

Those Who Were Not There

THE COLD WAR AGAINST THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Anne Braden



The famous billboard that appeared throughout the south in the late '50s and early '60s. Photo said to be taken by an undercover agent at the 25th anniversary celebration of the Highlander Folk School. To Martin Luther King's right are Aubrey Williams, president of SCEF, and Myles Horton, Highlander director. In left foreground, head down, is Abner Berry, reporter for Communist Party paper The Daily Worker. When photo appeared in newspapers, Horton said he hadn't known who Berry was.

Photo: Dale Ensberger, The Nashville Tennessean.

There is a subplot to the 1964 Mississippi Summer—and indeed to the entire civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s—that is rarely mentioned in its recorded history. It's the story of those of us who were not there. We were missing, not because we weren't committed to the movement, but because the people on the front lines, people we respected deeply, felt it was wiser for us to stay away.

My late husband, Carl, and I were among those people. By 1964, I had been involved in civil rights activity for fifteen years, and Carl, who was ten years older than I, for much longer. But

we didn't set foot in Mississippi that summer. We were labeled communists and subversives. Those who were putting their lives on the line had enough problems in 1964; they didn't need the added burden that our presence would bring.

It was certainly no great loss to the Mississippi movement that I was not there during the Summer Project. There's nothing I could have done that others weren't doing. Thus, Carl and I spent time that summer organizing people all over the country to demand federal intervention against the terror in Mississippi. But the story of our exclusion from Mississippi, and efforts to exclude others, is worth telling now for the light it sheds on the efforts in high places to control the movement that was shaking the nation to its roots.

Carl's and my reputation as "notorious communists" had its origins in the early 1950s, when we sold a house in a segregated neighborhood to a black

Anne Braden has been working for peace and social justice in the south for 41 years. She is co-chair of the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, on the board of the National Rainbow Coalition, and a member of the racial justice working group of the National Council of Churches.

couple in Louisville, Kentucky where we lived. This was at the height of the cold war abroad and anti-communist witch hunts at home. An ardent local prosecutor labeled the house transaction a communist plot designed to stir up trouble between the races, and charged us with conspiring to overthrow the governments of Kentucky and the United States. The result was intense community hysteria. People talked on the streets about how we should be lynched; we became symbols of evil and targets of combined anti-black and anti-red emotions. Carl was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and spent almost a year there before we raised his \$40,000 bond and were able to fight back and win the case three years later.

We were only two of many victims of such attacks in that period. We were among the luckier ones, because we received tremendous support from all over the country. But the attacks persisted for at least twenty years, and still sometimes emerge forty years later, I think because we never withdrew from the struggle.

In 1957, after the Kentucky case ended, we did not return to our previous careers as journalists for establishment newspapers. Instead we went to work for a regional civil rights organization, the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). This group was also labeled "communist." Its director, the late Jim Dombrowski, a white southerner whom I considered a saint, was a Christian socialist in the 1930s social gospel tradition. SCEF itself had descended from the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, founded in 1938 and at one time a mass social reform organization. It was one of the first targets of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) under Martin Dies of Texas, which labeled it a "communist front."

By the 1950s, SCEF had a single program: ending segregation in the south and uniting black and white southerners to do it. It was run by a board of brave, beleaguered people, both black and white, but its main outreach was to whites, seeking to show them that desegregation was in their interest too.

Carl's and my job was traveling the south, looking for whites who were willing to speak and act. We knew we were hardly scratching the surface and that the mass movement we wanted was not possible at that time. But, looking back, I'm proud of what the SCEF did. We did find and nurture many whites whose presence made a differ-

ence. We kept the door open so that later, when the mass black movement broke the south's police state, an interracial movement was (and still is) possible, although even today it is hardly assured.

But always in those years, we had to fight on two fronts. We had to stave off attacks of segregationists, and we had to fight for our right to be part of the civil rights movement. In 1958, HUAC came south and subpoenaed us, along with other civil rights activists, mostly white. Carl told the Committee his beliefs and associations were none of their business, for which he spent a year in prison in 1961-62. HUAC struck terror into human hearts in those days, and many civil rights leaders who were willing to face jail, cattle prods, police dogs and the threat of death shrank from associations that would label them traitors to their country.

