

Chapter 5

Faith is living in scorn of consequences.

Clarence Jordan, founder of the cooperative
Koinonia Farm, Americus, Georgia

"Breaking the Respectability Barrier" Tax Resistance and Picketing

In 1948 Maurice McCrackin met Wally and Juanita Nelson, a black couple who were active, confrontational pacifists. Wally Nelson changed McCrackin's life, as he had changed the lives of many over the years. McCrackin spoke of him with the greatest admiration: "He's a person of peak conviction. Just absolutely committed to the unity of the human race."¹

An energetic, muscular man, small in stature, with a style at variance with the popular image of the dreamy pacifist, Wally Nelson grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, the son of a Methodist preacher. A conscientious objector (Nelson described himself as a "conscientious *asserter*") during World War II, he had walked away from a Civilian Public Service camp rather than finish out his time. Although the CPS camps were technically initiated and run by the historic peace churches--the Mennonites, Brethren, and Quakers--Nelson came to feel that the very act of going to these camps was a form of cooperation with the war effort that in a way legitimized the concept of the draft. For walking out of CPS, Nelson was imprisoned for thirty-three months. While incarcerated in Cleveland, Ohio, he had helped stir up more trouble by smuggling out information about the terrible jail conditions. Juanita Morrow, a reporter who covered the story for the *Cleveland Call and Post*, soon became a close friend of this stubborn and principled man.² For several years she visited Nelson in prison, and eventually the two entered a lifelong partnership working for peace and social justice.

In 1948 Wally Nelson came to Covington, Kentucky, just across the river from Cincinnati, to visit a man he had met while in prison. That friend urged him to attend a meeting in Cincinnati of a group interested in improving race relations. There he met Maurice McCrackin, and that meeting evolved into the Cincinnati Committee on Human Relations (CCHR), an affiliate of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Wally Nelson later joked that he came to Cincinnati to visit for two weeks and ended up staying seven years.

Wally and Juanita Nelson had been very much influenced by CORE, which James Farmer, George Houser, and others had founded in 1942 with the goal of using nonviolent, direct-action techniques in the struggle for racial justice. The group that the Nelsons and McCrackin helped form chose the name "Cincinnati Committee on *Human* Relations" rather than a name that emphasized *race* or *Negro* because Wally Nelson did not like racial designations or even the concept

1

2

of race. He perceived the connection between words and reality and sought to shape reality by the conscious choice of words. He always insisted, "I'm a member of the human race."

Not long after they first met McCrackin, the Nelsons brought Lillian Smith to Cincinnati for the CCHR's first official organizing conference. Smith was well known as the author of the 1944 antilynching novel *Strange Fruit* and would later become one of the first southern white supporters of Martin Luther King, Jr. With her interests and experience, she spoke eloquently to the concerns of the CCHR.

In the early days, the committee had a large number of members who were students at Hebrew Union College, a Reform Jewish college and seminary in Cincinnati.³ Many participated in the "Fellowship Trios" promoted by the Woman's City Club, or volunteered at the Findlay Street Neighborhood House. Later they were to be among McCrackin's strongest and most consistent supporters, standing by him when his activities became even more controversial.

One of CCHR's first tasks in 1948 was to set goals and focus its energies. At the time two of the most blatantly segregationist institutions in the city were the local music colleges: the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, located at Highland and Oak streets, not far from General Hospital, and the Cincinnati College of Music, located near Music Hall and McCrackin's West End neighborhood. These two institutions, predecessors of the College Conservatory of Music of the University of Cincinnati, excluded blacks from their student bodies. When pressed on this issue, the school administrators, Luther A. Richman and Fred Smith, asserted that the admissions policy was not anti-Negro but merely economic: they did not want to alienate their students, who came predominantly from the South.⁴ Yet conservatories like Oberlin, Eastman, and Juilliard had long been integrated, with no detriment to enrollment.

The CCHR chose their target and their tactics with care, first publicly raising the issue of racial discrimination, then consulting and negotiating with officials in an attempt to resolve the dispute, and only later picketing or using nonviolent direct action. When face-to-face negotiations with music school administrators got nowhere, CCHR felt that it had no choice but to picket the schools. This was McCrackin's first experience carrying a picket sign, and he felt a bit silly about it, as if it violated a minister's dignity. But this seemingly insignificant action taken at age forty-two proved to be a turning point in his life. Up until this time, McCrackin had made use of conventional approaches to persuasion: sermons, letters, meetings, petitions, statements of concern. Now he was being asked to do something that many of his colleagues found reprehensible for a minister. Picketing probably freed McCrackin from his rather staid conception of himself, his friend and fellow activist Amos Brokaw suggested; carrying a picket sign meant "breaking the respectability barrier," something one had to do sooner or later if one was to bear an absolutely consistent witness for an unpopular cause.⁵

Meanwhile, Wally Nelson and McCrackin were spending a good deal of time together. Nelson helped out with McCrackin's other projects whenever he could. In 1948 the two were sorting Christmas toys donated to the Findlay Street Neighborhood House, carefully removing all tanks, guns, and war toys. Nelson said to him, "You're busy taking all the guns and war toys out

3

4

5

of those Christmas presents before you distribute them. Do you ever think that next March 15 you'll be paying for *real* guns?"⁶

The question stung McCrackin's conscience. He had not thought enough about the connection between federal taxes and war. He had also not considered thoroughly what anyone could do about this state of affairs. The very question was a moment of epiphany for him and quickly led to the decision to be more consistent in his peacemaking. When his 1948 taxes came due, he decided to withhold 80 percent of the bill, the percentage that he calculated went to support past and future wars. As the years passed, McCrackin's position on the payment of war taxes clarified. "Filing income tax for me," he has said, "is putting a pinch of incense before Caesar's image."⁷ What began as sermons and progressed to protest and picketing had now become full-fledged defiance of the law in the name of peace.

