

## THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: THE RIVER OF BAPTISM

*The greatness of America is the right to protest for right.*

—Martin Luther King, Jr., April 3, 1968,  
the day before he was assassinated.

*I think that people aren't fully free until they're in a struggle for justice. And that means for everyone. It's a struggle of such importance that they are willing, if necessary, to die for it. I think that's what you have to do before you're really free, then you've got something to live for. You don't want to die, because you've got so much you want to do. This struggle is so important that it gives a meaning to life. Now that sounds like a contradiction, but I encourage people to push limits, to try to take that step, because that's when they are really free. I saw this happen during the time of the sit-ins and the formation of the Student Non-violent (sic) Coordinating Committee.*

—Myles Horton, 1989

*We've got to fill the jails in order to win our equal rights.*

—activist Patricia Stephens

*To think how little it required to be an activist in those days and what work it is today. Writing a column, dining with a Negro, carrying a sign in front of a rotten theater, going to A&M occasionally, even eating regularly in the old Soda Shoppe. No National Guard, just rednecks—how easy it seems—but I'll never forget the fear I experienced.*

—white activist 1971

*While a student at Florida A&M University during the 1960s, I experienced first hand the humiliation, frustration, anxiety and the hurt of being on the other side of bigotry, prejudice and discrimination. As one of African descent, I was not allowed to eat in any establishments in town; try on clothing in stores; or use a public facility. I could not enter the front door of a doctor's, dentist's or optometrist's office, nor could I sit in a city park; go to a movie theater or get a room at a hotel or motel. . . . At the time, the only thing I enjoyed about Tallahassee was Florida A&M University and leaving Tallahassee.*

—black activist Bernard Hendricks, 1990.

What is this talk of protest, dying for justice, filling of jails, intense fear, frustration, and anxiety? A movement that began idealistically ran smack into a wall of prejudice and strong-willed action to resist change. Killings, beatings, jailings, terrorism, and state-sponsored repression or indifference were standard responses to citizens demanding equal treatment. The civil rights movement was a hard, tough fight against almost overwhelming odds. In thinking and reading about the 1960s, it is easy to forget that violent, confusing, and rapidly changing environment. The period was historically discontinuous. The protest era broke from the past and does not continue into the present. Confusing images abound because the intense struggle was so different from everyday life and politics. When our recent history gets retold, it tends to be smoothed out, sanitized, and structured in an orderly fashion.

On February 1, 1960, four black freshmen at North Carolina A&T—David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and Ezell Blair—sat down at the lunch counter in a Greensboro F. W. Woolworth store and refused to leave until they were served. Without prompting from any existing civil rights organizations or adult black leadership, they launched a new phase of a student-led struggle for freedom.<sup>1</sup> Within a year and a half student sit-ins had spread to over twenty states and one hundred cities. At least 70,000 black and white students actively engaged in demonstrations and rallies. More than 3,600 people were arrested. At least 141 students and 58 faculty were dismissed. Hundreds of other students withdrew from universities to protest the expulsions (Matthews and Prothro 1966; Orum 1973).<sup>2</sup> The sit-ins were more than the typical youthful enthusiasm on college campuses during that period. One activist observed that businessmen may think sit-ins are like panty raids, but they haven't had their sociologists in the field recently (Moore 1960). Demonstrations could be mobilized quickly in different cities. Black students realized that disruptive politics could change patterns of southern segregation faster than a reliance on legal approaches. In many locations students became impatient with their elders and formed their own separate organizations to push militantly for change.<sup>3</sup>

Three major surveys provide insights about the protests. The level of protest participation was very high. Matthews and Prothro (1966) report that 39 percent of black students were taking part in the protest movement by 1962. Orum (1973) reports that 69 percent participated in protest. Orum's figure is higher because the survey was conducted during a period of rapid growth in the movement and his sample

consisted of seniors who had four years to become involved in campus-based protests. Gurin and Epps (1975) found that during the 1960s about 20 percent of white students participated in various forms of student protest or political action; however, 70 percent of black college students participated. In the local movement center of Tallahassee 63 percent of Florida A&M University (FAMU) students participated in the protest movement during the 1960–63 period.

To fully understand how these dramatic events created an activists' generation and changed the larger society, it is necessary to step back in history. Student activists were baptized into adult politics by the protest movement. One out of six demonstrators was arrested; one out of twenty was thrown in jail; one out of ten was beaten, clubbed, gassed, pushed, spat upon, or harassed in other ways. Only 11 percent said that they experienced no negative effects from having protested (Matthews and Prothro 1966). The movement shaped their orientation and participation in politics. As Karl Mannheim ([1928] 1972:111) stated, "I only really possess those 'memories' which I have created directly for myself, only that 'knowledge' I have personally gained in real situations. This is the only sort of knowledge which really sticks and it alone has real binding power." The events covered in this chapter were the real political education for activists. Rather than having a vicarious, academic exposure, activists gained personal knowledge and learned about democracy from the streets, mass meetings, and jails.