We resisted exclusion from the movement because we felt that SCEF's work was unique and important, and also as a matter of principle. We believed that the cold war labeling of people divided and weakened the struggle for racial justice. And we had powerful allies, brave black leaders who stood up to this kind of attack as well as to the police dogs. Ella Baker, the "godmother of SNCC," was one. Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, who led the Birmingham movement, was another; he braved fury to accept the SCEF presidency at the height of the attacks. From my perspective, Martin King was another who resisted the witch hunt. I did not know until I recently read it in Taylor Branch's book, *Parting the Waters*, that Martin once gently warned a student activist to keep a distance from us. I suppose that is true. But I know that Martin, after tortured soul-searching, led a clemency campaign for Carl in the HUAC case and steadfastly resisted efforts of the Louisiana Un-American Activities Committee to get him to repudiate any association with SCEF.

As for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), when black students launched the sit-ins in 1960, the young people knew nothing of the witch hunts or what had produced them. But they soon heard that SCEF should be avoided. At the second convention in October, 1960, there was a major debate on whether the organization should grant SCEF observer status in its ongoing structure, as it was doing with other "adult" organizations. Rev. Wyatt T. Walker, then executive director of King's Southern Christian

Leadership Conference (SCLC) argued passionately for our inclusion, and prevailed. Soon the most dedicated student leaders had decided to reject divisive labeling and to let no one tell them with whom they could associate. We became very close to the young people, and they accepted our help in many quiet ways, probably because SCEF really wanted to see SNCC develop on its own, free from control by any of the older organizations, including ours.

But SNCC's association with us caused them some trouble. For example, in 1962, Bob Moses, the brilliant dedicated SNCC leader in Mississippi, invited Carl to come to that state to conduct workshops on civil liberties. After a tour of the state, Carl wrote a routine staff report for SCEF that was distributed to the SCEF board by Jim Dombrowski. There was a leak somewhere, and the report reached the segregationist *Jackson Daily News*, which ran banner headlines reporting a Mississippi tour by a "communist." Powerful forces supporting the civil rights movement financially, including the Voter Education Project that was channeling foundation funds, reacted in fury, not at the *Daily News*, but at Carl and SCEF.

Thus, as plans for the 1964 Summer Project emerged, we knew without being told that we should not go to Mississippi that summer. But that spring, we did work closely with some white students, many of whom we had brought into the movement, who had formed a support group called the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC). They were organizing what became known as the "white folks project", eventually recruiting twenty-five whites to work that summer trying to talk to white Mississippians about their interest in supporting the black freedom movement. The project had its own sessions in June of 1964 at the college in Oxford, Ohio, where the Summer Project was training its 1,000 volunteers. SSOC activists invited Carl and me to conduct a workshop for the "white folks project."

When we arrived, SSOC leader Ed Hamlett climbed into our car. "Let's get out of here," he said. He told us that the National Council of Churches (NCC), which was funding the training, had declared that we could not be there. He took us to the campus home of a faculty member, where we had our workshop.

That spring, I had written a pamphlet called *HUAC: Bulwark of Segregation*, part of our educational campaign

on what the witch hunts were doing to the movement. SNCC had ordered quantities to distribute. That day in Ohio we learned that the pamphlets had disappeared. Bob Zellner, a leading white SNCC activist (whom SCEF had recruited from an Alabama campus) said he asked a Council of Churches official where the pamphlets were. "I took them up," was the reply. Bob and others vowed they'd find the pamphlets and distribute them in Mississippi. A few days later, James Chaney, Andy Goodman and Mickey Schwerner were murdered, and in the ensuing crisis no one had time to look for the pamphlets. We had more, of course, and eventually thousands of copies were circulated in the south.

That day in Oxford, I saw Bob Moses on the campus. He was remorseful, and embarrassed. "There was nothing we could do about it," he said, "we fought for Highlander (the educational center in Tennessee that was also labeled communist) and the National Lawyers Guild (that was sending teams to Mississippi) and won. You and Carl were just more than we could win. We'll talk later." We never did, about that. It was not necessary. The "fight" Bob referred to was with NCC officials. There were limits to what was possible; we understood that.

Other forces were also trying to control who worked in Mississippi. SNCC leader Jim Forman, in his landmark 1972 book *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, describes meetings that summer where foundation officials and representatives of the Kennedy administration wrung their hands over the involvement of the Lawyers Guild. "We worked hard during the '30s and '40s, fighting forces such as the Lawyers Guild," Forman quoted Kennedy adviser Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., as saying to SNCC people. "We find it unpardonable that you would work with them." Forman found that comment "blind and arrogant." Mississippi activists were desperate for courageous lawyers. The Lawyers Guild had recruited the young and the brave throughout the nation. They saved lives in Mississippi that summer.