On March 8, 1949, a week before tax day, Maurice McCrackin publicly announced his refusal to pay the 80 percent of his tax bill that went to support wars. This news was picked up by both the *Cincinnati Post* and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.⁸ Sitting on a bus from Cincinnati to his home in Wilmington, Ohio, Ernest Bromley saw this news item and realized immediately that McCrackin was the man that his friends the Nelsons had been wanting him to meet.⁹

The Bromleys at that time lived and worked in Wilmington, some fifty miles north of Cincinnati, where they were trying to integrate the public schools. Parents of a baby boy, they earned their living in ways that precluded being taxed because they too objected to the payment of war taxes. Marion contracted for secretarial work at Wilmington College, and Ernest did odd jobs--dishwashing, farm work, house painting, carpentry--while they undertook their real vocation in the community, which was to work for peace and social justice.

Ernest Bromley was a native of New England. His father, a pastor, had moved often to different churches throughout the New England states; his mother had died when he was only six. He, like McCrackin, had trained for the ministry, studying at Duke University and Union Theological Seminary. One of his most important influences in college was Edgar Scheffield Brightman, the Boston University professor who would years later have such a profound influence on Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁰ After ordination as a Methodist minister, Bromley initiated his ministry in North Carolina. The traditional ministry was not to interest him long, however. Because of his differences with the official church, especially in matters relating to war, he resigned his ministry in the mid-1940s and moved to New York City to work for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR).

Bromley's wife, Marion Coddington, one of five children from a working-class family in Akron, Ohio, was employed for some time after high school as secretary to the general counsel of Firestone Tire Company. In that important position she gained an on-the-job education in business and law. Bright and unconventional, she had survived a bout with tuberculosis as a young woman. Her long convalescence allowed her the leisure to read and to think deeply about the moral questions she had so fervently discussed in her church youth group. Once she recovered,

6

7

8

9

10

she pursued life with vigor. An avid golfer, she also owned a half-interest in a Taylorcraft airplane, which she piloted around Ohio and neighboring states. Increasingly, though, she felt uncomfortable with the enthusiasm for war that she felt among her peers during the early 1940s. She questioned her own materialism and yearned for a way to serve the cause of peace. Finally she left her job, sold her share in the airplane, and moved to New York City, where she took a considerable pay cut to work as secretary to the famed pacifist, preacher, labor organizer, and FOR director, A. J. Muste. Around 1943, Ernest and Marion met. Shared interests and work brought them together and eventually led to marriage, with A. J. Muste officiating at the wedding.

In 1948, the Bromleys joined Muste and many other well-known pacifists, including David Dellinger, Bayard Rustin, and Milton Mayer, in founding Peacemakers.¹¹ An organizing conference held in Chicago in August 1948 was attended by hundreds from across the United States. It was Muste who had sent out the call for a new, clearly radical pacifist coalition more willing to engage in bold, direct action on controversial issues than the established pacifist organizations. This new group would take risks, vigorously oppose the draft and militarism, and advocate nonviolent direct action, especially war-tax resistance. Like members of the FOR, the American Friends Service Committee, and a few other groups, the Peacemakers were prepared to risk their careers, their freedom, even their lives, to attain their goals. At first most of those involved thought this new group would be a rather loose confederation of like-minded people offering mutual support, but eventually the semiyearly gatherings and the resultant newsletters took on a life of their own.

The basic principles, or "disciplines," of the Peacemakers were outlined in one of the earliest issues of the *Peacemaker* newsletter. The elements of this discipline included accepting nonviolence as a way of life for resisting totalitarianism and achieving social change; refusing to serve in the armed forces and resisting conscription; maintaining a simple style of living; finding a livelihood compatible with Peacemaker values; working for inner transformation; and involvement in Peacemaker activities and programs.¹² Many Peacemakers interpreted these disciplines as a commitment to civil disobedience and spent time in jail for their beliefs. In fact, an outsider might think that jail was a rite-of-passage for Peacemakers, a test of true commitment.

Because of similar values, commitments, and friends, the Nelsons knew that Maurice McCrackin should become acquainted with Ernest and Marion Bromley. Wally Nelson had spoken highly of the Bromleys' work to McCrackin, and he had told the Bromleys all about McCrackin. Their coming together in the spring of 1949 would affect the rest of their lives and transform McCrackin from a respectable liberal into a controversial radical.

By 1950, Peacemakers were working closely with the CCHR. A *Peacemaker* article of April 25, 1950, mentions a three-pronged action called "Operation Brotherhood," which involved CCHR's campaign to integrate Cincinnati's two music schools; a campaign to desegregate the schools in Wilmington, Ohio, where the Bromleys lived; and a campaign to support unjustly-dismissed Negro teachers in Xenia, Ohio.¹³ This alliance of the Peacemakers with McCrackin and CCHR was a powerful combination of energies and wills.

11

12

13

In spite of the picketing and publicity and meetings with administrators, little progress had been made by 1950 in the attempt to integrate the music colleges. Another, more dramatic step was called for. In an attempt to raise money and consciousness on the issue, Juanita Nelson invited Muriel Rahn, the black soprano, to give a concert at Cincinnati's Emery Auditorium. Rahn responded generously, and her concert on May 24, 1950, was well received. The next day E. B. Radcliffe praised the concert in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and raised the larger issue of human rights in the arts:

The performance of a trained artist not discriminated against in preparing herself for [a] career spoke eloquently for the obvious--that artistic ability and the matter of skin pigmentation have no relationship; that artistic ability and the opportunity to develop it are most worthy of encouragement without restriction.¹⁴

What happened after the Rahn concert had a greater personal impact on CCHR organizers than the concert itself. Juanita and Wally Nelson, along with Michael Robinson of Hebrew Union College and Sally Edgemon, co-chair of CCHR, all dressed up and euphoric about the success of the concert, went out afterward for dinner. The integrated group tried to enter a nearby Howard Johnson's restaurant, but they were brusquely refused service. The four insisted that they be served and refused to go away quietly. Although blacks were clearly not welcome, they were finally allowed to eat in the back. Deflated, the four CCHR members recognized that they had their work cut out for them if they meant to challenge Cincinnati's entrenched layers of racism.¹⁵

