the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments to the Constitution, yet a mere four years later enough change had occurred that Mississippi was readmitted to the union and sent a black man to the Senate.

Returning to what was going on under my nose in McComb, I felt I was only minimally involved. After all, my job was to visit white campuses, and if I got mixed up in something like this march it would be highly unlikely that I would ever be able to set foot on a single white Southern campus. Besides, I told myself, I can't go on this demonstration because my father will lose his church and my mother will lose her teaching job. Also, I said to myself, I can't go (not that anyone's asking me, of course) because I'll be the only white person in the march and that might cause more violence than usual. "More violence than usual," I thought to myself. "How much violence is 'usual' in these cases?"

During this long colloquy with myself the students finished their signs and began filing down the steps to form a line of march outside. This caused me to start talking to myself again. "I'm lucky," I thought to myself, "I know what I'm going to do—or in this case, what I'm not going to do. I'm definitely not going to go on that march."

For a fleeting moment I wondered how the other SNCC people decided who was going to go and who was going to stay behind to mind the store. Suddenly it hit me, "What the hell am I talking about . . . what about these kids . . . what's going to happen to them . . . and what about their parents . . . and what about their jobs? This is Mississippi, for Christ's sake . . . in 1961 . . . these kids are going to be massacred."

About half the kids and some of the SNCC staff people had filed out when

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I slipped into the line and headed down the stairs. Nobody said anything to me and I learned later that this was the SNCC way. Nobody ever suggested that such and such a person be part of any particular direct action. Each person made up his mind each time. There were no orders.

LEAVING THE GLOOM OF the Masonic Hall I was suddenly blinded by the sun of a glorious, brilliant October day. The black people of the Burgland community in McComb, Mississippi, were sky high, right up there with that sun. Smiling, laughing black faces lined the unpaved streets or hung over their front fences and whooped with joy to see this spectacle in deepest, darkest Mississippi. There was banter between the townspeople and the young marchers. We were the old guys, McDew, Moses, and I. I was all of twenty-one, and maybe McDew and Moses, a little older.

As we approached the railroad tracks things began to get quieter until you could hear only the shuffle of feet on dusty gravel. Even the weather, it seemed, began to change as we crossed from “nigger town” to the sidewalks of white McComb. The sky seemed darker and the footfalls were quieter until this nervous quiet was shattered by a shout,

“Zellner, I’ll kill you . . . you dirty bastard. I’ll kill you!” At first I thought I was hearing things. Nobody here knew me. I’d never been to Mississippi before and even these kids, I was sure, didn’t know my name. They knew I was one evermore standout eyesore of a white man in that all-black march, but they didn’t know my name. I kept looking for the source of that scream, “Zellner, I’ll kill you.” The scream seemed to get louder and louder until I finally located a red-faced, bald-headed white man leaning halfway out of a pickup truck.

“Doc,” I thought, “good ole Doc from Huntingdon College, captain of the basketball team, my nemesis from school, the man who hated me most, the Klansman who always talked like my first two names were ‘nigger lover’ as in ‘nigger lover’ Bob Zellner.”

“What luck,” I thought, “I never knew where the son-of-a-bitch lived and now by the greatest good luck I’ve found out.”

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As I stared dumbfounded at Doc it occurred to me that the whole town, maybe even the whole state, was rapidly mobilizing to annihilate us. Chains and pipes materialized from nowhere. A speeding car cracked through our line trying to run someone down. Students scattered in unison like a school of fish in the presence of a shark, then immediately come back together when the clear and present danger was past. One man ran his old truck into a telephone pole trying to hit some students, then leaped out with a pipe wrench, swinging it wildly over his head like a club. Our people were beginning to be hit.

When the line approached the City Hall in McComb, it was clear that our intention to pause briefly and then proceed to Magnolia was not going to work. Not only was it too late in the day to risk the open country but our progress was blocked by a huge mob of white people that had formed in the street just beyond the City Hall.

What happened then, as I learned later, was typical of SNCC. When in doubt, pray. Hollis Watkins, who I could see from my place in line, stood up on the stoop of the City Hall, raised his left hand, bowed his head and began to pray. I remembered that he was one of the ones who had just gotten out of jail. In a quavery voice Hollis said, "Oh Lord . . ."

