

MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM SUMMER
50TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE
JUNE 25 - JUNE 29, 2014

Jackson Convention Center and
Tougaloo College
Jackson, Mississippi



We the People:

**Freedom and the Mississippi Theater of the Civil Rights
Movement: 1960 - 1964**

Freedom Rides, Freedom Votes, Freedom Schools, Freedom
Work, Freedom Elections, Freedom Summer, Freedom
Democratic Party

By Robert "Bob" Moses

We the People:

Amzie Moore's "*We the People*" embraced the black sharecroppers, day laborers and domestic workers spread across the Delta. C.C. Bryant's (a union railroad employee) embraced black workers, their families, the Mississippi NAACP, and black Masons, Webb Owens took in mentoring McComb's black teenagers and managing black shopkeepers NAACP contributions out of his back pocket "bank", EW Steptoe's embraced small farmers scratching out a living in Southwest Mississippi.

I was passed along: to EW by C.C. to C.C. by Amzie to Amzie by Ella. Ella Baker's "*We the People*" introduced Freedom's Liberty: a liberty to stand shoulder to shoulder with progressives of all stripes. I escorted Carl Braden across the 1962 Mississippi Theater for Ella, the same liberty that lead to Bob Zellner's dramatic 1961 McComb Mississippi entry into SNCC.

SNCC's "*We the People*", with its two hands "shaking", fashioned a liberty welcoming Jane Stembridge, Connie Curry, Dorothy Zellner, Mendy Samstein, Casey Hayden, Mike Miller and Friends of SNCC all across the nation. CORE's Louisiana network shepherded Dave Dennis and national CORE into the Mississippi Theater and

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SCLC's Citizenship Training did the same for Annelle Ponder. Aaron Henry did likewise for the State NAACP, and for the National, Medgar Evers. Medgar's assassination rippled across the nation: Robert Spike introduced Mississippi to resources of the National Council of Churches while Allard Lowenstein introduced Stanford and Yale students into the 1963 Freedom Elections, raising the question of a summer project.

Guerilla Warfare:

Father John LaBauve, of the Divine Word Ministry of the Catholic Church, a black catholic priest, ran voter education classes out of his parish in Mound Bayou where Amzie took me in the summer of 1960. The Catholic Church transferred him; he was gone a year later and the work did not begin in the Delta as originally planned. Instead Amzie responded to a letter from C.C. Bryant in McComb and we began in the southwest counties of Pike, Walthall and Amite, where the highway patrol and the thin veneer of the State's shield quickly disintegrated exposing SNCC field secretaries to violence and local people to murder.

The deadly gunning down of Herbert Lee in September 1961 and Lewis Allen in January 1964 became the assassination book-ends of the two and one-half years of Freedom Work, 24/7, carried out by SNCC and CORE field secretaries, teenagers and young men and women in their early 20s, that led to Freedom Votes, Freedom Schools, Freedom Elections, Freedom Summer and the Freedom Democratic Party. Guerilla warfare was what it was. Some scarcely thirty plus SNCC and CORE 24/7 Field Secretaries living and working catch as catch can within the homes, families and networks of local NAACP 'race-men': the Amzie Moore's, Aaron Henry's, C.C. Bryant's, E.W. Steptoe's, Vernon Dahmer's, C.O. Chinn's.

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SNCC and CORE field secretaries mounted an earned-insurgency against the State and the Nation:

First and foremost we had to earn the right to secure the indispensable element of guerilla warfare, the respect and trust of that population segment, the local NAACP leadership that would 'harbor' and sustain us and advance Freedom Work.

Second we had to gain the respect and trust of the officials commanding the sole instrument of the federal government with "boots on the ground", the Civil Rights Division (CRD) of the Department of Justice. The 1957 and 1960 Civil Rights Acts created a "Legal Crawl Space", a zone of possible action within which SNCC and CORE field secretaries pushing voter registration could maneuver: Mississippi locked us up, but the Feds held the jail house keys.

Third, we earned the right to call on the Nation to come take a closer look at itself. It was a matter of understanding the larger meaning of two murders, Herbert Lee in September 1961 and Lewis Allen in January 1964, as bookends: Medgar's assassination was the breach in Mississippi's Political levee. When black youth at Medgar's funeral flowed into the streets, "boots on the ground" in the person of John Doar stepped between them and the State's line of "Defense" against black youth outraged, after which SNCC and CORE field secretaries channeled the implications of Medgar's death away from state action murder vs. black youth riot in the street, into state and national politics, accelerating Freedom Votes into Freedom Elections and the Freedom Democratic Party.

The Call:

The call was made after Lewis Allen's assassination. Students from Yale and Stanford attracted national attention in the 1963 Fall Freedom Elections as did Bob Spike's fifty National Council of Churches ministers bussed in for the January 22nd Hattiesburg Freedom Day ran by SNCC field secretary Lawrence Guyot. After which

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SNCC field secretaries lingered to continue their debate about a possible summer project to bring large numbers of college students into Mississippi. The debate ground to a standstill. Then on Jan. 31 we got word that Lewis Allen had been gunned down. I came back from Amite and threw my weight into the debate:

After Herbert Lee the two or three SNCC field secretaries working then in Pike, Amite and Walthall counties, re-dedicated ourselves. By the era of Lewis Allen, however, we had earned a platform from which to call on the country to see itself *for* itself. The two assassinations book-ended the guerilla warfare phase of the Freedom Work.

In "One Drop of Blood" (the American Misadventure of Race), Scott Malcomsom takes SNCC and Freedom Summer to task for succumbing to the American creed about who is important, who counts. Freedom Summer, to be sure, raised one more time the question Bernice and "Sweet Honey in the Rock" engraved into "Ella's Song": Until the killing of black men, black mother's sons is as important as the killing of white men, white mother's sons, we who believe in Freedom shall not rest. In any case, it is not easy, to say the least, to step back and take a good look at ourselves; we should use the 50th commemoration of the Mississippi Theater to do just that, just as, fifty years ago, in spite of ourselves, the assassinations of three black men, Herbert Lee (1961), Medgar Evers (1963) and Lewis Allen (1964), pushed us to do. A task that, in the end, was more than a notion.