At this point McCrackin and ten other local ministers published in the *Peacemaker* a "Call for Action."¹⁶ They requested that people sign a statement of concern and write letters to the two music colleges asking for a change in their admissions policies. A later *Peacemaker* described the public's reaction: "Newspapers and radio gave publicity to the call. Seven theatres provided their lobbies for the signature operation. The sponsoring group brought the matter to the attention of the Mayor in an interview with him." This petition ultimately got 8,000 signatures, a considerable show of support for a change in racial policy among Cincinnatians.¹⁷

While McCrackin participated in Peacemaker activities and the music school campaign, his pastoral work at West Cincinnati-St. Barnabas continued to flourish--the pastoral visits and counseling, the dances for teenagers, the youth camp, the talent nights, the meetings responding to neighborhood problems. McCrackin did not allow his pastoral ministry to suffer as he undertook other projects. Indeed, he felt that such projects as integrating the music schools were part of his pastoral ministry because they addressed the deepest needs and hurts of his West End neighbors.

Three years of negotiations passed, and still the music schools' policies had not changed. By 1951 it was time to try different tactics. The CCHR organized a public hearing on the issue for September 6, 1951. James C. Paradise, a local labor attorney, moderated the hearings, which included testimony by Walter F. Anderson, composer and head of the music department at

14

15

16

17

Antioch College; Josephine Johnson Cannon, Pulitzer prize-winning novelist and short story writer; civic leaders; rejected applicants; and representatives of other music schools.¹⁸ The hearing focused attention and public outrage on the school administrators.

Finally, after years of vigorous, disciplined activity, the CCHR won its first victory. The music schools agreed to allow blacks into their programs, but not into campus residences. (Eventually this barrier, too, was overcome.) For McCrackin and the others, the full admission of blacks into the music schools represented not merely a victory, but an "*institutional change*."¹⁹ This success boosted CCHR members' confidence and ambitions. The campaign had been McCrackin's first foray into organized protest. Previous actions had been matters of personal conscience or responses to particular difficulties faced by people he knew. Now he was beginning to see the connection between the personal and the political. And he understood that effecting change in a larger context served to empower even those not directly involved by establishing an image of and belief in cooperative progress.

Breaking the respectability barrier had come earlier for the Bromleys than for McCrackin. One evening in early 1950, the Bromleys had welcomed into their Wilmington apartment Jim Otsuka, an Earlham College student and fellow pacifist. They were eager to hear about his recent experiences at an antiwar action at the atomic energy facility in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Some neighbors became alarmed when they saw Otsuka, a Japanese-American, and while the Bromleys and Otsuka were eating supper and conversing in the kitchen of their upstairs apartment, the neighbors spied on them. During the demonstration at Oak Ridge, Otsuka had burned a portion of a dollar bill to illustrate the idea that two-thirds of our tax dollars go up in smoke in support of the military. To show the Bromleys how he did it, he grabbed a match and pretended to burn a dollar bill in their kitchen, amid great laughter.

The neighbors regarded this irreverence for American values with mounting alarm, reporting it later as evidence of treason. The result was that on March 7, 1950, the Bromleys received notice that they were being evicted and had ten days to get their possessions out. On March 17, Ernest, Marion, and their eleven-month-old son, Danny, were physically evicted. Their belongings were carried outside and set on the sidewalk. The eviction was not resisted, but a problem developed when Ernest Bromley photographed the arresting officers. When he refused to hand over his camera or film to the police, he was arrested. Refusing to cooperate with the arrest, he was dragged several blocks to the county jail. Marion Bromley described the incident:

They grabbed Ernest and arrested him, marched him across the town square to the jail. And so they just took all our stuff, moved it out on the sidewalk. And here I was, with an eleven-month-old baby, and I had wet diapers on the line. . . . All I could do was grab some clothes and a little bit of food and I didn't even have his carriage.²⁰

Bromley was not permitted to see his wife or friends, was denied a lawyer of his choosing, bail before trial, and witnesses on his behalf, and was told that he must plead guilty. To this

18

19

20

he said, "I want it understood that I am taking no part in the proceedings."²¹ After spending a night in jail, Bromley was found guilty of resisting an officer and fined fifty dollars, plus fifteen dollars in court costs, both of which were suspended on condition of "good behavior." McCrackin stayed in close contact with the Bromleys during and after the eviction and arrest, commiserating with them and writing letters in their behalf. Ernest Bromley sued Wilmington officials for false arrest, but his suit was quickly dismissed. This harassment sent all who knew the Bromleys a clear message about what to expect when working against militarism and for an integrated society.

For a while after the eviction, the Bromleys lived in a little tumble-down house in the heart of Wilmington's black community, an arrangement facilitated by the Nelsons and Ted Lewis, a local black merchant. But soon afterward they moved out of Wilmington to a place where they could establish a community on property to be held in trust by the Peacemakers. With the Nelsons and Lloyd Danzeisen, a railway postal clerk, they set up a household in Gano, a small village twenty miles north of Cincinnati. They selected a large old farmhouse surrounded by several tillable acres. Soon this household was to be a center of activity for the Peacemakers.

Some years later Ernest took over editorship of the *Peacemaker*, and the Gano home became the scene of the group's newsletter mailings. These events, called "foldings" because the newsletter was collated, folded into thirds, and prepared for mailing, provided a time to build solidarity and friendship, as well as to discuss politics and make plans for Peacemaker actions. In the mid-1970s, the Gano household was to become the focus of a great battle with the IRS.²²

The connection between the Bromleys and McCrackin was further cemented in December 1950, when over one hundred Peacemakers held their orientation conference in the Findlay Street Neighborhood House. A. J. Muste was in attendance. McCrackin, the Nelsons, the Bromleys, and the Peacemakers had found each other. They recognized each other as brothers and sisters in spirit, sharing the same philosophy and thirst for justice, as well as the courage and ability to act in response to the voice of conscience.