In organizing this book I have structured it chronologically into three time periods: the protest era of the early 1960s, the activists ten years later in the early 1970s, and the activists twenty-five years later in the mid-1980s. Throughout I have tried to remain faithful to C. Wright Mills's (1959) dictum that all our lives represent the "intersection of biography and history." This is particularly important for members of social movements, whose political education is often intense and disjunctive. As Piven and Cloward (1979:xx) in their book *Poor People's Movements* state, "Once protest is acknowledged as a form of political struggle the chief question to be examined must inevitably be the relationship between what the protesters do, the context in which they do it, and the varying responses of the state."

During the period between 1955 and 1960 that led up to student protests, there were at least 487 movement actions.<sup>4</sup> Local black churches, colleges, and NAACP chapters played significant roles. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were involved in only 26 percent of these actions, suggesting an ever-widening base for the protest movement (McAdam 1982). Students,

learning from their elders, were the last of the major organized groups in the African American community to initiate widespread insurgent activity.

In his analysis Morris (1984) shows that the four freshmen who sat-in in Greensboro had important organizational links to the adult protest movement. They knew about King's movement in Montgomery. They were familiar with previous sit-in demonstrations that occurred in Durham between 1957 and 1960. They belonged to the Youth Division of the NAACP, which was headed by Floyd McKissick. McKissick claims he knew all four men and that they studied the new tactics and strategies of the movement (Morris 1984). When students did become a major political force in 1960, they demonstrated the use of innovative tactics and the ability to use local resources to build strong organizations.

## BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS

Surprisingly, African American family background characteristics and individual orientations and psychological traits are not significantly different for protesters than for nonprotesters. Gurin and Epps (1975) found that black students who took part in the campus protest are not distinguished from nonparticipants by different demographic and family influences. Rather, the key influences on student activism tend to be campus based. The location of the university, the major issues on campus, the intellectual exposure to critical analysis, and campus organizations and support groups have stronger effects on student activism than other factors. Protest was likely to occur and participation was the highest in those environments where local movement centers provided structured opportunities to protest (Gurin and Epps 1975; Haines 1988; Morris 1984; Orum 1973).

From the third day of the sit-ins in Greensboro there was token white participation. Black and white civil rights protesters emerged from entirely different circumstances. The majority of black college students came from poor, working-class backgrounds, and most were the first generation to attend college. This largest segment of the black population—the working class—is frequently overlooked in research. The findings from research presented here support Gurin and Epps's (1975) study and Zinn's (1964) observations, which show that activists were disproportionately drawn from the "striving working class." FAMU students came from extremely modest families who had aspirations for upward mobility for their children. Black working-class families put an

enormous value on education and made extraordinary sacrifices to support their children's college education.<sup>5</sup> In most families both parents of FAMU students worked. It was not unusual to find the father as a day laborer and the mother as a school cafeteria worker, or to have the father a career enlisted man in the military and the mother working in a dry cleaners. There was also a pattern of serving the rich, with the father working as a chauffeur or gardener and the mother as a maid. It was extremely rare to find both parents employed in "white-collar" occupations. Among the FAMU protesters, 69 percent had fathers with fewer than four years of high school education; 56 percent of non-participants had fathers with under four years of high school. Of those arrested, 71 percent had blue-collar fathers. Among the nonactivists, 79 percent had fathers in blue-collar occupations.<sup>6</sup> The activists did not come from privileged, middle-class backgrounds. In 1964 the Geschwenders (1973) studied the relationship between measures of relative deprivation and protest participation among sociology students attending FAMU, and they also found that the students were primarily from working-class backgrounds. The middle-class students were not more likely to participate in protest activities than working-class students. In contrast, active white students came from highly educated, professional, higher-income families (Flacks 1971; Keniston 1968). Their mothers were generally employed in professional occupations and the families tended to be urban and somewhat secular in outlook.

The supportive environment for protesting was also much different for blacks and for whites. Only 3 percent of the southern black adult population disapproved of the sit-ins, and black college students protested within the context of a local black movement center. Not only did they have strong community support, but they also had firm backing from fellow students and many faculty within black universities. In contrast, only 1 percent of southern whites approved of the sit-ins, and as rare as they were, only 18 percent of southern white liberals approved of them (Matthews and Prothro 1966). In an interview one of the white activists reported leading a dual life: one as a member of a traditional southern family and another as a college demonstrator opposed to segregation.