Just then a beefy red-faced policeman reached for him and said loudly, "You're under arrest!" Hollis raised both hands over his head and shouted, regretfully, I thought, "Oh Lord!" It was as if he was saying, "Oh Lord, here we go again . . . how much jail time do I get this time?"

It wasn't funny at the time but every time I tell this story I think of the incident with great merriment. Humor and religion: sometimes I don't know which sustained us the most. As other marchers attempted to lead the group in prayer, the same thing happened as with Hollis. Then a small mob of white men began to gather around me. Without seeing him I could sense that my old friend Doc was in this group somewhere. They'd reach over and shove me or lightly poke at me and then look at the police who were by now standing around waiting their turn to arrest a praying marcher. Each time a member of this small mob would hit me the cops would wink

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or look away and their body language said very clearly, “He’s fair game, get him and get him good.” I clutched the Bible that Charles Jones had given me earlier. I was standing quietly, determined not to show them any fear. Martial arts training was coming in handy now because I was able, without showing much effort, to minimize the effects of these blows by imperceptibly moving at the very last second, slipping a punch here, rolling with a punch there. At this point I had not even raised my arms to cushion the blows.

As the licks came faster and heavier now I became aware that Bob Moses and Chuck McDew had quietly moved to my side to absorb some of these punches. One stood in front of me and one in back and they faced the attackers without attempting to fight back. They were both stocky and solidly built and they seemed to have absolutely no fear. I would remember this moment as a time of a brotherly male bonding as fierce, I suppose, as any welded in war. When those two—McDew, a dark, superbly trained and conditioned football player, and Moses, light-skinned with the raw power of a boxer, came to my aid I experienced a wild moment of exhilarating insanity.

“We can,” I thought, “whip all these lowlifes.”

Then, with some disappointment, I remembered we were supposed to be nonviolent. This nonviolence was certainly new to me because I was Southern born and bred and a pretty fair street fighter, as well as being trained in boxing, wrestling, and fencing. The Zellner boys had had to fight their way into every little Southern town their Methodist preacher dad had ever been assigned to.

That moment with me, Moses, and McDew against the mob was fleeting, however. I was in the throes of a most pleasant feeling of security, serenity, and absolute joy to find such brave stalwarts for companions when the cops came over and grabbed the two of them. To this day I remember the sound of the billy clubs and blackjacks the cops used as they thudded into the heads of Moses and McDew. I was thinking, “How can one human do this to another human being—especially with everyone watching?”

Then I thought, “If they act like this in public what will they do to a person in their jail?” At this point I became aware of a strange feeling of

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detachment. I was being beaten while I watched my new-found friends being brutally gashed and bloodied and yet I felt at peace. I had a sense of standing above myself—of being an observer—of actually watching myself being harried by a small knot of men at the edge of a much larger mob in the street. My senses seemed—and now I am convinced they were—heightened to almost super proportions. Then, with Bob’s head bleeding profusely, they dragged him and McDew off. At that point, they could easily have arrested me, but the police obviously didn’t want to arrest me, nor did they want to stop the mob from beating me. I watched in great fascination as the larger mob armed itself. They already had pipes and bats and wrenches and now they were methodically tearing down a brick wall in order to fill their hands with missiles. I heard their screams now as the large mob—the one in the middle of the street—was pleading with the small mob around me, about twelve or fifteen men, to drag me out into the middle of the street.

Next thing I knew, they marched our whole crew into the town hall. I believe I was the only person left outside, and it seemed clear that the police didn’t intend to protect me or keep the little mob around me from taking me out to the bigger mob. It would have had a different outcome when they first started pummeling me, if the police had come and said, “Out of here,” and they could have arrested me very easily. It was like they wanted me to be beaten to death and could say, “There was nothing we could do, there were four hundred people beating this guy to death. Do you expect us to risk our lives for this guy?”

“Bring him here,” the larger mob screamed, “We’ll kill him. Bring him here.” Their banshee screaming sounded like grief—a moan, then a shrill trilling like you hear sometimes in middle Eastern countries during a time of mourning. Then dutifully my little mob began to pick me up and move me bodily toward the street. Up to that point I had been rather passive. I held my Bible close.

Suddenly a thought popped into my head. I heard very clearly in my father’s preaching voice, “God helps those who help themselves.” “Yes,” I thought, “if they take me into that street there is no force on this earth that

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can save me. They will definitely kill me.”