Maurice McCrackin's life was changing. It was not coincidental that he met a group of like-minded social activists at the very time he was becoming more radical in his expression of Christian concern. Without the understanding and integrity of the Nelsons and the Bromleys, he might not have dared the actions that he later became famous for. And without the vulnerability and courage of the people he worked with in the West End, he might have lost sight of why radical advocacy was and continues to be needed.

Following the successful campaign to integrate Cincinnati's music colleges, the Bromleys, Nelsons, McCrackin, and others had to decide where to concentrate their efforts next. To this end they held weekly meetings and considered several proposals, finally deciding in the spring of 1952 to focus on the integration of Cincinnati's Coney Island Amusement Park.²³

Coney Island was a Cincinnati institution, a sprawling, privately owned amusement park on the banks of the Ohio River at the far eastern edge of the city. Visitors remember the large, towered arches marking Coney Island's auto gate, where buses dropped off people who had come

21

22

23

the ten miles from downtown. It was a lively gathering place. On broad expanses of sidewalks, groups of children and their chaperones chattered excitedly about which rides they would take in, what to do if someone got lost, and where to meet again for the ride home. Ice cream vendors hawked their treats, and laughing teenagers carried on their horseplay as they waited to go through the entrance gates.

Older white Cincinnatians fondly recall riding on riverboats from downtown to Coney's pier, dancing on summer evenings in the Moonlight Gardens, swimming in the gigantic Sunlight Pool, and riding Coney's famous roller coasters. In the 1950s Cincinnati-area television, radio, and newspaper ads enticed one and all to come to Coney Island for a day of fun. During the spring and summer, the television personality "Uncle Al" would lure children to Coney: "Come on, kiddies. Come on out. Meet Uncle Al. Come out to Coney Island!"²⁴ What Uncle Al failed to add--what every black adult in Cincinnati knew--was that you were welcome to come to Coney only if you had white skin.

When Marian Spencer, mother of two young boys, first heard one of these invitations, she called the amusement park to ask, "Is Coney for all children?"

"Why, yes," she was told.

"But we're Negroes," she persisted, knowing the situation, since her father-in-law worked as a waiter at the park.

The Coney representative fumbled for an answer: "No, well, I . . . I . . . but . . . I don't, I don't think that means Negroes."²⁵ Spencer's sense of justice was aroused, and she took the matter up at the next NAACP meeting. Almost automatically, that group assigned Theodore Berry, a black attorney experienced in fighting job discrimination, the task of gathering evidence for a legal case.

"Stop making Ted do everything!" Spencer protested. And thus it was that she, who had never considered herself a leader, volunteered to organize a campaign to integrate the park. Her husband, Donald, a teacher in the public schools, was at first hesitant about such an action; he feared losing his job, and he was not the only one to fear retaliation.

Indeed, there was considerable controversy over CCHR's choice of Coney as a target. Some of Cincinnati's respected black leaders, including members of the Urban League and even the NAACP, opposed targeting this cultural icon.²⁶ Some feared that such a campaign would cause so much tension in the community that it would push race relations back fifty years; others preferred actions to address blacks' housing and employment problems.

Ernest Bromley later commented perceptively on the choice of Coney as a focus of CCHR actions: "Some people told us you would never be able to do anything there. You ought to be working on something else, like employment. To us it was the other way because Coney was such a sacred cow. The little kids saw all the advertisements on TV and heard all of the stuff on the radio and all of these enticements to come to Coney Island--and they couldn't go. It seemed like a *terrible* thing. It was something like the theaters and the eating places where they couldn't eat."²⁷

24

25

26

27

Ann Bell, a suburban supporter of McCrackin and a volunteer at the Findlay Street Neighborhood House, also backed the campaign. Bell was a personal friend of the owner and president of the park, Edward Schott. She had also helped establish a girls' club in the early days of the Findlay Street Neighborhood House and had on occasion taken some of the black girls in the club to Coney Island, using her influence to get them through the gates. Bell found herself in a strange position as a friend of both McCrackin and Schott. She, like others, maintained that Schott was a very personable man. Yet she felt obliged, like McCrackin, to oppose his admission policy.²⁸

Bromley and others correctly gauged the emotional and cultural import of Coney. The choice could also be looked at from another angle. Richard Moore, then pastor of Greenhills Presbyterian Church and a participant in the Coney demonstrations, noted, "Coney Island was the largest single public accommodation in Greater Cincinnati. As Coney Island went so went the restaurants, bars, and bowling alleys that catered to the general public."²⁹ If Moore's analysis was correct, then the guardians of a segregated society had reason to resist the integration of Coney.

McCrackin and a group of other ministers began meeting with Schott, hoping to encourage him to open the park to all people. Schott flatly refused to make any changes. When private negotiations failed, the CCHR established a rather daring procedure to challenge the status quo. CCHR members in racially mixed groups would drive their cars to Coney's two auto gates. Invariably, Coney would refuse admission, saying, "This is a special day and you have to get permission from the sponsor today."³⁰ The sponsors were not, of course, available for consultation. Whites, on the other hand, could walk or drive right into the park, without consultation with sponsors. Jane Williams, a CCHR member, was turned away from Coney one day when she came with a racially mixed group. She and the others were told it was "Cancer Day," and blacks were not welcome by the sponsor. Ironically, her own mother lay at home dying of cancer.³¹ This bitter injustice stirred the anger and stiffened the determination of Coney campaigners.

When they were denied admission, CCHR members would tell the Coney gatekeepers, "Well, we'll just wait here then."³² The drivers would turn off their car motors and toss their keys under the seat. This resulted in monumental traffic jams and prevented anyone from getting into the park. Other CCHR members used similar tactics to jam the pedestrian entrances. When this happened Coney's private police, the "Solar Rangers," and vigilante "goon" squads sprang into action, trying to bully CCHR members and make them move away from the gates.