Another major difference between black and white protesters during the early 1960s was the degree of integration into the mainstream of campus life. Black activists belonged to more campus organizations, held more offices, and participated more often in student government and policy groups on campus. In contrast, white civil rights activists were less integrated into the campus mainstream and less in control

of student government. During the height of the civil rights struggle in Tallahassee, white student government leaders at Florida State University (FSU) did not necessarily approve of segregation practices, but they strongly disapproved of student demonstration tactics.

Some southern white civil rights activists had deep religious convictions that contradicted segregation; others were students who had "avant-garde" interests. They were committed to an existentialist philosophy that demanded acting and doing regardless of the likelihood of success. These beliefs were part of the intellectual culture on college campuses in the early 1960s (Gitlin 1987). Sandra Cason participated in an Austin, Texas, sit-in when she attended the University of Texas and lived in the Christian Faith and Life Community house. She captured the sense of white commitment when she addressed a National Student Association (NSA) convention:

I cannot say to a person who suffers injustice, "Wait." Perhaps you can. I can't. And having decided that I cannot urge caution, I must stand with him. If I had known that not a single lunch counter would open as a result of my action, I could not have done differently than I did. If I had known violence would result, I could not have done differently than I did. I am thankful for the sit-ins if for no other reason than that they provided me with an opportunity for making a slogan into a reality, by making a decision into an action. It seems to me that this is what life is all about. While I would hope that the NSA congress will pass a strong sit-in resolution, I am more concerned that all of us, negro and white, realize the possibility of becoming less inhuman humans through commitment and action, with all their frightening complexities.

When Thoreau was jailed for refusing to pay taxes to a government which supported slavery, Emerson went to visit him. "Henry David," said Emerson, "what are you doing in there?" Thoreau looked at him and replied, "Ralph Waldo, What are you doing out there?" (Hayden 1988: 41-42).

Cason's statement suggests that the early white southern activists were different from most students. They had deep moral and political commitments that they were willing to put into action. Although not social isolates or marginals, white civil rights activists could be found in progressive, politically oriented student groups, and in avant-garde literary or intellectually oriented groups (White 1964). On a more

personal level, one of the white activists claims that white males all dated black women during the protest (interview). Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken (1971) found that early white civil rights activists were motivated by a progressive political ideology and humanistic values. They were not the mainstream, social conformist type of student, nor were they likely to control or be leaders in student government during the early 1960s.

White activists were distinct from both the black activists' generation and the other white students who did not support or participate in the civil rights struggle. There was only a smattering of thin support for white civil rights activists in the white community. A few liberal professors in the social sciences and liberal arts offered encouragement, guidance, and money for bail bonds. In an interview, one former activist commented that students participated if their major professors approved of the movement and avoided direct involvement otherwise. One church serving the campus ministry encouraged limited white involvement in the Tallahassee civil rights struggle. The student newspaper at FSU was staffed with moderately progressive reporters and writers whose views were reflected in editorials and news stories. There was also a small group of avant-garde students affected by the emerging beat generation and the questioning of social conventions. By and large, however, the white community strongly opposed the militant tactics of the protest movement.

In contrast, black students had almost universal support from the black community. Their professors, student government, local ministers, civil rights organizations, and parents were proud of the students' challenges to segregation. One exception to family support was the response to a Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) demonstrator who sat-in and was arrested. In an interview he explained that he came from an orphaned family of six children. His oldest brother sent money home while serving in the Army. His oldest sister, who kept the family together, told him when he was arrested, "The next time you want to sit-in, you can sit in our living room."

Tallahassee's white activists shared the characteristics of the Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken (1971), Flacks (1970), and McAdam (1989a) studies. Although the white activists' parents were no more affluent than the nonactivists' parents, they were somewhat better educated. According to the activists, their parents were also more active in politics, with a higher rate of both voter participation and activity in political organizations than the parents of nonactivists. As a group the white civil rights activists were more secular, but among the activists

there was a contingent motivated by strong religious convictions. Few activists in the South were Jewish.

College orientation and experiences were significantly different for white activists and nonactivists. For the white activists the first basic goal in college was to change rather than fit into the system. They also wanted to delve into intellectual pursuits and to develop the necessary personal and social skills to function as adults. Nonactivists overwhelmingly (66 percent) chose preparing for an occupation as their first goal. The activists were much more likely than the nonactivists to major in the social sciences (57 percent versus 24 percent) and the arts and sciences (32 percent versus 21 percent). In their academic environment, they were more likely to discuss controversies over basic values, learn about social problems, and see in the outside world the relevance of what they learned in the classroom. Their average age of twenty-three was the same as that of the white volunteers who went to Mississippi in 1964 (McAdam 1989a), but they were somewhat younger than the nonactivists.<sup>7</sup>

## TALLAHASSEE: A LOCAL MOVEMENT CENTER

Detailed analysis of Tallahassee as a local social movement center provides the historical context for the baptism into politics. Over a period of eight years there were significant bus and economic boycotts, sit-ins, picketing, voter registration drives, and mass mobilization, all of which characterize a protest era. In this section the major events will be described and the relative success of the strategies and the protest in a hostile political environment will be examined.