With this thought in mind I very deliberately placed the Bible on the steps of City Hall and with both hands took hold of the railing pipe that ran down the center of the City Hall steps. It occurred to me that this railing was placed there to help old men and ladies ascend and descend the three tiers of steps to the City Hall.

“I’ll try to ascend,” I thought quixotically.

Then it became a contest. When I showed this first bit of resistance, the mob, which I thought could not get any louder or more frenzied, exploded. My mind returned very rationally to the contest at hand. If I can hold on here, I have a chance to survive. If they pull me loose, I die. I don’t know what held them back but the large mob in the street continued to rely on the small group of men around me.

“This is the vanguard,” I thought. “These are the militant Klansmen.” Their mettle was being tested now so they set about with grim determination to detach me from my railing. Several grabbed my belt while others took hold of my legs, stretching me out horizontally from the pipe, which I clutched in both hands. There were, I estimated, two or three men holding each of my legs. Others attempted to pry my fingers loose from the somewhat rusty pipe. I was glad it was rusty because, I reasoned, the friction would improve my grip. I calmly noted that my strength was incredible. How could this many men not pull me loose instantly? I was actually in pretty fair condition going into this fight, having just come off years of ballet dancing with the Montgomery Civic Ballet, exhibition diving, and the aforementioned boxing, wrestling and fencing.

“So,” I thought, “this is a good contest. I certainly have good motivation at any rate.”

It didn’t seem odd to me at the time that I would be having these rather detached, meandering thoughts, all the while trying to dodge the blows aimed at my hands now by a lead-filled pipe and the odd baseball bat and wrench. Things were happening fast but my thinking and my physical actions seemed to happen even faster. With lightning speed I would watch the

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pipe or the wrench descend toward my hands and then at the last possible millisecond I'd release the grip of the endangered hand and grab the rail in a different place. This would give me also a dry, blood-free grip on the rail, which would hopefully enable me to move further up the steps. My mind seemed to be keeping up with many things at one time. The men pulling on my body fell into a rhythm. They'd pull hard and then let up momentarily to gather for another pull. When they leaned back, I'd move up the pipe and hold on for their next pull. It kept coming into my mind, "This is a great contest and I think I'm winning."

This moment of hubris was short-lived, however, as one man behind me became suddenly more hysterical and went for my eyes. I felt particularly vulnerable there because my hands were fully occupied holding onto the rail. This man slipped his hands over my head from behind and began probing into my eyes with his fingers. He seemed to have a purpose in mind beyond just putting his fingers into my eye sockets, and then I realized he was trying to get hold of my eyeball. "Will he really be able to get a grip on my eyeball?" My sociology training came into play at this point as I thought, "This is what they mean when they say 'eye gouging'—this is mayhem."

Once again I decided to help myself if I could without letting go of the rail. I'd wait until he just about got the eye where he wanted it, between his thumb and finger, and then I'd jerk my head in such a way to make the eye slip from between his fingers.

The hysteria of the men around me seemed to reach a peak and they all started climbing on top of me. I supposed they reasoned if they could not pull me loose from that hand rail then they could weigh me down enough to break me loose. So they played how many grown men can we pile on top of Zellner. While they were piling on I realized I had reached the top of the flight of stairs. The last thing I remember was that my head was sticking out of the pile and rested on the top step. I literally could not move. I could do nothing to stop the big brown boot that crashed into my head again and again. Just before I passed out, I thought, "So this is the way I die—like a football being kicked in a scrimmage."

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The next thing I was aware of was a man's face in my face saying over and over again, "I shoulda let them kill you, I shoulda let them kill you!" I later learned that it was the police chief, George Guy, saying, "I shoulda let them take you."

Even before I realized I was in the police chief's office I said in my calmest voice with as much authority as I could muster, "I'd like to make a phone call."

There was a whoop of laughter but I recall one voice that said, "For goodness sake let the man make a telephone call. Nobody knows where he's at." Then, I noticed for the first time that the mob had filled the corridors of City Hall. The open door to the office was filled with rough characters holding every known weapon. Both sides of the door were lined, it seemed, from top to bottom with squeezed red faces peering at me. One great joker kept hollering, "You think I can hit him between the eyes from here with this here wrench?" Then he'd shake his Stillson wrench at me and grin like he was a great friend of mine.