On May 17, 1952, a mixed group of about fifteen CCHR members tried to enter Coney in cars. Admission was refused, and two members, Marion Bromley and Wally Nelson, were arrested and later released.³³ Because of overlapping jurisdictions, Coney was patrolled by Cincinnati city police, Hamilton County deputy sheriffs, and Anderson Township police, as well as its own private police. The vigilante squad seemed to be stationed at the beer and party-supply

28

29

30

31

32

store across from the park. All of these groups were ready to spring into action at the first sign of "trouble" to mete out their version of justice.

Ernest Bromley recalled the time when one of the vigilantes smashed a car window with a bottle:

As soon as we drove up and there were people in the car noticed to be "dark," they'd stop your car and tell you to back out and do this or that.³⁴ This time they smashed the rear window of the car. The kids in the car were really scared. I was, too! They came around the car as if they were going to do you in, smash the windows. The deputy sheriff was standing right there. I knew him. I had talked to him on several occasions. As soon as they smashed the window, I said to him, "Well, did you see that?" He said, "No, I didn't see a thing." It was a terrible crash. He ordered the wrecker to come over there when I wouldn't move. I fixed it so they couldn't open the door to haul us out. They would do that. They would haul you out of the car and drive your car away off the road. This time he towed the car with all of us in it up to River Downs [the horse track adjacent to Coney].³⁵

On another occasion vigilantes knocked Ernest Bromley to the ground and took a swing at John Grifalconi, who was trying to photograph the incident. Grifalconi was new on the scene and had not participated in CCHR's training program in nonviolence; he reacted to the provocation instinctively by swinging back. His response caused some soul-searching among CCHR members. "We had some discussion about that afterwards in the group," Bromley remembered. "You start doing that and you can get in big trouble. We hadn't been going out there with any such line as that. This was really rough."³⁶ Most CCHR members were committed to *nonviolent* action and felt that violent responses like Grifalconi's must not happen again.

On another hot and sultry day in the summer of 1952, when McCrackin was among the demonstrators, groups of young men hung around the Coney auto gates, muttering among themselves and glaring expectantly at the cars that pulled up.³⁷ These cars disgorged adults and children, both black and white, their faces unmarked by the merriment that usually characterizes park-goers. These more solemn children and adults took out handwritten placards from the car trunks, signs reading, "Coney Is for *All* Kids!" "Let Us In!" and "We Object to Whites Only!" The picketers had been trained to walk with dignity and to respond without anger if anyone insulted them.

Most onlookers, wary of the picketers, hurried on toward the gates. The young men waiting before the gates, however, seemed ready for action. They moved in closer, swaggering, secure in the strength of their numbers against this ragtag group of protesters.

Among those carrying signs were Ernest Bromley, his small son Danny in a stroller before him, and Marian Spencer, whose many hours on the phone had drawn out this group of twenty-five or so. Many other women had agreed to go, aware of how much it would mean to their children to gain admittance to the park, but changed their minds when their husbands warned that

35

36

37

such an action would jeopardize their jobs. But many from McCrackin's church and the Findlay Street Neighborhood House did come out.

As the picketers moved back and forth near the buses, the men nearby began to hurl insults: "Nigger lovers!" "Go home!" McCrackin plodded on, looking straight ahead, hoping by his solid, slow movements to impart courage to the others. All were frightened by the violence inherent in the insults and in the mood of the men who were now approaching.

McCrackin prayed that no violence would occur and was glad that a nonviolence training session had given demonstrators practice in responding calmly to verbal threats. As he was thinking these thoughts, a man approached him, wiping sweat off an overheated brow. "Nigger lover!" the man sneered. And, getting no response from McCrackin, he coughed up a mouthful of phlegm and spat it directly into the minister's face.

McCrackin's body recoiled in disgust, and almost automatically he reached into his pockets for a handkerchief, hoping that the assault was over. The spitter did not leave. He seemed torn between wanting to follow McCrackin to continue the insults and wanting to hold his ground and regain his posture of indignant rage.

McCrackin wiped the spittle off and folded it into his handkerchief, but kept rubbing his cheek as if to remove the memory of its sting. When he looked up, he saw that Vali Rae Johnson had left the picket line and gone over to the curb.

Mrs. Johnson, a worker from McCrackin's church and the neighborhood house, was a frail black woman who had grown up in an integrated neighborhood in Pittsburgh and never lost the vision of that possibility for Cincinnati. She had come out on this day to do her part, but seeing her minister insulted had disturbed her deeply. She wanted to strike back at his assailant and was trembling so violently that she had to retreat from the picket line to rest on a nearby curb.

As soon as the crowd's attention was focused elsewhere, McCrackin went over to her. She told him that she had wanted to strike the man who spat, but she remembered the training in nonviolence and held back. Later she remarked that she would never be able to participate in such a demonstration again--she could not stand the mean-spirited violence and was not sure she could refrain from retaliating.

There were other violent incidents growing out of this campaign. Once McCrackin came to the park with T. T. Clement, the director of the Findlay Street Neighborhood House. As usual, they were refused entrance. As they were driving back to town on Kellogg Avenue, they noticed that they were being followed by a car. The men in the car shouted racial insults and made threatening gestures. Then they began to chase McCrackin and Clement at a high speed. The two felt certain that their lives were in jeopardy. "They were chasing us down Kellogg Avenue and then we finally came to Delta Avenue," McCrackin recalls. "There at the viaduct, T. T. slammed on his brakes and all of a sudden swerved into Delta Avenue. This gang of guys didn't see us make the turn and continued down Eastern Avenue. So we got away."³⁸

On June 22, the CCHR made its fourth appearance at Coney's gates. This time four people were arrested: Wally Nelson, Juanita Nelson, Marion Bromley, and Hal Goldberg, owner of an art supply store. They were charged with breach of the peace and resisting an officer."³⁹ "Breach of the peace" may be a fairly accurate description of what they were doing: confronta-

38

39

tional, nonviolent direct action of the sort Gandhi used in India. On that day, cars with racially mixed groups were again turned away from the entrance gates. A constable dragged McCrackin out of his car and towed it and another protester's car away from the entrance. When the Nelsons and Marion Bromley refused to leave, they were thrown bodily into the back seat of a police car, to the cheers of a few unsympathetic onlookers. They, along with Goldberg, were processed at a nearby firehouse and locked up in the Hamilton County Jail. Goldberg's wife posted bail for him, but Marion Bromley and the Nelsons refused to cooperate in any way with the arrest, posted no bail, and fasted. During those terribly hot days, Ernest Bromley picketed the jail often, with his two babies, Danny and Caroline, in tow, and friends flooded county officials with letters of protest. Local supporters, including Theodore Berry and his wife Johnnie Mae, filed numerous complaints about this arrest and jailing.⁴⁰ This kind of support, greatly appreciated by all of those arrested, was to become a feature of future actions.

