Chapter 8

*If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet renounce controversy are people who want crops without plowing the ground.*

Frederick Douglass

"Share a Bit of the Danger"

**Operation Freedom**

At a Peacemaker gathering at the home of Polly and Amos Brokaw on New Year’s Eve, 1960, Maurice McCrackin told his companions that he had just heard from his friend Carl Braden of Louisville, Kentucky, who with his wife Anne, was active in voter registration as part of his work with the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF). On December 30, the Department of Justice in Washington had obtained a restraining order to halt the evictions of black tenants in Fayette and Haywood counties in Tennessee, where landlords had apparently violated the Civil Rights Act of 1957 by visiting extremely harsh economic reprisals on any blacks who dared register to vote. Tenant farmers were being evicted and their farm equipment repossessed because they had registered. Their case was to be heard in the Sixth Circuit District Court in Cincinnati, and McCrackin urged all present at the Brokaw party to show their support for the tenant farmers by attending the hearing. Everyone at the party listened because, as Miriam Nicholas explained later, “When Mac raises a concern, it’s all hands to the plow.”

After attending the hearing, the Peacemakers were moved to action. They decided to send a delegation to Tennessee to see if there was any way to help the evicted sharecroppers. McCrackin was to go south with Wally Nelson and Ross Anderson, a peace activist and former resident of the Koinonia Community near Americus, Georgia. It was not McCrackin’s first fact-finding trip to the South. In July 1956 he had gone with Wally Nelson on a journey that included a visit to Koinonia. During that trip he had talked with Coretta Scott King in Montgomery, Alabama, and viewed the bullet holes riddling her porch. Now, in January 1961, he, Nelson, and Anderson drove the 500 or so miles from Cincinnati to Fayette and Haywood counties, near Memphis, to investigate the Tennessee situation.

What they found verified McCrackin’s sense that these folks desperately needed support. Families that had already been indescribably poor became destitute after their evictions. Many sharecroppers had fled to land belonging to a black farmer named Shepard Towles, where they camped in donated tents. They were hungry, discouraged, and unsure of their future.

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In addition to these hardships, a heritage of violence menaced all who questioned the fairness of the racial climate in southwest Tennessee. The possibility of lynching haunted those involved in this struggle. Many in Haywood County still remembered seeing the body of a young man being dragged through town behind a car in 1939, a warning of what happens to those who openly organize voters. Some recalled that in the 1950s a local black minister was beaten after he was found with Highlander materials in his car. The Highlander Folk School, where civil rights activists gathered to plan their work, was justifiably feared by those who resisted the push for racial equality. Reprisals such as these were designed to demoralize all who claimed their rights, and to drive black families north.

Odell Sanders and John McFerren, businessmen and respected leaders within the black community, had both been active in voter registration drives. McFerren had traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify before a congressional committee about the economic reprisals that resulted from these efforts. Sanders and McFerren told McCrackin and the others that tenant farmers and other black citizens in Haywood and Fayette counties were threatened with eviction not only when they registered to vote, but also when they dared send their children to the all-white public schools. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision had not yet affected segregated schooling in rural Tennessee. Yet the decision and the Freedom Rides begun in the 1950s had raised the expectations of black people throughout the South. It was the beginning of a great movement on the part of blacks to claim their economic and civil rights, and it was met with unmitigated cruelty.

Reactionary forces in Fayette and Haywood counties had launched a program of economic and social ostracism undergirded by terrorism. Names of blacks who registered to vote or sent their children to previously all-white schools were circulated among business people and banks. Those listed were neither extended credit nor given jobs. Any whites who objected to this policy were also boycotted and ostracized.

One white couple, Oren and Sarah Lemmons, had testified in court about this blacklist. As a result they were forced out of business, sugar was poured into the gas tanks of their delivery trucks, and their employees were threatened. Leo T. and Frances Redfern, another white couple, were forced out of business because they refused to honor the blacklist. They remained undaunted, offering their land for use as an interracial cooperative farm.

When McCrackin, Nelson, and Anderson returned from their fact-finding trip, they wrote a report describing the situation graphically and compassionately. Located in the southwest corner of Tennessee, Haywood and Fayette were the only counties in Tennessee where blacks were in the majority. At that time Haywood County’s population stood at 27,000, of whom 62 percent were black; Fayette County’s population was slightly larger at 35,000 with 78 percent black. The rural economy was in upheaval; machinery was replacing tenant farmers and sharecroppers all over the South. But the sudden and extreme economic deprivation being endured by hundreds of black families in this area stemmed from more than the advent of new technology.