When my eyes cleared up a little I repeated I'd like to make a call. We'd been trained to insist on a call and to never leave a jail willingly without first letting someone know where we were and where we were going. The chief said, "Why, you're not under arrest. You're free to go. Go on, get out of here."

He motioned toward the door and the crowd in the door parted leaving only the sweating faces stacked along the door jamb. I could tell the terror was about to begin again and I didn't want to show fear so I said rather loudly, "I do not choose to leave and I insist on making a phone call."

"You insist, do you?" the chief said in a rage. He grabbed me by what was left of my shirt front and hurled me toward the door.

"Get out of my office you dirty nigger-loving son-of-a-bitch. I only brought you in here cause you looked like a good nigger lover—a God-damned dead nigger lover."

He shoved me into the hallway and I was swept down the hall and out the front door. I was thrown unceremoniously into a beat-up car which filled

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up quickly with men from the mob. They all had on white shirts—two in the front and two in the back with me. The leader was the driver, although he never said anything, and I don't know to this day if any were law officers. The two in front were pretty old and beefy with big pot bellies and real red faces. To me, they seemed hard-core Klan guys. In the back were a couple of younger guys who were supposed to be in fighting trim—the very active Klan guys. I wasn't tied up and wasn't handcuffed either, because it might have signified that the police had some jurisdiction over me. They could easily say, "Well, he was in the courthouse, and he was mouthing off, and these people dragged him off, and there was nothing we could do." This was a lynching in process as far as I was concerned, and I was the lynchee. They had a noose. They never put the rope around the neck. They just brandished it in front of me.

Other cars and some pickups nearby roared to a start like everybody was going to drive the Indianapolis 500. Off we went into the countryside. My eye was really hurting now but I immediately asked where we were going. Someone in the car said, "If you're lucky you might make it to the jail in Magnolia."

I HAD NEVER BEEN to Magnolia and had no idea where it was until we got to the edge of town and a sign pointing to the left said "Magnolia" six miles. The car I was in and the long caravan of pickups sped past the sign. Instead of turning left toward Magnolia we continued straight on out into the country. I became convinced I would not survive the day. Once again now, just like during the beating, a sense of peace descended on me and I marveled at the contradiction. When it seemed there was a chance I'd survive I'd become frantic and nervous with an overpowering sense of dread. When it looked certain that I would die I would become calm. These people had been trying to kill me all afternoon, and now there didn't seem to be anything to stop them. At this point, however, I sensed some indecision on their part. Before it had been "Just let me at him. I'll rip him limb-from-limb." Now they didn't seem to know exactly what to do.

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Somebody said, "Everybody saw us leave town with him."

"Yeah," someone else said, "but ain't nobody goin' to do nothing to us for doin' anything to him."

"That's true," another said, "but we can get some of the boys from Amite County to take him off our hands. We'll say we put up a fight but they got him away from us anyway." Another man from the front seat turned around and said with some glee, "Yeah, we can even black one another's eyes."

Every time I'd try to say something they'd say, "Shut up, nigger lover."

A man who looked like my uncle Harvey called me a nigger-loving motherfucking Jew communist queer Goddamn Yankee from New York City. That was too much for me. "Look, friend," I said, "Five out of six is not bad but I'm not from New York. I'm from further south than you are. I'm from East Brewton, Alabama."

That seemed to really piss them off but it did get their attention. I figured that they must know that I wasn't a Yankee because Doc had been in the mob before and he must know these yahoos. He's probably back there in one of those pickups, I thought.

I don't know why it seemed so important to me for them to know I wasn't a Yankee; maybe it was because I was still convinced they intended to kill me. So I took the opportunity to look each of them in the eye and ask, "Do you think you are capable of killing me by yourself or do you have to do it like cowards in a bunch?"

I was playing with their heads, because I was convinced that they were going to kill me, and I wanted them to know that it was a cowardly thing to do. This was not Southern justice. I was getting more and more Southern as I went along so I speculated out loud that there was not a man among them that could whip me in a fair fight.