Marion Bromley and Juanita Nelson suffered intensely in the hot jail. Fortunately, the three could be held for only nine days without arraignment, and on the ninth day, July 1, still not cooperating, they were carried to the courtroom, which was actually in a fire-station in Anderson Township. They refused to make a plea and were finally released on their own recognizance by the frustrated justice of the peace. The case was ultimately dismissed.

The CCHR leadership was temporarily put out of commission by these arrests and jailings. For a while, Marion Bromley was weak and in a fog as a result of fasting and dehydration. Yet the Coney campaign was not dead. In mid-summer, Ernest Bromley was distributing leaflets on the Coney situation in front of the park's corporate offices in downtown Cincinnati. Earlier the Cincinnati police had acknowledged his right to leaflet and picket, but on July 19, 1952, officers told him that the distribution of leaflets was illegal and stood by while two middle-aged men encouraged a young, half-drunk fellow to attack him. The young man knocked Bromley to the ground, breaking his partial dental plate. After this incident, the police subjected Bromley to questioning, while telling his attackers to "go along."⁴¹

None of the CCHR's dramatic and courageous protests at Coney, or the arrest, fasts, and trial of Marion Bromley and the Nelsons, ever reached the mainstream Cincinnati newspapers. There was a conspiracy of silence; Coney was too untouchable a community symbol. Thus, even though a news reporter witnessed the attack on Ernest Bromley at the Coney headquarters and brought a policeman to the scene, the incident never made the paper. When CCHR invited the nationally syndicated columnist Carl Rowan to speak in Cincinnati, local papers reported that he spoke about race relations but never mentioned his specific topic--Coney Island. The story of the Coney integration campaign was told only in the *Peacemaker* newsletter and the *CORElator*, the organ of the Congress of Racial Equality, edited by Jim Peck.⁴²

So far McCrackin's role had been less confrontational than the Bromleys' or the Nelsons'. He had focused his efforts on negotiating policy changes, organizing carpools, and gathering other kinds of support for the Coney campaign. McCrackin was still somewhat uncertain about appropriate tactics, but he was quite comfortable writing reports, issuing statements of concern, and lobbying policymaking bodies, which he pursued with great vigor.

40

41

42

In July 1952, Cincinnati City Council, prodded by CCHR, began considering the Coney demonstrations and the park's racial admission policy. According to its normal procedure, City Council appointed a subcommittee to study these issues. But it quickly became evident that this committee had no intention of actually challenging segregation at Coney. McCrackin therefore prepared his own report on Coney, intending to read it to City Council, but he was not permitted to read it into the record, lest it prejudice the subcommittee's investigation. McCrackin instead circulated copies so that others could make Council aware that Coney's private park police, legally under the jurisdiction of the Cincinnati Police Department, seemed to have been given free reign in harassing the demonstrators while ignoring the vigilante groups. McCrackin had taken the trouble to ask Cincinnati Police Chief Stanley Schrotel to intervene, but no remedial action had been taken. Furthermore, the private Solar Rangers openly encouraged intimidation and violence. When Ernest Bromley and McCrackin tried to talk with individual Rangers at their homes, they were threatened with billy clubs and warned that they would be beaten if they continued their protests.

After two months, City Council's preliminary report on Coney's admission policies was ready. The September 27, 1952, *Peacemaker* gives this account:

According to the report, the committee has talked with Coney Island officials and found: "1) that Coney Island admission gates are entirely without the territorial limits of Cincinnati; 2) that officials have been informed by their legal counsel that they are operating entirely within the law; 3) that amusement park dignitaries are 'extremely sympathetic.'"⁴³

The representatives of City Council were persuaded. The *Peacemaker* of September 27, 1952, quoted the committee:

Your committee is convinced that it is a sincere desire of the officials of Coney Island, Inc., to find the proper solution of the subject matter at the earliest possible time and that such a solution will be reached in due time. In view of the above, your committee has no suggestions for remedial action by Council or administrative officials of the city at this time.

This cover-up, a testament to the power of Coney's president, Edward Schott, was unacceptable to the CCHR.

Not until October 1952, however, did McCrackin get the opportunity to read his report to City Council. In a strong statement directed at the Coney subcommittee, he remarked that before observing the workings of this committee, he would not have believed that there could be a collaboration among big-money interests, law enforcement agencies, and the "hoodlum element," but now he was a "sadder and wiser person." He was beginning to understand how thoroughly racism and racial segregation were woven into the fabric of American society. At that Council meeting, the Reverend Frank B. Lauderdale of the NAACP and Charles Posner, head of Fellowship House, urged an integrated admissions policy. Finally, Marian Spencer, the woman who

had spearheaded the campaign and who years later would be elected to City Council, spoke out as a private citizen and mother. Councilman Theodore Berry submitted legislation that would permit the city to close the park for 30 to 90 days for racial discrimination, a proposal that ultimately failed.⁴⁴

The Coney campaign would now take a new direction. The NAACP, which had hesitated to take on this project, now made use of its legal resources to pursue the integration of the park. CCHR's direct-action approach had borne fruit. CCHR had drawn attention to the situation and empowered and involved a great many people. Now legal action seemed to be the best tactic, and the NAACP provided the leadership to direct it.