On May 27, 1956, five months after the Montgomery bus boycott, the South's second major bus boycott was launched in Tallahassee. Students initially spearheaded the insurgency. Wilhelmina Jakes, an elementary education major at FAMU, and her roommate Carrie Patterson, a FAMU English major, boarded a crowded bus and sat down in the front row. The driver told them they could not sit there. Having ridden on desegregated buses in South Florida, Ms. Jakes asked, "Why?" Getting no answer, she said, "If I can't sit where I want to, then I'd like to have my money back, please" (Morris 1990). The driver refused to return the money, drove to a gas station, and called the police. The police arrested the young women. After teaching school for thirty-three years, Ms. Jakes, now Mrs. Street, returned to Tallahassee to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. She described the event to a reporter:



"About this time I started to get real upset because of how they were treating us. Here they were treating us like criminals for paying to ride on a public city bus, I didn't know who they thought they were, I wasn't going to let them insult me. They were treating us like we weren't human beings and it really got to me." At the station, they were charged with inciting a riot. She was incensed. "I was astounded that they would say such a thing. We hadn't done a thing wrong. My guess is that they thought we were trying to make a statement here because of what was happening in Montgomery." (Morris 1990)<sup>8</sup>

Two important events occurred the next day. A cross burned in the yard of the two arrested students and FAMU students held a mass meeting led by Broadus Hartley, president of the Student Government Association. The students decided to boycott all buses and encourage all other blacks using buses to find other means of transportation. The chaplain at FAMU, the Reverend James Hudson, recalled, "Students were there in full numbers, it was a full auditorium, as many faculty as could get in—many of us were there. Well, the students decided that they would protest the action of the bus company and the police officers, and that they would withdraw student patronage of the bus company and that they would ask the community to join them in withdrawing patronage or boycott the bus company" (Killian 1984:773). C. K. Steele, a black minister who rose to prominence as a new black leader, stated in a 1978 interview, "Without the students, there would have been no protest, there would have been no movement. They are the militants. They are the soldiers" (Killian 1984:779).

Tallahassee had the local resources of black students and faculty at FAMU, an NAACP chapter, and a black ministerial alliance. The alliance took over the boycott almost immediately. One of the newest ministers in town, J. Metz Rollins, headed the first committee to talk to bus company officials. The ministers' leadership was crucial because as a group they were not as vulnerable as others to economic and political pressures and reprisals (Neyland 1989). The Reverend C. K. Steele was a key organizer and president of the local NAACP chapter. He was a relative newcomer to Tallahassee, having moved to the city just three years prior to the boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr., was his good friend, and later Steele became the first vice president of the SCLC.

Once the boycott was initiated, Steele started the Inter-Civic Council (ICC), modeled after the Montgomery Improvement Associa-

tion. The NAACP was initially afraid to sponsor the boycott because of anticipated negative reactions from authorities, but later it did provide legal funds and advice. Numerous mass meetings were held at the black churches to encourage blacks not to ride the buses and to organize a successful boycott. Initially, two meetings a week were planned, but the leaders found it necessary to hold two or more meetings each evening at black churches during the mobilizing phase of the boycott. Attendance at these mass meetings was the baptism into protest for many Tallahassee citizens. An effective car pool was organized by Dan Speed, a black business owner whose store was an important meeting center for black leaders. As the chair of the Transportation Committee for the ICC, Speed was the "banker" of the movement, which could not have maintained a boycott without his able assistance (Killian 1984). The ICC made the identical demands as the Montgomery bus boycott, but they were rejected by the City Commission.

The boycott was so successful that the bus company quickly lost money. Most of its riders, 60 to 70 percent, were black. During the boycott 90 percent of the black passengers did not ride the bus (Smith and Killian 1958). When they stopped riding, the company was soon in financial trouble, and a fierce struggle ensued over the next nine months. The new militant black leadership of the ICC stuck to its position. It also expanded the bus boycott into a voter registration drive and an economic boycott of stores. The boycott lasted for eighteen months.