They started arguing among themselves, and the CB radios were working, and I knew they were in contact with somebody somewhere. "Well, we can't just string him up. Everybody saw us leave with him. Is anything is going to happen to us? They have us hanging him, and I ain't gonna do it. Let's turn him over to those boys down in Amite County. None of them were in

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McComb.” This was the Klan way; they could call on an action squad that would come from somewhere else.

They stopped the car, and, after removing some rails at a cattle gap, proceeded to the back of a cow pasture near some trees. Stopping under a field pine, a man from another vehicle, a rickety old flatbed wood truck, ostentatiously removed a rope with an elaborately tied hangman’s knot. For the second or third time that day I heard myself saying under my breath, “These people are overreacting. They’ve got to be overreacting. This is after all, for Christ’s sake, my first demonstration.”

WHEN THEY STARTED ARGUING again among themselves I thought I had a chance. The few men and vehicles around me in the woods were outnumbered by the cars and pickups just beyond the ridge of the field back up on the road. Every pickup truck, it seemed, was equipped with gun rack and a long whip antenna. Then they loaded me back into one of the pickups and off we went again. This time they did take me to the jail in Magnolia. It was a low, squat little brick building standing out in a yard under a huge live oak tree. It didn’t look big enough to be a jail, but then it occurred to me I had never been in a jail before. Just because it looked like a jail you’d have in a photographer’s studio to take joke pictures of Cousin Jane and Uncle Henry in prison stripes, didn’t necessarily mean it wasn’t a jail. Anyway, it would have to do because it was the only one offered to me. By the time the caravan reached the jail I realized that most of the entourage had quietly slipped away. I remember feeling some ambivalence toward the uniformed police who came forward to escort me to the cell. I thought, “Are they protectors or not? Is this part of an elaborate charade leading still to my undoing?”

The next thing that happened was a trusty, a black prisoner, came by and proceeded to put about five or six mattresses in my cell, saying, “You might need these.”

I realized he was trying to tell me something. But I said, “I think one is enough.”

And he said, no, take them. He said there was talk about them com-

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ing into the jail for me that night. He said, "If they come with gasoline or anything like that, you get in the corner and put those mattresses over you and hold out as long as you can."

I realized I was still not safe. I was very touched that he was so concerned. I mean, he didn't ask me who I was or what. But he knew what was going on. So then I had to sweat that out.

I didn't have long to collect myself and my thoughts in my cell before another uniform came to take me out. I had been trying to find a shiny surface to use as a mirror so I could assess the damage to my face and my body. The guard caused me to jump when he shouted,

"Okay, let's go!"

I really didn't want to leave that cell. My sense of time was totally screwed up. I didn't know if I had been in there ten minutes or two hours. The guard opened a door to the outside and the daylight streamed in. I immediately went limp and fell to the floor. I did not intend to leave that building without maximum resistance, no matter how nonviolent I was supposed to be. The uniformed guard suddenly laughed and said, "It's all right. The Feds want to talk to you."

Disbelief, fear, anger, relief, everything flooded over me at once and I realized my system was finally overloaded. I felt like a package, highly prized, and at the same time despised as something unclean. I felt that for hours since those moments on the City Hall steps I had simply been carried along by the tide, tossed here and there willy-nilly wherever the force would take me. Now I finally put my foot down.

"No," I shouted with determination, "I will not leave this building. I have not been allowed a phone call to a lawyer. If it is the FBI, as you say, then they can come here to see me."

"Okay," the guard said with a grin and stepped out the door. In a conversational tone of voice he said to someone outside, "Here he is but you'll have to come get him."

At that four crisply dressed look-alike white men with white shirts and ties peered in at me on the floor and said pleasantly, "We need the sun so

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we can take pictures.”

They lined me up against the outside wall of the jail and asked me to face the low sun in the west. When they began taking pictures of my wounds I stood there rather numbed and thought to myself, “All this because I had the audacity to march with some Mississippi black young people.”

The sheriff and assorted deputies and a few remnants of the mob were standing a short distance away when one of the FBI agents sidled up to me and whispered, “It was pretty rough out there on the City Hall steps, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said, “It was nip and tuck there for a while.”

“Well,” said the agent, “we didn’t want you to think you were all alone out there. We got it all down. We took real good notes. We wrote it all down.”