During Coney's 1953 season, blacks again tried to enter the park, and three who were refused admission filed a class action suit. Judge Carson Hoy threw out the suit, saying it was not a "proper class action," a ruling later sustained by the Court of Appeals. Ethel Fletcher, a black social worker, attempted to gain admission to the park on July 2 and July 4. The park justified denying her admission by claiming that its corporate sponsors had specifically asked that CCHR and NAACP members not be admitted. The fact that the denial had nothing to do with organizational membership and everything to do with skin color prompted Fletcher and the NAACP to file suit. A year later, on July 20, 1954, Common Pleas Court Judge Charles F. Weber ruled that Coney could not deny Fletcher admission, but that the ruling applied only to Fletcher: this was not a class action.⁴⁵

By this time, the Coney campaign had finally made the Cincinnati newspapers. Explaining Judge Weber's ruling, the *Cincinnati Post* stated: "For others to gain an injunction [prohibiting the park from denying them admission] it would be necessary for them to be refused admittance and then file suit on similar grounds." The Post continued: "Mrs. Fletcher may become the first Negro to enter Coney Island as a paying patron." (As noted above, black children had been admitted with 4-H Club and orphan groups.)⁴⁶ The park management commented only, "We are studying the opinion." In fact, they immediately appealed it.⁴⁷

McCrackin tried to keep the heat on and the issue before the public. He and other members of the clergy lauded Judge Weber's ruling in a statement signed by thirteen Protestant ministers.⁴⁸ Another "statement of concern" regarding Coney's admission policies was signed by 65 area clergymen and made public in the summer of 1954.⁴⁹ And a racially mixed group of 50 adults and children was denied admittance to Coney on August 18. Walter S. Houston, chair of the Cincinnati NAACP's legal committee, considered using this incident as the basis for another class-action suit. On the same day, Edward Schott finally made a public comment on the campaign: "Of course, we will admit Mrs. Fletcher. We'll have to. It's a court order. We will not defy the court. But we already have appealed the court's decision."⁵⁰ It seemed that blacks would have to enter the amusement park one at a time--and then only if they succeeded through the courts at outmaneuvering those who would shut them out.

44

45

46

47

48

49

50

Yet even Coney's management must have suspected that the world was changing. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said three years later at the Highlander Folk School, "While the reactionary guardians of the status quo are busy crying, 'Never,' the system of segregation is crumbling all around them."⁵¹

The years 1954 and 1955 marked great progress for the civil rights movement in Cincinnati and the nation. The movement, the struggle, was vigorous at all levels. Both whites and blacks were involved, the famous and the unknown. Judge Weber's 1954 decision was important for the CCHR and the local NAACP, and it heartened many other Cincinnatians as well. They discovered that if they organized, worked, and put themselves on the line, they could sometimes win. On the national level, another court case was making news. On May 17, 1954, the U. S. Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, declared an end to the policy created by *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In a decision that applied primarily to school facilities, the Warren Court declared that separate schools for blacks were "inherently unequal." They thus undercut one of the principal legal props of de jure segregation, ratifying a movement that had been gathering strength for years.

During the winter of 1954-55, more pressure was brought to bear on City Council by CCHR and NAACP members requesting that the Council deny Coney Island an operating license for the 1955 season. A license was ultimately issued with the stipulation that there would be no more racial segregation on Cincinnati city property.⁵² When the park opened on April 30, 1955, it opened its gates to blacks for the first time.⁵³ That weekend, around twenty blacks visited the park. The first blacks to legally enter it were Marian Spencer and her two sons.

Except for the black paper, the *Call Post*, no Cincinnati paper said a word about the change in admissions policy, and the park's newspaper ads continued to carry the coded message "Admission to the Park subject to the requirements of the exclusive outing sponsor."⁵⁴ An official of the Urban League noted in a memo on Coney that very few blacks used the park between 1955 and 1960, never more than twenty at a time. Although there were few incidents involving race, a man named George Johnson tried to use the pool and was refused.⁵⁵ Not until May 29, 1961, did Coney scrap all segregation in the park and open the pool and the dance pavilion to everyone. The campaign begun in 1952 by CCHR and the Peacemakers ended in a partial victory in 1955 and a complete victory in 1961.

Looking back on his dealings with Edward Schott and the Coney Island management, McCrackin had some surprising thoughts:

We would go to see Ed, negotiate with him. And he would say, "It's a matter of money." In retrospect, see, Ed Schott made no claim about any moral position. But the church, the Presbyterian Church, called for a "non-segregated church in a non-segregated society," and other denominations had made national pronouncements. And we should have been picketing the churches before picketing Coney Island. Because Coney Island didn't claim any-

51

52

53

54

55

thing. The Church makes all these claims. I was so steeped in religious tradition that I made more exemptions for the Church than I did for Coney Island. The more claims you make, the more moral responsibility you have.⁵⁶

Eventually McCrackin was to overcome his background and challenge the church as well as the culture to a consistent living out of its ideals. Already he was beginning to see how subtle institutional racism could be. Reflecting on the church's policies and claims and its lack of black members, McCrackin said, "A congregation, which has had no Negro members from its beginning decades ago doesn't need to hang out a sign, 'We cater to white trade only,' to make its Negro neighbors understand that they are not welcome. *The policy of a church is its practice.*"⁵⁷

At the time, Wally Nelson, freer of institutional loyalties, was more direct in his appeal to enlightened conscience. His rallying cry was and is, "You Don't Gotta!" You don't gotta register for the draft; you don't gotta pay for war with taxes; you don't gotta violate your conscience and honor illegitimate authority. Nelson also believed "you don't gotta" accept the humiliation of segregation because of skin color and cultural heritage. This belief, followed up by persistent and purposeful actions by a small group of people, led to the integration of the Coney Island Amusement Park. It was a significant victory, one that sparked the imagination and nurtured further dreams of justice.