Tallahassee, although a state capital with two universities, was a small southern town with sentiments and values more akin to rural Georgia than to Miami. A survey completed shortly before the boycott revealed that the large majority of white residents opposed desegregation on principle and 75 to 80 percent specifically opposed bus desegregation (Smith and Killian 1958). City officials had a clear mandate to take a hard line against the bus boycott (White 1964).

The boycott's effect on the black community was the opposite. White (1964) argues that the boycott generated feelings in the black community that broke the social and psychological bonds of oppression. Smith and Killian (1958) reported almost universal black community support for the boycott. Zebedee Wright, elected FAMU student body president in 1956, credited the bus boycott with increasing the racial and political awareness of students (Hemmingway 1989). Rabby (1984:92), in her extensive historical analysis of the event, which uses many firsthand interviews, reports that, "blacks in Tallahassee were on the move. Feelings of self-esteem, of pride, and of accomplishment

infused the black community and filled individual blacks with a new hope and belief in their future."

The charge has been made, however, that the Tallahassee bus boycott was a failure. Segregated seating returned after the protest stopped, and by 1957 the newly created ICC moved from a direct-action, protest organization to a planning and discussion group (White 1964). This critique does not fully take into account the harsh political environment. As the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was to discover in other areas of the Deep South, Tallahassee was too tough to easily crack, particularly early in the black insurgency phase of the civil rights movement. The white power structure used every means available, outside of ordering the assassination of the boycott leaders, to stop the protest.<sup>9</sup>

Rabby (1984) describes most, if not all, of the threatening and repressive actions. These actions are worth reviewing to establish the environment of limited political opportunities and situational factors that affected strategic decisions. Governor LeRoy Collins, like other white authorities, used the old bromide of calling the bus boycott the work of outside agitators. He suspended all bus service after a critical test of the new federal court ruling which stated that segregated seating was unconstitutional. The Florida Supreme Court had judges whose racism influenced their decisions. One judge wrote the following in his opinion: "Segregation is not a new philosophy generated by the states that practice it. It is and has always been the unvarying law of the animal kingdom. . . .When God created man he allocated each race to his own continent according to color. Europe to the white man, Asia to the yellow man, Africa to the black man, and America to the red man" (Neyland 1989:40-41). The judge neglected to explain why the white man dominated America.

In the summer of 1956 the legislature acted by convening a special session to resist desegregation, during which a committee was established to investigate the NAACP. Public employees, particularly FAMU faculty, were threatened with firing if they participated in the protest. On February 1, 1958, the legislative investigative committee, under the leadership of its chair, Senator Charley Johns, announced that it was going to investigate the extent of "Communist activities" in Florida. It targeted the NAACP and the Florida Council on Human Relations. This cold war, anti-Communist hysteria seems unusual until it is remembered that southern whites thought that the NAACP was a Jewish, Communist conspiracy hatched in Moscow.

The attorney general of the state, Richard Ervin, ruled that Speed's car pool was illegal and insisted that the Supreme Court ruling desegregating buses in Montgomery, Alabama, only applied to that case and must be specifically tested in Florida before segregation laws in Florida could be considered invalid. The governing body of the state universities, the Board of Control, (1) issued a strong warning to students to stay out of protests or accept strict disciplinary measures, (2) maintained a policy against black and white students fraternizing, and (3) put pressure on the two university presidents to control faculty and students with the accompanying threat of a loss of future funds. The president of FAMU, George W. Gore, warned faculty, staff, and students not to participate, and the president of FSU, Doak Campbell, expelled a white Ph.D. candidate. The student's "crime" was inviting three black foreign exchange students from FAMU to attend an FSU party for international students. At a meeting with a governor's commission, FSU's president also reported that he had been given profile reports on white students sympathetic to integration. In his estimation the students had erratic and unstable personalities.

The City Commission was the locus of much of the white resistance. On June 3, 1956, the commission denied the formal demands of the ICC for desegregating the buses and ordered the police to harass the organized car pool. C. K. Steele was the first to be arrested for speeding. The commission also planted a mole inside the ICC to gather information. It had all eleven leaders of the ICC and ten drivers arrested for operating a transit system without a license. The commission worked hand in hand with the Chamber of Commerce in refusing to negotiate with the protest organization. It pressured local judges to follow its mandates and interpretations of the law. In the meantime, the city shut down the financially ailing bus service. When the bus company wanted to restart the bus service in compliance with the federal ruling on Montgomery, the city arrested the bus company manager, Charles Carter, and nine drivers! It also tried to divide the black community by pressuring more conservative black leaders to criticize the boycott leaders and to offer compromises acceptable to whites.<sup>10</sup>