White Citizens Councils had sprung up in response to a black registration and voting campaign launched by the Civic and Welfare Leagues of the two counties. By the time
Mc Crackin and the others paid their visit, the grassroots struggle for voting rights was well under
way, spearheaded by local blacks. Some had already paid dearly for their activities. Odell Sand-
ers had been forced to close his grocery store in Brownsville. The McFerrens were still hanging
on to their store and filling station, but at considerable risk, especially since John had testified in
Washington. Theirs was the only gasoline that blacks active in the voter registration drive could
buy. Gasoline companies in the area were being threatened if they supplied the McFerrens with
fuel. McFerren personally visited many gasoline trucking companies, trying to talk them into
supplying him. Finally he went as far away as Memphis in search of a supplier. There he ar-
 ranged for the Memphis Trucking Company to travel over back roads and deliver gasoline to his
station in the middle of the night so as to elude the spies. The precarious arrangement only
worked once; after that his place was staked out twenty-four hours a day. His Memphis supplier,
once identified, was eventually driven out of business, effectively cutting off McFerren’s supply
of gasoline. After that blacks active in voter registration had to drive out of the county to buy
fuel.

The Peacemaker deputation reported that of the 700 black people evicted in Fayette and
Haywood counties, 699 had been registered to vote. The majority of these tenants, however, had
remained in their rented shacks until the final court decision was made in Cincinnati. The Federal
Appeals Court issued temporary injunctions barring future evictions of or economic reprisals
against blacks registering to vote. Unfortunately it offered no redress at all for those already
evicted or economically damaged. The deputation encouraged Peacemakers and others to send
cash for food, clothing, lumber, and a loan fund. The report, drafted mainly by McCrackin, con-
cluded with an inspirational call to action and understanding:

All these people have intangible needs also. They are out in the front line, standing up for
freedom and human dignity. They are laying their lives on the line. They need active
support, as well as understanding and sympathy. They need to know that we are with
them. Supplies and cash are indispensable, but so are human contacts. Visitors should
go down and stand and sit and work with the persecuted. They do not need to have people
tell them what they ought to do. They know, they are doing it. But they do need to have
friends and to meet those friends face to face from time to time. Go and share a bit of the
danger. Stand and watch for a few nights at a store which may be dynamited during the
night. Let the weary owner get a few full nights’ rest. . . .It is well to note that persecu-
tion cannot be long continued if it is not carried on by more or less unanimous consent
and support. A very few taking a strong stand against the boycott could dispel it like a
bad dream.

On February 16, people interested in alleviating some of the distress in southwestern
Tennessee were invited to a planning meeting in Cincinnati. Among the participants were nine
who drove up from Haywood and Fayette counties, including Odell Sanders and John McFerren.
They named their campaign “Operation Freedom.” Although some present objected to its mili-
tary ring, most liked its upbeat quality and its allusion to the Freedom Rides, which were right
then going on in the South.
The original intention was to offer temporary emergency aid to those in the tent cities. By March 1961, 155 men, women, and children were living in tents, refugees in their own country. It soon became apparent, however, that ongoing economic help would be needed for the leaders of the push for equality. At the time, most national civil rights organizations had no provision for financial help during crises. Operation Freedom complemented the work of these organizations by assisting individuals whose economic distress sprang from their civil rights activity. But it was difficult to turn down others whose need was also great and Operation Freedom sometimes went beyond this stated mission. Clarence Jordan, an Operation Freedom board member, described their mission this way:

Operation Freedom is an emergency operation, set up to aid people while their tears are still wet and their minds and hearts are still seething with anxiety. It is the Red Cross of the civil rights movement, going immediately to the scene where the tornado of racial turbulence has unleashed its fury.9

During the spring and summer, McCrackin returned to Haywood and Fayette counties several times in the Findlay Street Neighborhood House station wagon, with clothing piled high up on top. Sometimes he came with Wally Nelson, sometimes with Ernest Bromley. Always on these trips McCrackin and the others took time to talk with the besieged families, offering encouragement and inquiring about what could be done to help.10

Often they stayed in Memphis at Owen College, a black junior college that became a kind of way station for black southerners fleeing to the North and northerners heading south to offer aid. The Director of Dormitories at Owen was Isabel Flagg, a relative of Odell Sanders, who knew full well what McCrackin and the others were doing in the South and went out of her way to make them comfortable en route.

To raise funds, Ernest Bromley and the Peacemaker regularly published and circulated brochures and newsletters detailing the specific needs of particular families and describing the Operation Freedom program and distribution system. Among other publicity efforts, they made a forty-minute record called “They Chose Freedom” and sold it for three dollars a copy.11 This record, intended for use by churches and philanthropic groups, consisted of interviews with persecuted Tennessee families.

By the time McCrackin arrived in Brownsville, Tennessee, on October 29, he had already made many trips to the area. Haywood Sheriff Tip Hunter thought McCrackin had become a nuisance and planned to do something about him. Because Sanders knew the territory better than McCrackin did, he was asked to drive the neighborhood house station wagon over the country roads while he and McCrackin distributed food and loans. A white passenger with a black driver was suspicious enough, but the conspicuous Ohio license plates were cause for surveillance. That day the sheriff’s deputy took deliberate note of the parked vehicle, stalking around it to make his disapproval felt.