Notes for Chapter 5

1. Interview with Maurice McCrackin, June 1986.
2. Interview with Juanita and Wally Nelson, January 4, 1988.
3. McCrackin and the Bromleys have said that up to twenty-five CCHR members were connected to Hebrew Union College. These Jewish students, including Michael Robinson, Balfour Brickner, Henry Cohen, Philip Schechter, and many others, formed the backbone of the organization. McCrackin's Jewish allies came from all sectors of the Jewish community and included businessman Mike Israel, bar owner Abe Goldhagen, and labor attorney James Paradise.
4. "Ask Support in Combatting Racism," *Peacemaker*, April 21, 1951, p. 5.
5. Interview with Amos Brokaw, April, 1987. Brokaw, like Nelson, served time in prison for draft resistance.
6. McCrackin interview, June 1986. In 1948 the federal tax deadline was March 15.
7. Ibid.
8. "Pastor 'Won't Support War'; Refuses to Pay All of Tax," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 19, 1949; "Pastor Awaits Outcome of Income Tax Protest," *Cincinnati Post*, March 19, 1949.
9. Interview with Ernest Bromley, June 1986.
10. See Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986).
11. Interview with Ernest and Marion Bromley, June 1986.
12. "The Disciplines," *Peacemaker*, June 5, 1949, p. 5; "Peacemaker Discipline Revision," *Peacemaker*, May 26, 1951, p. 4.
13. "Attacking Segregated Education," *Peacemaker*, April 25, 1950, p. 2.
14. E. B. Radcliffe, "A Protest in Concert," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 25, 1950.
15. Bromley interview, June 1986; Nelson interview, January 4, 1988.
16. "Tackling Segregated Education," *Peacemaker*, April 25, 1950, p. 2.
17. "Ask Support in Combatting Racism," *Peacemaker*, April 21, 1951, p. 5.
18. "Discrimination to Be Aired," *Peacemaker*, September 1, 1951, p. 2.
19. McCrackin interview, June 1986.
20. Interview with Marion Bromley, March 4, 1987.

21. "Bromley Evicted, Jailed," *Peacemaker*, April 25, 1950, p. 3.
22. The IRS sold the Bromleys' home to pay for taxes they allegedly owed. This action was vigorously opposed by the Peacemakers, by local Quakers, and by other allies of the Bromleys. Plans were made to use mass civil disobedience if eviction was ever attempted. After months of such protest, as well as some interesting and effective behind-the-scenes communication via Quaker channels with IRS Commissioner Donald Alexander, the sale of the Bromley home was declared null and void.
23. Ernest Bromley interview, June 1986.
24. McCrackin interview, June 1986.
25. Interview with Marian Spencer, September 1986.
26. Interview with Ernest and Marion Bromley, June 1986.
27. Ernest Bromley interview, June 1986.
28. Conversation with Ann Bell, July 20, 1986.
29. Richard Moore, "Shirt of Flame," manuscript, p. 103.
30. McCrackin interview, June 1986; "Three Peacemakers Jailed As Participants in Campaign to End Park Segregation," *Peacemaker*, July 12, 1952.
31. Ernest and Marion Bromley interview, June 1986.
32. Ernest Bromley interview, June 1986.
33. Ibid.; "Report on Summer of Integration at Cincinnati's Coney Island," *Peacemaker*, December 5, 1955, p. 2.
34. Ernest Bromley went to great lengths to avoid racial terminology. Here he chose to use the term "dark" instead of "black" or "Negro," in the firm belief that race is an arbitrary designation.
35. Ernest Bromley interview, June 1986.
36. Ibid.
37. Vali Rae Johnson, group interview with women from the Community Church, 1987.
38. McCrackin interview, June 1986.
39. "Three Peacemakers Jailed."
40. Ernest Bromley interview, June 1986.
41. Statement of CCHR to Cincinnati City Council, October 1, 1952.
42. Issues of the *Peacemaker* from around 1950 to the mid-1970s are available to scholars and the general public in the archives of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. Peck was a veteran of many CORE demonstrations, amnesty protests for draft resisters, and War Resisters League demonstrations in New York. He was brutally beaten while participating in the Freedom Rides in the South.
43. "Coney Island Report," *Peacemaker*, September 27, 1952, p. 4.
44. "Coney Island Action Considered by Cincinnati City Council," *Peacemaker*, October 11, 1952, p. 1.
45. "Negro Wins Right to Enter Coney Island," *Cincinnati Post*, July 21, 1954.
46. Ibid.
47. "Negro Wins Right to Enter Coney Island"; "Resort 'Bars' Its Gates," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 19, 1945.
48. The following Protestant ministers signed this statement: Carl J. Bollinger, Harry Brown, W. E. Crume, Jr., B. B. Evans, Maurice McCrackin, R. R. Murphy, William Radar, Robert J. St. Clair, Ellsworth M. Smith, Abraham Swanson, Andrew C. Tunyogi, Jacob Wagner, and Walter F. Wolf. Two Catholic priests, Father Bartholomew Battirossi and Father Archie Fornasari, both of St. Henry Church, appeared as signers on mimeographed copies of this statement, but later asked that their names be removed. It is not clear whether they were pressured to do this; the absence of official Catholic support for these integration campaigns seems typical for that day. "Pastors Laud Coney Racial Decision," *Cincinnati Post*, July 29, 1954.
49. "Clergymen Concerned Over Coney," *Cincinnati Post*, September 9, 1954.
50. "Resort 'Bars' Its Gates."
51. Speech at the Highlander Folk School, September 1957. Original tape of this speech is in Special Collections, University of Tennessee Library, Knoxville, Tennessee.
52. City Council had legal jurisdiction only over that part of Coney that fell within the Cincinnati city limits. Coney used this technicality to continue segregation in the Sunlight Pool and the Moonlight Gardens dance pavilion.
53. "Report on Summer of Integration at Cincinnati's Coney Island."
54. Ibid.
55. Urban League Records, Box 9, Folder 3, Cincinnati Historical Society.
56. McCrackin interview, June 1986.
57. Maurice McCrackin, "Policy Became Practice," *City Church*, January-February 1954, pp. 8-11. Emphasis added.