Another source of resistance was the local newspaper, which editorialized against the protest leaders. Elaborate and sanctimonious posturing was combined with criticisms of direct action. A white Presbyterian church which had provided some money to support the development of a segregated black Presbyterian church fired the black minister, the Reverend J. Metz Rollins, because of his leading role in the boycott. Leaders of the boycott found their auto and life insurance

canceled. They had difficulty securing bank loans. The White Citizens Council urged white fraternities to mount a campaign against integrationists at FSU. The hooded KKK marched in front of C. K. Steele's home, paraded in front of the courthouse protesting the bus boycott, and held mass rallies (Rivers 1989). Vigilantes burned crosses in the yards of participants. Whites threw rocks at the cars of people attending ICC meetings and shouted threats over the phone and through church windows. Shotgun blasts were fired into C. K. Steele's home and into two black-owned businesses. Death threats were common. The heavy personal costs for these adult black leaders were so great they could not sustain direct-action protest through the remainder of the 1950s.

But although the battle to desegregate the buses may not have been a clear victory, the local civil rights movement was developing out of the challenge. A group of black FAMU and white FSU students began to meet secretly in 1957, drawn together by an existential commitment to change.<sup>11</sup> They were impatient with their elders and wanted to undermine university segregation. The students wanted to mobilize segments of the two student bodies to have a direct confrontation with segregated institutions. They felt a strong kinship with Martin Luther King, Jr., and the protest movement in Montgomery. To make themselves less controversial and vulnerable to harsh sanctions, they developed the facade of wanting to establish and broaden communication between the races (White 1964).

In addition, black students started an integrated Social Action Committee at FAMU. After learning about the organization, the FAMU administration stopped the meetings, but the students continued to build an organization base at FSU in semisecrecy. Their political action included participation in a national letter-writing campaign in support of a federal bill outlawing segregation in the armed forces. They also participated in the 1959 protest that erupted after the rape of a black FAMU coed by four white youths. In this incident, another black coed who escaped was able to quickly identify the rapists and they were arrested. The rape galvanized the FAMU student body into protest (Rabby 1984). In order to head off a planned mass march against the police department by angry, armed students, student government leaders held an all-day rally on FAMU's campus and classes were canceled. In Smith's (1961:225) words: "Again, the student body took action. They closed the University by refusing to attend classes, held mass meetings, and soon they were on national TV demanding justice." Events leading up to the rape trial were carefully monitored. The students and the NAACP demanded justice but not the death penalty,

which they opposed because four young blacks were on Florida's death row for raping white women. National and international media covered the trial. The guilty verdict for whites raping a black woman was the first in the Deep South (Rabby 1984; White 1964).

## CORE AND THE SIT-INS

During the 1959 summer two FAMU students, Patricia Stephens and her sister Priscilla, were visiting relatives in Miami. Encouraged to attend an interracial workshop sponsored by CORE, they were reluctant until promised a dinner in Miami Beach after the workshop.<sup>12</sup> The Stephens sisters came from a politically active family. Their stepfather was a high school civics teacher and their mother was a Palm Beach County Democratic party committeewoman who participated in black voter registration drives (Rabby 1984). They were to be the next sparks kindling the fire of protest. CORE, a northern-based organization trying to establish itself in the South, was formed in the early 1940s to challenge segregation. Its constitution declared, "The purpose of the organization shall be to federate local interracial groups working to abolish the color line through direct non-violent action" (Meier and Rudwick 1973:18). In academic parlance, CORE would be considered a radically committed, single-issue organization. CORE developed an elaborate ideology and formulated strategies and tactics to challenge segregated institutions. The training program for potential members was extensive, requiring investigation before action and then nonviolent action. Yet it limped along for almost twenty years waiting for its time to come.

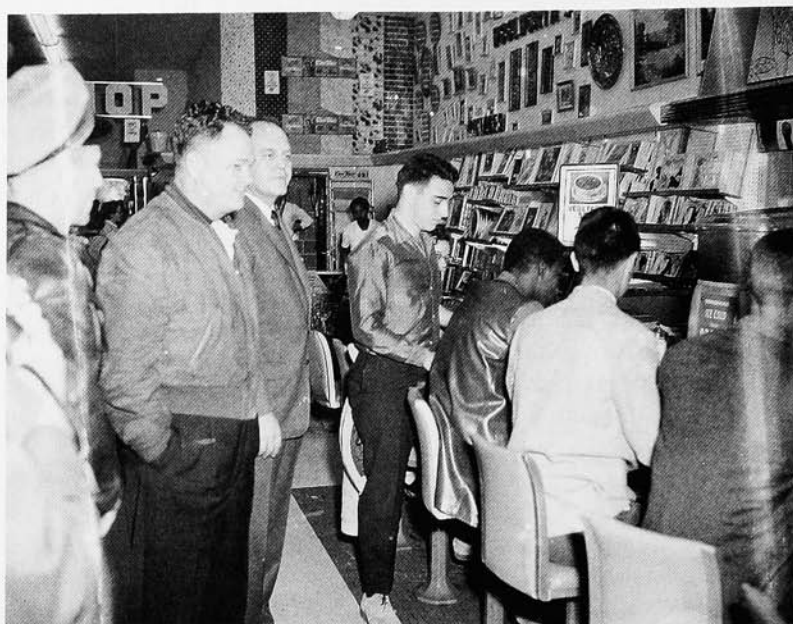
In 1959 CORE held its first southern interracial institute in Miami. Over six hundred people attended the first session on nonviolent direct action. CORE tested local lunch counters and theaters to document the extent of segregation. It launched sit-ins at a Miami lunch counter six months prior to the famous sit-ins in Greensboro. However, it succeeded only in closing the lunch counter, not in integrating the service. Patricia and Priscilla Stephens returned to Tallahassee primed to apply the lessons they had learned (Killian 1984; Rabby 1984).