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Later in the afternoon McCrackin was apprehensive as he sat alone in the station wagon waiting for Sanders to return from another errand. Two officers drove by, slowed down, then stopped and got out to confront McCrackin. They came to the side of the car and ordered him out. For a brief moment he thought of not cooperating but wondered how he could explain the purpose of not giving his name or of refusing to step into their patrol car voluntarily. Finally, he decided to try to win them over with calm reasonableness. He stepped slowly out of the car as the two men approached.

Sheriff Hunter was the spokesman. Officer Sullivan stood slightly behind him, shotgun in hand. “Who are you and what are you doing here?” he asked.

“I’m Maurice McCrackin, and I’m waiting here for Mr. Odell Sanders to return.”

“Around here,” Sullivan said, “we don’t call niggers ‘mister.’ Now get in this here patrol car and come with us.”

McCrackin obliged, hoping against hope that he would only be taken to headquarters and given a lecture, but fearing that he might be in for another involuntary confinement.

The sheriff continued the sermon on race: “The nigger is lazy and dumb and undependable. You got to keep them in their place or they get into all kinds of scrapes. Niggers just aren’t the equals of white folks in any way!”

McCrackin sat through the lecture, then surprised his captors by politely asserting, “I don’t agree with any of that. To me Negroes and whites are all children of the same Father. . . . We are all brothers and all equal.”

In disgust, seeing that he could not verbally intimidate McCrackin, Hunter raised the level of threat. He asked his partner, “Is that woman going to bring charges that he was spying on her?” And to McCrackin he said, “That’s quite a serious charge, you know.” This was the first McCrackin had heard about the outlandish charge that was to be filed against him: “loitering with the intention to peep and spy.”

“We’ll have to hold you for investigation,” said Hunter, whereupon they delivered McCrackin to the Haywood County Workfarm just outside of town. McCrackin determined that he would not eat, would not cooperate during his trial, and would not participate in the work program while he was confined. McCrackin was convicted of the Peeping Tom charge because he refused to cooperate with such an abuse of the law and thus did not participate in his own defense. He was sentenced to serve time at the Workfarm.

While serving his sentence, McCrackin took an active interest in his surroundings. He noticed the heterogeneous mix of inmates, black and white, men and women. They lived in cells above the warden’s quarters by night and worked the surrounding cotton fields by day. The prisoners enjoyed a relatively relaxed atmosphere, and some were free to come and go among the cells. McCrackin noticed that relations between the races seemed cordial and that the epithet “nigger” was rarely heard. The other prisoners treated McCrackin well, understanding by his demeanor and his fasting that he was not exactly “one of them.” Many worried about his health. Most were cooperative in answering his questions about life in rural Tennessee: “What is it like to be a tenant farmer? How much do tenant farmers make?”
From a man named Johnnie he learned that the average sharecropper made about $1,000 a year, most of it encumbered by debts run up for seed and supplies. A sharecropper often had to take on extra jobs at three to five dollars a day just to stay caught up.

At first McCrackin tried to carry on the same kind of conversation with Warden Ovid Lovelace, asking him how much land it would take for a man to live independently. Lovelace thought it would take about fifteen acres to raise livestock, maybe five acres for mere truck farming. McCrackin stored this information away in case Operation Freedom might later be able to help some tenant farmers buy their own land. Having established rapport with Lovelace, McCrackin thought it courteous to explain why he would not be participating in the work program. “No offense to you,” he said, “but I can’t cooperate when I know the law officers here are using this farm to intimidate people and keep them from their full rights as citizens.”

“All the years I’ve been here, there’s no one who refused to work. This is a work farm. I’ll get some work out of you some way. I’ll put the cotton bag on you—you may not pick much, but you’ll pick some.”

“I’ll put it on, but I won’t do any work,” said McCrackin, trying to agree to something Lovelace suggested.

Maybe we can say you’re sick,” offered Lovelace. He had heard the minister retching and knew that he was weak and miserable as a result of fasting. Such concern made McCrackin wonder how Warden Lovelace could work with a bully like Sheriff Hunter. He made a mental note to ask him if the opportunity ever arose. It struck McCrackin that people in uniform are often quite decent, but are not free to be their best selves. His questions, his refusal to work, and his fasting set the staunch northerner apart from other prisoners on the farm. Lovelace was moved to grudging admiration and decided that he would like to have his wife and children meet this unusual captive.

Mrs. Lovelace had no compunction about unlocking the jail door some days later and escorting in two reporters who had heard of McCrackin’s confinement and wanted to interview him and photograph the jail for the Nashville and Memphis newspapers. One of the men seemed much more interested in the question of Communism than in the conditions that had brought McCrackin to Brownsville. “What do you think of Highlander?” he asked provocatively.

McCrackin wondered what had brought Highlander into the Brownsville situation. He said essentially what he had said in Cincinnati when similar questions were raised. “It’s a great institution, and it stands for the great American principles of social justice and brotherhood.”

“What is your relation to the school?” continued the reporter.

“None officially,” answered McCrackin, “but I did attend a weekend there.” At that point the reporter pulled out a copy of the same broadside that had littered the Cincinnati and national landscape several years earlier. Sheriff Hunter had received it in the mail and turned it over to the reporter in hopes that it could be used to discredit his prisoner.