Suddenly I realized that the FBI had stood there through the whole thing and had taken notes. First they were gonna watch me being made into a greasy spot in the street by this mob and then they were gonna watch me being taken into the car, being taken off for my last ride. And I realized that they had recorded a lynching which for no reasons of their own hadn’t happened. And I was so mad I didn’t want to speak to them anymore. I never ever had any illusions about the FBI or the federal government from that point. That taught me more about politics in this country and about the Feds than anything I ever learned after that. I realized they had recorded my death and they had gotten a description of everybody. They were going to be ready to testify or whatever, but it wasn’t going to make a difference about my poor, damned body. So I went back in the cell.

Years later when the FBI refrain, “We can’t protect. We can only investigate” had become a grim joke with us in SNCC, I thought back to that afternoon and realized the many times the cops could have stopped violence in its tracks with very little effort. The mob in McComb had constantly looked to the police for approval of their violence. The cops gave their approval and the federal officers did nothing to stop the violence. When that little FBI agent whispered in my ear I learned a valuable lesson. Never depend

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on the federal government. Especially never count on an agency headed by J. Edgar Hoover. I didn't really want to talk to them after that. I'd take my chances with my Southern haters. I knew where they stood.

THE NEXT PERSON I saw was Jack Young, one of the few black lawyers at that time in all of Mississippi. He came down from Jackson. I didn't realize it until later, but he was almost paralyzed with fear. He looked cool to me then, talking to me in jail. He asked, "How are you doing?"

I said, "Fine, but I'm going to need a toothbrush, and a few supplies, some books and stuff like that. You know, whenever you get a chance."

He said, "What are you talking about?"

I said, "Well, I guess I'm going to be in here a few days, right?"

I knew there was a SNCC policy of "Jail, no bail." If you got arrested you just stayed. We didn't want to tie up a whole lot of money in bail. You stayed until you could work it out somehow. He said, "Bob, if you make it through the night, you're going to be lucky. This whole state is mobilizing to get your ass. I don't mean to unduly alarm you, but you have got to get out of here. We're trying to get you bail right this minute."

So I said, "Well, okay, whatever Forman says, whatever you guys work out."

That's my last clear memory of that day. I believe Jack Young got me out because I left the jail with him. I remember coming out with him and seeing his car, a new blue Cadillac. Someone had taken a glass cutter and carved "KKK" into all his windows.

I spent that night at Momma Cotton's house in McComb with Reggie Robinson, Diane Nash, Marion Barry, and Charles Jones. Most everyone else had been arrested. We left town before daylight and reached Jackson just as the sun was rising, rested up, and drove the next night back to Atlanta. It was a demoralizing experience for us. We viewed our return to Atlanta as a retreat. For me, it was my first demonstration and my first time in jail. Some of the others had been in sit-ins and on freedom rides. They'd been arrested before. But it was like nobody had been around the murderous atmosphere

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and mayhem of McComb. It had been very brutal.

Ella Baker was instrumental in rallying the troops. We continued our staff meeting in Atlanta. We met for a number of days. We began to evaluate what had happened. And Miss Baker said, "It's going to be rough now, you know. We just have to stick it out. We can't leave. We've got to go back to McComb." That was the last thing anybody wanted to do, but eventually SNCC staff did go back both for the trials and for continuing voter registration.

CHUCK McDEW, SNCC'S CHAIRPERSON, Bob Moses, the leader of the Mississippi voter registration, and I were the only "adults" arrested during the march and prayer service on October 4. We were charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Brenda Travis was sixteen at the time, and over a hundred students from Burgland High School walked out when Brenda was expelled for being arrested in the sit-in at the Greyhound bus station. I felt like telling the judge that it was Brenda Travis who contributed to my delinquency. She was a much more experienced freedom fighter than me; this was my first arrest, her third.

My father and I had decided to test the criminal defense system in Mississippi by trying to get a white lawyer to represent me. Attorneys Jess Brown and Young were among the few black lawyers admitted to practice by the state courts. William Higgs in Jackson was the only white lawyer in the state willing to defend civil rights workers and he was being banished from the state on a drummed-up morals charge.

Dad and I discussed our plan with Jim Forman and my present lawyer, Jack Young. At my arraignment in city court I would inform the judge that I had fired Attorney Young due to the large case load he carried. I would explain to the court that the difficulty arose from the fact that no white attorneys would represent civil rights workers. Young and Brown represented most freedom defendants in the state and the burden was too great to allow an adequate defense for the hundreds in jail.