It sometimes seemed that the targets of anti-communist attack were mainly whites who stood with blacks in the civil rights struggle. But not always. One of the most intense attacks was reserved for Jack O'Dell, a black man accused of earlier communist associations, who became the master organizer of voter registration and fundraising for SCLC. *Parting the Waters* documents

an unbelievable scene that many of us heard about years ago: of President Kennedy himself taking Martin King to the White House rose garden to tell him that he must get rid of Jack O'Dell and a key white supporter, Stanley Levison.

I have thought about that in recent years. I knew neither Levison nor O'Dell in the '60s, but later I came to know Jack well, through the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice, with which I now work, and the National Rainbow Coalition, that he helped build. He is the most brilliant political analyst I know today, a deeply moral person, totally dedicated to the struggle for human rights. But he is just one soft-spoken man. How could the most powerful figure in the world, the president of the United States, be so frightened of one man? What were all these people afraid of? Nobody was trying to turn the civil rights movement into a communist revolution. The people under attack were totally dedicated to the stated goals of the movement and respectful of its leadership.

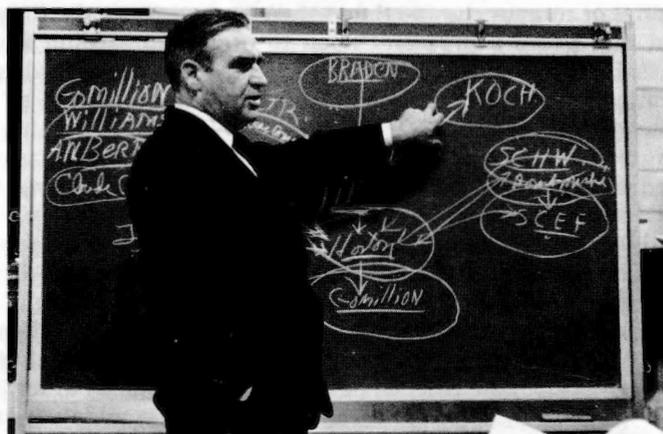
In part, the special attack on whites reflected knowledge in high places that any development of viable black/white coalitions would signal basic changes in who held power in the south and the nation. But I think something else was also involved. The organizations most under attack—SCEF, Highlander, the Lawyers Guild—had an important characteristic in common. They all had roots in the 1930s. That meant, of course, that communists may have been involved in them at one time.

But more important, they harked back to a time when economic justice was on the agendas of all social reformers, whether they were communist, socialist, Christian, radical or liberal. By the early 1950s, the cold war and witch hunts had severely crippled all movements for social justice. Essentially, the new civil rights movement, sparked by Rosa Parks' stance on a Montgomery, Alabama bus in 1955, reflected the fact that the black passion for freedom was the one thing too powerful to be crushed.

It is my belief that somewhere, somehow, those in power made up their minds that although they could not stop this movement, they must contain it; confine it to attacking segregation and voting restrictions. They had to keep it at all costs from challenging economic inequities that could lead to basic changes in the distribution of wealth. Hence their determination to keep out any person who might have such ideas. The attempt to shut the movement off from thoughts of economic reform didn't work. As early as 1963, SNCC had turned to economic issues. ("What good is it to sit at the lunch counter if you can't afford the hamburger?" became a slogan.) As the decade progressed, economic inequity moved higher on SNCC's agenda, and also on Martin King's, as he launched the Poor People's Campaign in 1968 and went to Memphis to assist garbage workers. And that was when he was murdered.

But economic justice remained the unfinished part of the civil rights revolution. That fact explains much about our national dilemma today. Despite all the gains for racial justice the great masses of people of color are in worse economic condition than they were in the late 1960s.

Today, through the efforts of the Rainbow Coalition, a quickening labor movement, and many religious groups, the issue of economic justice is back on the agenda of social reformers. It is the responsibility of those of us who hope to see the 1960s revolution completed to keep it there, and to tear down, once and for all, the fences built by cold war thinking to limit the ideas that people seeking justice can explore. □



Arkansas Attorney General Bruce Bennett outlines for the Tennessee legislature the ramifications of "conspiracy" to integrate the south, 1959. Names on the blackboard refer to Myles Horton, Highlander Folk School director; Carl and Anne Braden, Southern Conference Educational Fund; and Charles Gumillion, SCEF and Highlander board member.

Photo: Joe Rudis, *The Nashville Tennessean*.