The other reporter was curious about noncooperation and wanted to know if McCrackin would cooperate if he were given a speeding ticket. McCrackin responded that he would honor a traffic ticket if he had earned it. He maintained that he was not opposed to law and order, but only to the misuse of power.
The possibility that power could be misused did not seem to occur to McCrackin’s colleagues in Cincinnati. Publicity surrounding his imprisonment in Tennessee did not please those ministers within the Cincinnati Presbytery who were already suspicious of his tactics and goals. The Presbytery had advised him to pay his income tax, and its members were wary of his determination to work so far afield as Tennessee. Some Presbyterian leaders still suspected that he was a Communist sympathizer. For these reasons the Cincinnati Presbytery voted to send a delegation to the workfarm in Haywood County with the intention of urging McCrackin to “let the fires die down.” Unfortunately, these ministers merely interviewed McCrackin, the law enforcement officials, and the local Presbyterian minister. They did not investigate the oppressive conditions that had precipitated McCrackin’s involvement. The report they submitted to the Presbytery chided McCrackin for not defending himself in court and even admitted the possibility of guilt on the “Peeping Tom” charge. Ignoring the racist environment in Haywood and Fayette counties, they concluded that McCrackin was not cooperating with authorities and therefore deserved to be imprisoned.  

Many of the white ministers in those counties were equally unsupportive of McCrackin and Operation Freedom. For one thing, they did not share McCrackin’s understanding of the social gospel. Many of them had a literalist understanding of scripture; Dayton, Tennessee, had been the scene in 1925 of the famous Scopes “Monkey Trial,” where two of the era’s most famous attorneys, William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow, had battled over teaching the theory of evolution in the public schools.

Although the Presbyterian Church condemned McCrackin’s witness, his friends mounted a massive campaign to reach the larger community beyond Haywood and Fayette counties to bring pressure for his release while calling attention to the plight of the people there. The Reverend Clarence T.R. Nelson, brother of Peacemaker Wally Nelson and chair of the Operation Freedom board, wrote to Governor Buford Ellington of Tennessee and to President John F. Kennedy, asking them to investigate the arrest. An ad pleading for Christian concern, signed by seventy-two Cincinnati ministers, was submitted to the State’s Graphic, Brownsville’s newspaper, but was refused publication. The Cincinnati NAACP appealed to Attorney General Robert Kennedy for an investigation. All this time McCrackin refused to eat, suffering terrible nausea during the first week of his twenty-five-day fast.

Meanwhile, harassment of other Operation Freedom workers continued in and around Brownsville. L. Richard Hudson, a Cincinnati minister, was interrogated and intimidated in early November 1961. David Henry, a pacifist from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was jailed on November 14 for refusing to pay the fine on a trumped-up speeding charge. Henry was brutally beaten in his jail cell. And when Ernest Bromley arrived to check out the situation, he was also roughed up and denied access to either McCrackin or to Henry.

Intimidation of this sort was typical, and the Operation Freedom workers carefully chronicled it. Another Peacemaker from Cincinnati, Virgie Bernhardt Hortenstine, wrote this ac-

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count after she and a Reverend Caldwell of Memphis went to meet David Henry as he was released:

David was released from jail. His mother had paid the fine against his wishes. . . . David had been waiting all day at the home of one of the Negro leaders; he said the police had been circling the house about every fifteen minutes all day. We arrived just after dark, stopped and looked for a place to park without parking illegally, for the street was narrow. A police car came out of a side street and arrested Rev. Caldwell for speeding, charged him with going 35 m.p.h. They asked us to follow them to the police station, picked up a third uniformed man in their car, and led us past the police station out into the country. When they turned down a narrow, dark side road I persuaded Rev. Caldwell to turn around and go back to the police station. The police followed us back, asked Rev. Caldwell why he had not followed them. He said, “The lady who is with me said the police station was back in town; I thought maybe you had forgotten about us.” Word got out, and while Rev. Caldwell was still in the police station an Associated Press reporter called to ask if it was true . . . [that] Caldwell . . . had been taken 10 miles out in the country and beaten by the police. Rev. Caldwell was fined $13.00.17

While all of this was going on, McCrackin in his cell wrote letters and kept a journal. In one reflection, sent to his sister, he joked about the various meat dishes he yearned for as he fasted: beef with vegetable sauce, Cincinnati-style chili smothered in onions. Then, more seriously, he explained his reason for fasting when imprisoned. The goal was not to pressure the administrators to meet his demands:

Perhaps in a setting such as this it [fasting] should be a combination primarily of identification and protest—identification with people who are chronically hungry and undernourished and whose poverty deprives them of the basic physical necessities such as adequate clothing and decent housing. It is also that the protester is ready to deprive himself of the human needs in order to make clearer how he felt about some outrageous and persistent miscarriage of justice.18

