

Mike Miller July 23, 2005

Part I Historical Overview

Mike: Take some time to remember a moment when you were powerless. Get into that time, feel it in your gut. [a few moments of silence] What words would you use to describe that experience?

Students: Fear, frustration, anger, loss of control, depleted, anxiety

Mike: Why do you think anger was not the typical feeling encountered by SNCC field secretaries? . . . I should say something about SNCC. In WW II, there was finally a presidential order to integrate the armed forces. Even prior to that, black soldiers in Europe were having experiences with local European people that were pretty devoid of the kind of racism they knew in the US. And this was true both of northern and Southern black soldiers. So after WW II, during the occupation, this even increased. Black soldiers had experiences with European white men and women pretty devoid of what they knew here in the US. When the black soldiers returned here to the US many of them would not accept the prejudices/discrimination that they found here, particularly in its legal and more virulent forms in the South. A number of them left and went North in the great migrant stream that proceeded them in the 1930s to cities like Chicago and Detroit. But others stayed and became leaders in efforts that focused on things like anti-lynching legislation, fair employment practices, voter registration and so on.

That immediate post WW II movement was pretty much crushed by a combination of the hysteria of anti-communism period of the cold war through the certainty of the early fifties and by direct intimidation, killing, particularly in the South by sheriffs, police departments and white citizens. Then in 1955, the stirrings of something began again. Actually a little before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the murder of Emmett Till stirred a lot in the country and in the South.

The Bus Boycott in 1955, initiated by the Montgomery black women's association – Joanne Robinson has written a book, a different version from the common history of the role of this women's group. These boycotts were being repeated in other cities. Then in the late Fifties, students at the historically black colleges in the South were meeting and discussing what are we going to do? In 1960, at Greensboro NC, students from a local black college sat in at a Woolworth's lunch counter. That sit in was replicated by students spontaneously throughout the South. And soon there were thousands of students involved in this movement. They convened later that year under the auspices of Dr. King's organization, the SCLC. It was the intention of the SCLC to have a youth affiliate which they hoped that these young people from the college campuses would be. But with some support and advice from Ella Baker, whose a legendary but fairly invisible figure in the history of the Civil Rights movement. They decided not to be the youth affiliate of the SCLC but to organize their own group which they named SNCC. It took its name from the fact that it was coordinating the activities of these campus-based student organizations throughout the South.

In 1961, Robert Moses, who was a philosophy major at Harvard, grew up in Harlem, had come South initially to volunteer with Dr. King's organization but moved over to SNCC. Robert Moses went to Mississippi to see why no one had come from Mississippi to a conference that had been sponsored, I think, in Atlanta. And in Mississippi, he started to meet some of these local leaders who were returned veterans from WW II who were playing local leadership roles. Some of them in branches of the NAACP like Aaron Henry in Clarksdale. Others of them like Amzie Moore in Cleveland. Medgar Evers who was a state NAACP workers. And as Bob Moses spoke with the people who were local leaders in Mississippi, they told him: look, what you students are doing is good and okay. It's not really what we are interested in. What we're interested in is the right to register to vote. Because most of the people here in Mississippi couldn't afford to go into those places you are integrating anyway. They are working as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, domestics at \$3 a day, seasonal work, many of them are unemployed.

And until we can crack the refusal of country registrars to let black people register to vote, we're not going to get our freedom.

Around the same period Charles Sherrod had gone into Albany, Georgia and he had heard similar stories. So a group of people from SNCC decided they were going to drop out of school and be full time workers, in what we call the black belt counties, which are counties where the percentage of African American residents as high as 80 to 85 percent, where the voter registration rate was as low, in some cases, as low as one percent. I think there were a few counties where it was actually zero. These students decided they would drop out, work full time in these counties to try to encourage local people to go to the country court house to register to vote. In Mississippi, which I know the best, that where I spent some time, to register to vote, was not like what you do here. You stand on a corner, have people fill out a form [mail the form in] and that was that. You had to go to the county courthouse. You had to take a test which was administered by the country registrar in a highly discriminatory way. Black people with BA's and MA's and PhD's were routinely flunked, as you can imagine were people without a formal literacy. So the idea of the people from SNCC was that they were going to go into these counties and encourage people to go down to the county courthouse to try to register to vote where they would not only met this discriminatory test but their names would be published in the newspaper as having had tried to register, which alerted their employer to firing them, anyone who had credit with them to foreclosing or demanding their credit, or their landlord to evicting them, Klansmen to burning their homes. All kinds of retaliatory actions were taken against people who tried to register to vote.