The first date for our trial was in mid-November. Judge Brumfield began

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by lecturing us on race relations.

“Before you came here, Bob [Moses], the races here in McComb got along fine. Now you outside agitators have spread discord and caused the community to separate. We had good relations between the races but you are leading these children like lambs to the slaughter, and if you persist, then they will be slaughtered.”

Then Judge Brumfield said something that stuck in Bob Moses’s craw. “Isn’t it true, Bob”—always the first name, never “Bob Moses,” and certainly never “Mr. Moses”—that before you came to our town, several of our fine colored citizens had been allowed to register to vote? Isn’t it a fact that that happened right here in Pike County?”

When I was called to stand and face the bench, the judge read the charges: disorderly conduct, breach of the peace, resisting arrest, and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. When he asked how I pleaded, I answered in a strong voice that I was not guilty.

Brumfield looked up then and, seeing that I was standing alone, asked, “Are you represented by counsel, Mr. . . . Zellner?” I explained that I could not get a single Mississippi lawyer to plead my case.

“What’s wrong with Jack here? Wasn’t he representing you?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered, “‘Jack, here,’ as you refer to attorney Jack Young, no longer represents me.”

“Why not? Isn’t Jack good enough?” Brumfield inquired.

“Mr. Jack Young is an extremely good lawyer, Your Honor,” I replied, “But he and his associate, attorney Jess Brown, are handling almost all the civil rights cases in the state of Mississippi. Over a hundred of his clients are involved in this case alone. Mr. Young and Mr. Brown need some help. As you know, sir, these two men are incredibly hard-working and skilled at what they do. They are among the few Negroes admitted to practice in the state of Mississippi, but I am confident they are not the only attorneys competent to practice constitutional law.”

Judge Brumfield looked more and more uncomfortable as I spoke to the court and the audience. The entire black community seemed to be present.

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“Young man,” the judge interrupted, “have you made any effort to obtain counsel or is this just your speculation?”

Exactly the question I was waiting for—I pounced on it. Talking fast, I told him Dad and I had left no stone unturned to find a lawyer in Mississippi. I pointed to Dad who was sitting on the front row holding a folder documenting our contacts with John C. Satterfield, a white Mississippi lawyer who happened to be the current president of the American Bar Association. Brumfield sputtered and seemed to be looking around for help. While he was thus speechless, I took the opportunity to quote from Satterfield’s letter to me: “Attorney Satterfield’s letter reads in part, ‘Mr. Zellner you are a disgrace to your race. If you want to be a Negro, why don’t you just turn black? I wouldn’t represent you under any circumstances and I doubt that any white lawyer in the great state of Mississippi would either.’”

I went on that Daddy and I had written, phoned, and telegraphed more than a hundred Mississippi lawyers whose answers were substantially the same as Satterfield’s.

Brumfield rallied in an effort to regain control over his courtroom. “Why don’t you just continue with Jack . . .,” since I had put him on the spot for not granting attorney Young the courtesy title of “Attorney,” the judge fumbled for words. “. . . your lawyer, the lawyer of record, you know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean, Judge, but even you have to admit that this attorney is completely overworked. That’s why I fired him and I guess you will have to allow me to represent myself, unless you have a suggestion as to where I can find a good Mississippi lawyer willing to represent me in this important case.”

“Me find you a lawyer . . .? This case is continued until the next term of court, and you, Mr. Zellner, better come with your lawyer!” The gavel went BANG!

The judge didn’t want to hear from Daddy because he had written letters to the judge, the sheriff and Governor Ross Barnett demanding that I be protected when I showed up in court. Reverend James Abraham Zellner

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had done the whole Christian thing by telling each level of law enforcement that some advisors had recommended that I not even show up for court and forfeit the bond because it was too dangerous to appear. I had never given any thought to that option but Dad explained that we felt honor-bound to return for trial because that's what we promised when I was bonded out of jail.

Daddy had told them all, "I know you fine Southern gentlemen will guarantee the safety of my son. He has undertaken an obligation to return and you are sworn to protect him and his fellow defendants."

From then on, each time I showed up for a trial date and the judge found that I had been unable to get a lawyer; he continued the case until the next term of court. They never got around to trying me. I hope the bond money was returned to SCEF.