McCrackin, having learned a great deal about fasting during his 1958-1959 imprisonment for war-tax resistance, fasted now as a means of identifying with the poor and as a dramatic show of perseverance. He knew that the tradition of fasting had an honorable history:

I am sure that Jesus and the great Saints of history have been able to integrate their fasting into a deepening of prayer experience. While their prayer nurtured a strength, I believe my fasts have been sustained primarily because of a deep and abiding conviction that they are consistent with and fitted into furthering the achievement of the precepts to which I have given my life.
Thus McCrackin used his prison time for spiritual reflection. Not usually given to recording his dreams, McCrackin did so while imprisoned in Haywood County. One dream suggests the anxiety that attended his imprisonment so far from home:

I was somewhere with friends and we were about to leave an enclosed courtyard. Most of them had left through one exit. Into another entrance came a group of men dressed like pictures you have seen of Chinese brigand bands with rough, bulky clothing. The friend with me said, “You see, I said there would be trouble.” These young fellows came over carrying muskets and took my billfold. I asked them to give me at least my car registration and driver’s license. They then fastened a heavy stone connected with iron links to an ankle and took 2 old women’s coats, one they forced me to put on the normal way, the other in reverse. About then the bandit working with me disappeared and I picked up my rock and chain, hunting for a place to hide. There was a large abandoned building nearby. It looked like a student’s dorm that might have been bombed. I went into a door, hunting out some hidden spot, but there wasn’t any and I remember thinking, “He’s bound to come in here and will likely shoot me.” Then I woke up in the Brownsville Workhouse cell and said audibly, “What a relief!”

In prison McCrackin had the opportunity to confront his fears and also to honor his other emotions. Another dream is especially personal, touching on his relationship with his mother. He noted in his journal that he had been letting his beard grow while in prison. He wrote:

I dreamed that I was released and was getting ready to return to Cincinnati. I looked in a mirror and was greatly impressed with the well-filled in mustache and goatee—a wide one flaring at the bottom. I decided to wear it home, saying to myself that Mother will probably terminate the life of this beautiful creation as she did Bob’s when he came home from Echo years ago—but I never arrived home to find out, I woke up.

What McCrackin was doing bravely in the name of conscience by day was strangely permuted in his dreams at night.

Perhaps the forty-some days spent in the Haywood County Workfarm were not altogether unpleasant for McCrackin. He had just endured a tense year and an activity level that was at times frenetic. Here, for a brief period, he had a chance to write letters, to make friends, to meditate on where his ministry was taking him.

When it came time for McCrackin to be released, on Saturday, December 9, a delegation of friends had planned to escort him from the workfarm to Owen College in Memphis, where his belongings were being kept. John Wilson, McCrackin’s old college friend and executive secretary of the Ohio Council of Churches, was to be among the delegation. Brownsville authorities however, thought of a way to avoid any more publicity: they sent McCrackin to Memphis on a
Greyhound bus at 2:30 a.m. the night before his scheduled release. It happened that Ernest Bromley, on his way to meet McCrackin, was staying that night at Owen College. In the early hours of the morning, he was awakened by a knock on his door. There stood McCrackin, excited to be out of prison and willing to stay up the rest of the night to tell all about it. Both men were tired the next day, yet they delayed their return home to Cincinnati. McCrackin felt that it was important to set an example of moral courage and reappear at the scene of the trouble. So the next afternoon he and Bromley were back in Haywood County to attend a meeting of the Civic and Welfare League. “Freedom is indivisible,” McCrackin said. “Where people’s freedoms are being violated, we must do everything we can do to undergird that freedom. We should go to those places, share the dangers, not just have a remote or theoretical concern.”

During that first year, most of Operation Freedom's efforts were concentrated in the two counties named in the lawsuit being appealed in Cincinnati. That year the campaign loaned $42,994 to 95 blacks who had suffered after registering to vote. Eventually, information about the program was circulated nationwide to some 3,000 people and resulted over a ten-year period in raising about $250,000, most of it distributed directly to the people, since there was a volunteer staff. Overhead was low; telephone bills averaged about forty dollars a month; $250 a year went to an auditor and a bookkeeper. Most of the money raised was distributed as loans at 2 percent interest, but when these could not be repaid, the money was treated as a grant. The evicted people needed relatively little money to survive. Someone who lost her job for testifying in court received $38.25; another person who lost his job for attending a mass meeting got $77.50. The loan to Contee Wilkes, who needed $500 to pay off his tractor so that it would not be repossessed, was relatively large. McCrackin, Operation Freedom treasurer, with the help of Wally Nelson, Miriam Nicholas, and others, had devised the simplest possible accounting system, keeping red tape to a minimum and getting help immediately to people in need. In Tennessee the Operation Freedom directors asked Richard Haley, Tennessee representative for CORE, to serve as liaison. Later they put local black ministers in charge of determining who needed relief and filling out a simple one-page application form. Sometimes they took applications for emergency relief over the phone. The northerners trusted the southerners to monitor their own operation, and with few exceptions their faith was justified.