I think about 24 SNCC people were the first group who were full time doing this. They were called field secretaries. A long answer to your question about field secretaries.

Student One: Will you refresh us as to what snick is?

Mike: S, N, C, C. You can't say it. So the acronym was made up, was "snick," the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Sylvia: and they called SCLC "slick," right?

Mike: There's this group of returned veterans who remain in the deep South, and they're angry about what's going on. And in the counties, there are either branches of the NAACP or local county, what we'll call voter's leagues or improvement associations. They had various names. Only a handful of people participated in these. If you asked people what the feeling of powerlessness was like for them, they would have been angry about it. Why do you think that might not have been the experience that you would have heard reported from the vast majority of the people in the black belt counties?

Student Two: because they were afraid.

Mike: You could be angry about being afraid

Two: I guess because they got used to it

One: Any expression of anger, any expression of aggression was criticized.

Mike: those are all true

One: I was thinking that any expression of anger, or perhaps they were so used to the situation, that their anger was gone?

Mike: yeah, anyone else?

Three: they could have felt ashamed?

Four: Like you said, when they were soldiers in Europe, they had a taste of dignity that they didn't get in the US maybe once they had that they couldn't go back.

Mike: I'm not talking about—, .. the soldiers were angry, the people, they were the ones that was this thin layer of activism and leadership in these counties, not only the soldiers, but most people were not in that category, and I'm trying to find out from you why you think that is. The things that have been said so far have been accurate. I want to add one that is related to what's been said. If you are in a circumstance where you can't do anything about it, and least that you can imagine, to be angry is really to go crazy. I think. Anger is not an emotion you can afford if you think there is nothing you can do about the circumstance. And so you

rationalize it, you try to suppress. You do all kinds of things so you don't have to confront it.

There is one other reason that is a fairly controversial idea. That's the idea that at some psychological level, you have internalised the label that the system has put on you. This label of inferiority so it has become an internalised oppression, which leads you to accepting a status that you shouldn't accept. That's a controversial idea because, well, we don't have to go into that.

So a SNCC field secretary would arrive in a county. In those counties where there was someone like Aaron Henry or Amzie Moore, one of these local leaders, EG Steptoe in Amite City, where there was one of these local leaders to host the SNCC worker, we would call that SNCC worker an invited worker in that county. Someone local who was known was inviting SNCC to have a person work in that country. Why would that be important?

Five: It would give them legitimacy to their being there.

Mike Exactly. Everyone understand that? So when they go door to door for example to talk with people,

“who are you?”

“Well, I'm working with Amzie Moore.”

“Oh, you're with Amzie, you're okay.”

This legitimacy is very important to organizers in an organizing process. In some places SNCC didn't know any local people, and neither did Amzie Moore. . . or Aaron Henry or any of them. When Sam Block and Willy Peacock (now Wazir) went into Greenwood, in Leflore County, they slept in their car for, I think, at least 6 weeks. Then a woman whose name escapes me at the moment invited them to stay at their place. She owned her own piece of land. Those who owned their own piece of land were relatively independent. So these field secretaries would go door to door, either identifying someone local who invited them, or just identifying themselves with the Freedom Movement which by then, they were called Freedom Riders, people had seen the Freedom rides on TV – they had made national news,

people riding Trailways and Greyhound buses into the deep south and challenging the segregated seating on those buses. And there had been a bus burned in Anniston in 1961, I believe, and elsewhere along the route there had been violence. So that was national news and even the poorest of people tended to have a TV or access to one. So the SNCC workers were often called Freedom Riders even though they weren't there to do that.