Early in the fall semester they canvassed dorms at FAMU and met with C. K. Steele and other identified activists. The first organizational meeting was in October 1959 with thirty students, including the FSU white students who had been meeting secretly. Fifteen students joined. The national CORE office was impressed that this CORE chapter in

the Deep South was interracial. Saturday training and indoctrination meetings were held at the NAACP-ICC office, and three strategies emerged: gathering information on intra- and inter-city bus segregation, exploring desegregation of the city-owned airport, and desegregating local lunch counters. On November 11, 1959, three CORE members sat down at a "white only" lunch counter in Tallahassee. They were refused service and asked to leave. This was three months before the famous Greensboro sit-ins (Killian 1984). Test teams of blacks and whites found they could ride the city buses with only occasional harassment. Blacks were able to purchase tickets at the "white only" counter at the Greyhound station but were refused at Trailways. CORE appealed for relief under the Interstate Commerce Clause, but received only recognition, not federal assistance. Long months were spent building a small organization, testing and following CORE policies, and attempting negotiations before direct action (White 1964).

Two weeks after the February 1, 1960, sit-ins in Greensboro, lunch counters were again targeted in Tallahassee. On February 13, CORE organized the first sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter. James McCain, a field director of CORE, encouraged students to sit in as part of a regionally coordinated strategy. Supported by their deep humanitarian convictions that they would be able to win over the hearts and minds of white authorities, they had little idea there would be a bitter three-year struggle to desegregate lunch counters. Ten protestors—eight FAMU students and two high school students—sat in. They were refused service and left the store after two hours.

Patricia Stephens and Richard Haley, a FAMU music instructor, emerged as the two major leaders of the Tallahassee CORE chapter. They prepared CORE volunteers for the next sit-in on February 20. Seventeen sat in at Woolworth's. The mayor arrived and told them to leave or be arrested. Six left and eleven were arrested. The Stephens sisters, two sons of C. K. Steele, six other FAMU students, and an older woman who was a veteran of the bus boycott and an ICC member were marched to jail through an angry, jeering white crowd. The sit-ins around the country and the local arrests dramatized the need for action. Hundreds of FAMU students planned to attend the trial of the eleven protestors, but when authorities got wind of their plans it was postponed. Governor Collins denounced the sit-in demonstration and both he and the local newspaper defended the sanctity of private property over the rights of citizens to be served (Killian 1984; Rabby 1984; White 1964).



*Student sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter on March 12, 1960. The Police Chief and City Manager are observing the protesters before making arrests. (Florida State Museum Archives)*

On March 12, after three weeks of planning, CORE held its largest sit-in. Patricia Stephens mobilized two hundred FAMU students to march downtown. Part of the planning involved outmaneuvering the police who were waiting to prevent the sit-ins. Two activists, who were in ROTC, suggested a military diversion tactic. As explained by one activist, a large force distracted the police while those planning to sit-in took an alternate route along railroad tracks to the department store. Six whites and six blacks sat in at Woolworth's. They were quickly arrested and led off to jail. The day became confusing and tense. Another group of white CORE activists sat-in at another lunch counter, but the black CORE members failed to show up as planned because they had encountered an angry group of armed white men led by the local head of the White Citizens Council. The police retreated from the scene, exposing the students to imminent attack. A strategic decision was made to disengage and march back to campus, where 1,800





*FAMU students protesting outside Woolworth's, 1960. (Florida State Museum Archives)*

students were mobilized to march back to town. They were met by City Commissioner William Mayo and the police. Mayo ordered the students to disperse, and the police immediately began firing tear gas and pushing the students back toward campus (Rabby 1984).