Operation Freedom also worked with other sponsors to organize work camps. For instance, the International Voluntary Service helped build a new community building for the Civic and Welfare League in Somerville. College students from the University of Chicago, Cornell, Oberlin, and Antioch participated in this project, living with local black families and coming to understand their lives.

It soon became apparent that the hardships endured in southwestern Tennessee were characteristic of other southern communities as well. CORE had been sending workers out to various trouble spots to offer assistance, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was staging demonstrations to prick the nation’s conscience about racial oppression in the South.
By 1962 the tent cities in Haywood and Fayette counties had been dismantled and the blacks staying in them had resettled. Now the voter registration campaign needed to penetrate further South. In the fall of 1962, Amzie Moore, the president of the Cleveland, Mississippi, NAACP, asked Operation Freedom to help in the Mississippi Delta, just across the state border from Haywood County. Although 300,000 blacks lived in the Delta region, few were registered to vote. The threat of violence kept them virtually enslaved. This was the area where in 1955 Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black youth, was murdered by whites, ostensibly for whistling at a white woman. His body was dumped in the Tallahatchie River.

Amzie Moore, who had served in Burma during World War II, was a key link in the civil rights chain. Not only did he lead the NAACP and encourage voter registration in Bolivar County, Mississippi, but movement people were always welcome in his Cleveland home, where they sometimes evaded the police stakeouts by driving into the parking lot of a neighboring funeral parlor and sneaking through the fence to the Moore back yard. Moore worked for the post office, but this did not protect him from economic reprisals. He was fired once on a trumped-up charge and got his position back only by appealing directly to the Postal Administration in Washington, D.C. Even after he was reinstated, his supervisor at the post office sought to force him to resign by scheduling him for split shifts and hours that varied from day to day. But Moore endured, doing movement organizing between work shifts. Among other things, he helped establish a sewing center where women could gather to make the clothes they could not buy because of the boycott against local merchants who had refused credit to those who registered to vote or sent their children to formerly all-white schools.

In the spring of 1963, the youthful coordinator of Operation Freedom volunteers for Mississippi, Jack McKart, reported on his trip to the area. He told of employees being fired because their relatives had attempted to register to vote, of lists distributed to bankers advising them to turn down loans, and of shootings:

I wish everyone could sit as I have in the cold sharecroppers’ cabins with coats on, see the hunger and the children out of school because they have no adequate clothes, see the bullet holes in the houses of registration workers, hear of the two young women left unattended in a white hospital after they had been shot, talk to the young man just out of jail charged with telephoning a white woman, hear of the mutilated body found near Canton. You have to be there to believe it. A Northern minister said to me recently, “Don’t take it too seriously; this sort of thing has been happening a long time.” When thousands of people are suffering, it is hard to comprehend. I guess that is why the Germans couldn’t comprehend when 6,000,000 Jews were facing gas chambers. It was too big—they were an abstraction, like people in Mississippi now. But when you see, you have to act.25

One of the Mississippi families described in the Operation Freedom pamphlets was that of Matthew and Mae Bertha Carter. Seven of their thirteen children were the only black children enrolled in the formerly all-white school in Drew, in Sunflower County, near Senator James O. Eastland’s 3,000-acre plantation.26 Not coincidentally, at the end of 1962, only 141 black voters
were registered in Sunflower County, out of a total black population of 38,000. The Carters worked on a plantation near the Eastland establishment. When the plantation supervisor, whom they called the “Boss Man,” heard that they had enrolled their children in a formerly all-white school, he stopped by their house to threaten eviction. Mrs. Carter and the children were inside at the time. Mr. Carter said he would have to check with his wife about withdrawing the children. He returned shortly and told the supervisor merely: “She says they’ll stay in!” For their rebellion, the Carters were slowly deprived of all means of livelihood, their property vandalized, their income cut off. But they stuck it out in their tenant shack for a full year.

Shortly after they moved to the nearby town of Drew, the Carters’ house was fired upon and their daughter Ruth narrowly escaped being shot. For a long time afterward the family slept huddled together on the floor below the range of shots that might come in through the window. Matthew Carter could not find decent work, and the family wondered how it would survive. Mae Bertha Carter had no money for soap or groceries. One afternoon she came home to find McCrackin waiting for her on the porch. He had heard of their plight and asked simply, “What can I do to help you through?”

“Well,” she said, “we could certainly use some groceries.”

He gave her the cash that got her through, and thus began a lifetime friendship. Mae Bertha Carter maintained that the Reverend McCrackin had been sent in answer to her prayers.

Mae Bertha Carter’s religious grounding and faith in quality education may have been buttressed by help from Operation Freedom, but her own resourcefulness inspired those who were lending her that support. Each of the Carter children eventually graduated from high school, and several of them were among the first blacks to graduate from the University of Mississippi, their tuition paid for by scholarships from the NAACP. Mrs. Carter’s courage, tinged with a sense of fatalism, is evident in her statement in one of the Operation Freedom newsletters: “Down here if they don’t get you in the wash they’ll get you in the rinse!” But they didn’t get her in the rinse. She helped set up the Head Start program in Cleveland, Mississippi, and she taught preschoolers there for many years.

