

KIDNAPPED BY THE MOVEMENT

by Charles E. Cobb Jr.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *What makes On the Road to Freedom not your usual travel guide is that its author, Charles E. Cobb Jr., was there, right in the throes of the organizing and violence in Mississippi in the 1960s. For the book,*



Charles E. Cobb Jr.,

author of

On the Road to Freedom



I hadn't intended to get arrested, hadn't even thought about the possibility. It was the spring of 1961. I was a freshman at Howard University and had gone to Baltimore with other Washington, D.C., students to join picket lines protesting segregation. At the church where assignments were being given out, I began a conversation with a group of protesters who had experience because I had none. And when this group volunteered to go to Annapolis, I decided to join them.

We went to a restaurant called Antoinette's Pizza—popular with Naval Academy midshipmen. But instead of setting up a picket line as I expected, they entered the restaurant, sat down at tables, refused to leave when asked, were arrested, and then “went limp” and had to be carried into a waiting police paddy wagon. This definitely had not been in my plans. But I just held on to the biggest person in the group as we

Cobb has retraced his steps so that we, too, can follow the footsteps of the remarkable pioneers of the movement. Like many of these volunteers, Cobb never meant to get so intensely involved.

were dragged out of the eatery.

In the Anne Arundel County jail for a few days, I began to hear stories about the just-beginning work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Albany, Georgia, and Mississippi. I was eighteen years old.

Almost everyone I know in my generation who became deeply involved with the southern civil rights movement has an I-didn't-plan-to, then-one-day story of first involvement.

I sat in and picketed regularly for the rest of the spring semester. Because of this involvement, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) invited me to a civil rights workshop for young people it planned to hold in Houston that summer.

This, I thought, would give me a great opportunity to see the “real” South, and I bought a bus ticket for a journey taking me from Washington through Vir-

ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM
by Charles E. Cobb Jr.
ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-439-4
Trade Paper Original
Publication: January 2008

ginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and on into Houston. In Jackson, Mississippi, however, acting on impulse, I made my way to the office that SNCC and CORE shared. Jackson students had been sitting in for a year, and one of those students, Lawrence Guyot, confronted me when I explained that I was just passing through.

“Civil rights workshop in Texas!” sneered Guyot, giving me a hard look (everyone called him by his last name). Guyot is a big guy and he hovered over me, forceful, disdainful. “Tell me: Just what’s the point of going to Texas for a workshop on civil rights when you’re standing right here in Mississippi?”

His challenge was clear: You can chatter about civil rights in meetings or you can *do* something to get those rights. If you want to *do* something, then join our effort here in Mississippi.

I had to at least consider staying, and soon I knew I had to stay, because not long after our conversation, Guyot was almost killed by a Ku Klux Klan mob. *I just talked to this guy!* I remember thinking. Leaving, I thought, would be flight.

And so, I wound up in Ruleville—a town of about a thousand people in the blues and cotton heartland of the Mississippi Delta. My friend and movement comrade Bob Moses used to say, “When you’re in Mississippi, the rest of America doesn’t seem real. And when you’re in the rest of America, Mississippi doesn’t seem real.”

Ruleville was scary enough for me to be thinking about leaving as fast as I comfortably could. On my second day in town, the

mayor—who also owned Ruleville’s only hardware store and was Justice of the Peace—came to a screeching stop in front of me and a coworker, Charles McLaurin. He jumped out of his car, pistol in hand. “I know y’all ain’t from here and you’re here to cause trouble. Best you get out of town.” Then he roared off.

I might have left, but I got arrested again. Two nights after we had brought a group to the county courthouse to try and register to vote, Klan riders shot up the black section of town, wounding two girls in one home. The mayor arrested me, claiming I’d done the shooting to get some publicity.

Great fear quickly settled in across the black community and I knew I couldn’t leave. One of the biggest fears in black Mississippi then—slowing the movement as much as direct intimidation in those early days—was that civil rights workers would start something and, when the inevitable violence and reprisals began, move on, leaving local supporters alone to face the terrible consequences of making white folks mad.

I finally did get out of Mississippi—in 1967. But Mississippi has never gotten out of me. The skills I learned as an organizer in that state have proven invaluable to me as a journalist and writer everywhere I’ve been in the world: how to listen to people, how to talk to people honestly. And the core principle from movement work in those days remains at the heart of much of what I observe as a reporter covering largely unfamiliar places: that people are still fighting for the fundamental right to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives. ■

“Almost everyone I know in my generation who became deeply involved with the southern civil rights movement has an I-didn’t-plan-to, then-one-day story of first involvement.”

—CHARLES E. COBB JR.