Altogether thirty-five students were arrested that day, among them the editor and reporters for FSU's newspaper, the *Florida Flambeau*. Recorded comments reveal how ugly the situation was. Shouting at the white reporters, the police said, things like the following (Delevan 1960): "Your parents would be ashamed of you." "The niggers are better than you are." "You sons of bitches." "All those niggers live for is to produce bastards, and you want to help them." The police were not the only ones to overreact. The governor confined African American students to campus. The Chamber of Commerce demanded that strong disciplinary action be taken against faculty and students at both universities who were active in the protests. The City Commission stated that it would not tolerate "unlawful" demonstrations. The editors of the *Florida Flambeau* were told by university officials that the paper would be suspended unless coverage of the sit-ins was toned down. Enormous



FAMU students about to be tear-gassed by the police. They were protesting the arrest of twenty-three students who sat-in at lunch counters. (Florida State Museum Archives)

pressure was put on the universities' presidents.<sup>13</sup> Some students were disciplined and Haley's contract at FAMU was not renewed.

Again the cold war, anti-Communist hysteria rose from the slime. Governor Collins announced that the protests were following "a Communist script whether or not it is written from the Kremlin" (*Tallahassee Democrat*, March 15, 1960). A white student disrupted CORE by claiming that Carl Braden of the Southern Conference Education Committee, who came to Tallahassee to offer aid and financial assistance, was under a cloud of suspicion because of his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (White 1964). Later, during the protesters' trial, Judge John Rudd told the students that their attorneys, Tobias Simon and Howard Dixon from the ACLU, were "closely affiliated with the Communist Party in the United States."

The trial of those arrested in the first sit-in received national attention. Eight of the eleven chose jail over bail and refused to pay their fines. They were the first students in the country to accept a jail

sentence rather than be fined and go free (Rabby 1984). Patricia Stephens wrote CORE, "We could be out on appeal, but we strongly believe that Martin Luther King was right when he said, 'We've got to fill the jails in order to win our equal rights'" (Rabby 1984:137). The national publicity produced hundreds of sympathetic letters sent to the jail, including one from Martin Luther King, Jr., which stated, "As you suffer the inconvenience of remaining in jail, please remember that unearned suffering is redemptive. Going to jail for a righteous cause is a badge of honor and a symbol of dignity. I assure you that your valiant witness is one of the glowing epics of our time and you are bringing all of America nearer the threshold of the world's bright tomorrows" (Rabby 1984:140). The students, suffering under brutal conditions, composed freedom songs and defied their jailers. The political awakening of one activist, as explained in an interview, started in Dr. Haley's music theory course and fully blossomed during discussions while in jail. They were in jail for almost two months, and when freed went as minor celebrities on a nationwide speaking tour to raise funds for CORE.

Meanwhile, Governor Collins was undergoing a dramatic change of heart.<sup>14</sup> In a statewide television-radio address from Jacksonville on March 20, 1960, he pleaded for racial understanding and stated that if black patrons' business was accepted at a store, they had the moral right to be seated at the lunch counter. The speech caused an uproar in the Florida house and senate, where there were threats to convene a special session to address the sit-in issue. It also had a dramatic effect on black citizens. In an interview, one of the activists vividly recalled the speech. It was the first time a major southern official had recognized the legitimacy of the protest. In his later years as an elder civil rights statesman, Governor Collins took particular pride in the fact that he was successfully able to veto many bills patterned after the most radical segregationist actions taken in other southern states. Collins (1989:11) declared, "It is difficult to imagine what the world would be like without the work of nonviolent insurrectionists." He was referring to such people as Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend C. K. Steele, and the students Wilhelmina Jakes and Carrie Patterson.

When the CORE-sponsored Freedom Riders came through Tallahassee, there were arrests at the Tallahassee Municipal Airport. During this period, it is clear that students were leading the way and reviving the local civil rights movement, as they were in many other areas (Branch 1988). In a statement by a coalition of black ministers pledging to continue the fight for freedom, they stated, "We are ashamed that it was not us who first led the struggle. We commend

the young people for taking the leadership. They are far ahead of us but we are rushing to catch up" (*Tallahassee Democrat*, March 20, 1960). There were further sit-ins and arrests at department stores and other public accommodations.<sup>15</sup>



Boycott and picketing downtown Tallahassee stores because of lack of progress in desegregating the lunch counters at Neisner's, McCrory's, Woolworth's, Walgreen's, and Sears stores in December 1960. (Florida State Museum Archives)

The sit-ins in Tallahassee have received a mixed assessment. Rabby's (1984) assessment, although very positive, does state that the students were demoralized by the manifold forms of repression and that civil rights organizations did not have the monetary and legal