Significant gains were made in voter registration during the years of support from Operation Freedom. In 1963 only 500 blacks in Bolivar County were registered. By 1967, 9,000 of 17,000 eligible blacks had done so. L. E. Griffin was responsible for placing more black names on the registers in the Mississippi Delta than any other person. His tactic was to meet farm workers early in the morning, transport them to registration centers, and drive them back to the fields in time to put in a full day’s work.

Operation Freedom was deeply appreciated by those it served. Without immediate economic aid, given with few strings attached, many blacks would either have moved from their birthplace or given up the struggle. And the times were against continued submission.

With increased numbers voting, black candidates were able to win offices. Even though the assassination in 1963 of Medgar Evers, NAACP field secretary for Mississippi, showed how dangerous it was to be a black leader in the South, many aspired to leadership positions. In 1964 Fannie Lou Hamer, from Sunflower County in the Delta, challenged the racism implicit in Mis-
sissippi’s delegate selection process. The first part of her impassioned speech before the Credentials Committee of the National Democratic Convention, delivered in the simple words of the common people, was carried on the national news. Blacks in the Delta and in southwestern Tennessee were becoming empowered. In Haywood and Fayette counties, they made sure that nine black magistrates were elected by 1966—the first such elected officials since Reconstruction.

School integration, however, continued to be a problem. In Bolivar County, there were 350 black children enrolled in formerly all-white schools by the end of 1967, as opposed to 18 the year before, but once the schools were integrated, white families started to move out. Private academies replaced the formerly all-white public schools, and serious educational inequities persisted.

As late as 1966 violent persecution of blacks by whites was still going on. In Grenada, Mississippi, black children going home from school on the first day of integration were beaten with chains, pieces of pipe, and ax handles. Many had to lie for hours in a church before they could be moved to a hospital. The blacks boycotted Grenada businesses in response and were in turn punished by being denied loans for seed and fertilizer. Such stories demonstrated the ongoing need for Operation Freedom. Eventually it spread to Alabama and to southwest Georgia, and new stories of courage in the face of cruelty surfaced in the Operation Freedom newsletters, as when a domestic worker in Selma was told she would be fired if she attended the funeral of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a murder victim.

Operation Freedom continually elicited ideas for small businesses to assure livelihoods for families displaced from the plantations. Polly Brokaw, the Peacemaker whose Cincinnati home had been the birthplace of Operation Freedom, enjoyed gathering driftwood from the shoreline of the Ohio River and fashioning lamps and stools from it. Her idea was that something similar could be done with driftwood gathered along the Mississippi. So she bundled her children into the car and headed south with samples, planning to visit Fannie Lou Hamer in Ruleville, Mississippi. However, Brokaw and Hamer were not destined to meet. Brokaw’s car was turned away by local law enforcement officers, who had been alerted by her request for directions to the Hamer house. They accused her of peddling without a license and sent her back home to Cincinnati.

Many other business suggestions were embraced. Eric Weinberger, an enterprising easterner, helped set up a shop in Haywood County for the manufacture of leather tote bags, which were sold through the mail. For interfering with economic intimidation in this way, Weinberger was constantly harassed by white gangs and was once beaten almost beyond recognition. Art and Carolyn Emery sold their farm in Iowa to help set up a vegetable co-op in Tennessee, one of several formed. In March 1967 Wally and Juanita Nelson toured the Operation Freedom areas and submitted a lengthy report about the development of these small enterprises, thirteen cooperatives that produced everything from candy to quilts.
Operation Freedom was part of a larger movement. On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech to a quarter of a million people gathered before the Lincoln Memorial. Later that same year, four Sunday school children were killed in an explosion triggered by arson in a Birmingham Baptist church. In 1964 thousands of volunteers were involved with Freedom Schools in black communities across the nation, and three civil rights workers--James Chaney, a black civil rights worker from Meridian, Mississippi; Andrew Goodman, a young white student from Queens College, New York; and Michael Schwerner, a white social worker from New York City--were murdered near Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Once national attention had been focused on conditions in the South, the federal government made a commitment to help with housing. Robert Kennedy is said to have wept when he visited the Delta area. In 1966 the Federal Poverty Program was begun in Sunflower County, Mississippi, largely as a result of Operation Freedom’s efforts to empower the black community there. Today Cleveland, Mississippi, has rows of small tract houses, each with its own small yard. Built in the early 1970s, these homes could be acquired for as little as $200 down, thanks to the efforts of leaders such as Amzie Moore. Coming from the unspeakable conditions of the plantation shacks, black families appreciated these modest dwellings, with their indoor plumbing and other basic amenities.

Operation Freedom beautifully embodied McCrackin's dream of the “Beloved Community.” Gross injustice was making people's lives miserable, yet many people hearing about it would have considered it none of their business or would have seen themselves as powerless to change it. McCrackin's role was to recognize the need and then organize people to meet that need. He helped set up Operation Freedom, working collaboratively, and he remained on its cutting edge until it was fully established. He took risks that landed him in jail, and he used his imprisonment to reach prisoners and others. Local black families found him an especially effective witness because they knew he was standing for them, walking the road, suffering as they had suffered for so long. Unfortunately, many of McCrackin's white colleagues found it more difficult to understand his motives.

Other features of Operation Freedom also bore the McCrackin stamp. The emphasis on fact-finding and the communication of these facts through individual histories typified his way of illustrating principles without unwieldy theoretical explanations. Communication was open across class lines, across racial lines, and across the miles between Cincinnati and the Deep South, and it went both ways. Not only did many Cincinnatians visit the South, but on several occasions southerners visited Cincinnati to report their experiences first hand. John McFerren and Odell Sanders came to Cincinnati in February 1961, just a month after Operation Freedom was conceived; later, Viola McFerren, Mae Bertha Carter, and Fannie Lou Hamer spoke to McCrackin's congregation, demonstrating by their very presence the solidarity the two groups were living out.

Typical also was the network of collaborative participation: Peacemakers, students, Civic and Welfare Leagues, church groups, and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) a coalition made up of the SCLC, CORE, the NAACP, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating
Committee. Even the Operation Freedom board of directors reflected McCrackin's skill in building coalitions. Included were nationally known civil rights activists Ella Baker, advisor to SNCC; Anne and Carl Braden of SCEF, who had been convicted of sedition in the 1950s for buying a house in a white subdivision of Louisville, Kentucky and selling it to a black couple; Peacemakers Ross Anderson, Amos and Polly Brokaw, Ernest Bromley, Lloyd Danzeisen, Virgie Hortenstine, Wally Nelson, and Miriam Nicholas; Lesha Greengus and her husband, Samuel, who taught at Hebrew Union College; Roger Phenix, Myles Horton, and later Conrad Brown, all with Highlander connections; and John Wilson, McCrackin's former college roommate, for the Ohio Council of Churches. As in the civil rights movement in general, college students were an important part of the team.

McCrackin kept up many of the friendships he made during this period, writing letters, making periodic phone calls, paying visits. Twenty-five years later when he again traveled south, the Carters, Birdie Lee Griffin, and the McFerrens all rejoiced to see him again, eagerly catching him up on the news of the children and grandchildren in whom he had always taken such a personal interest. It was obvious from their response to McCrackin that Operation Freedom had forged an alliance of love. They had created what McCrackin referred to as “community in the midst of chaos.”

Chapter 8 notes

2. Koinonia, the interracial cooperative founded by Clarence Jordan, was the target of ferocious opposition by segregationists in the 1950s and 1960s.
4. Operation Freedom newsletter, March 1961. Slightly different population figures are given in other sources.
5. The Civic and Welfare Leagues had been granted state charters in 1959.
8. According to Polly Brokaw, this name was suggested by Wally Nelson (interview, April 1987). According to Clarence Nelson's letter of February 28, 1961, this name was already in use for similar help efforts elsewhere. The Reverend Clarence Nelson (Wally's brother) was chair of the Operation Freedom board.
10. The plights of many of these people are recorded in Robert Hamburger's oral history, *Our Portion of Hell*. Hamburger was an easterner whose experience collecting the interviews was so profound that he was still returning to the area twenty years later to maintain the “family ties” that he had created during his research.
11. This recording and other materials from the estate of Operation Freedom leader Virgie Bernhardt Hortenstine are in the Archives and Quaker Collection, S. A. Watson Library, Wilmington College, Wilmington, Ohio.
14. John Scopes, defended by Darrow, lost his case in the local court. His conviction was later reversed on technical grounds.
22. Ibid.
23. McCrackin signed the checks, but Nicholas did all the bookkeeping.
25. Ibid.
27. Operation Freedom newsletter, February 1963. A summer 1968 *Peacemaker* reports that whereas black women earned twelve to fifteen dollars a week for housework, the Eastland plantation earned $13,161 a month (or $157,930 a year) from the federal government for crop subsidies. Such were the economic disparities undergirding the racist system.
32. The last half of her speech was not carried on national television— the networks switched coverage to the convention floor.
35. In Drew, Mississippi, the Carters were still active in 1987, protesting against the fact that board of education members are appointed rather than elected, thus preventing change. As a result of this protest, one of the Carter daughters, Beverly, was appointed to the board.
39. Some 3,000 bags were sold for $3.00 each.
40. Interview with Isabel Flagg, June 1987.
42. Operation Freedom newsletter (“Notes from the South”), Spring 1967.
43. Mainline churches and their publications paid little attention to Operation Freedom. Only the *Christian Century* followed the Operation Freedom story, publishing several articles by Virgie Hortenstine.
44. For Anne Braden’s account of this historic case, see her book *The Wall Between* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1958; a new edition is planned for 1991 by the University of Tennessee Press). As of 1990, Anne Braden was still active in politics and the human freedom movement; in 1988 she chaired Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaign in Kentucky.