

ABRAHAM WOOD

Family Affair

My father was sort of a rough fellow at times when it came to racial situations. I've heard him relate to us on the job how he had gotten into it with a number of white fellows who had given him a beatin' because they called him out of his name or tried to make him fit into the traditional nigger role. . . . Me and, of course, my brother and my children caught the spirit, too. We had three children to be involved in going to jail. My three oldest daughters went to jail, and my baby at the time, my oldest son, cried because he couldn't go. He was about five years old, I believe, and he wanted to go too.

He, his father, and brother were all ministers, all active in the Movement and all supporters of SCLC's decision to recruit school children for the climactic May demonstrations.

Some of the black parents did have some misgivings about it. I remember some of the criticisms which came up. . . . Of course, it reflected the same kind of thing that the officials of the board of education were saying, that some of the white city fathers were saying about the possible harm that could come to these children: "Isn't it a shame using these little children as the cat's paw that reaches in the fire. . . . Dr. King ought to be ashamed of himself. . . ."

Well, here I was seeking to recruit other students to march, and the in-

volvement of my children just came about as a matter of course. . . . There wasn't any asking to come: "Can we be involved?" [Laughs] It's just, "We ought to be in it and we *are* in it. We *want* to be in it."

How old were your three daughters?

I believe . . . eight, nine, and ten, or maybe nine, ten, and eleven. Something like that. . . . When the [school] board sought to handle the children, expel the children, it was my brother's daughter who was a party to one of the suits where they had to get a ruling from a judge to stop them from taking those steps against the children.* So my children's involvement came about as a matter of course. I don't remember telling them to come be involved. They just caught it, you see. When I looked around there they were. . . .

Did you not have any misgivings for their safety?

Well, no, I didn't have any misgivings for their safety. What misgivings I might have had were taken care of by listening to Dr. King. But the question did come up as to subjecting these young people to possible harm, this kind of thing. He said that they had already been subjected to brutality by living in the Southern way of life. Been exploited and abused and misused, you see. And it made a lot of sense. Made a lot of sense. When you get caught up in the Movement, you just lose some of your fear. It's an amazing kind of thing. I can look back now at some of the situations we got involved in and I didn't think about it to be afraid. At the time. But when you look back at some of the situations we were in, you kind of shudder afterwards. But when you are caught up in the emotion of the Movement and you commit yourself, you really don't worry about what's going to happen to you.

What was the turning point of the Birmingham Movement during that time?

Well, I think that with the student involvement, the whites started getting the idea they were going to have to negotiate, but the thing that really broke the camel's back was the selective-buying campaign. At the same time we boycotted the downtown merchants, and I think this was the real concern of men like Sidney Smyer, who was with Birmingham Real Estate and head of the chamber. And I had never seen an old white man cry, but at one of the meetings at the chamber of commerce. . . . he actually

*See Judge Elbert Tuttle.

broke down and cried. The merchants were hurting. We had the pressure on them in order that they might pressure the city. . . . This helped move Birmingham to the turning point. . . .

What kind of city is Birmingham for blacks today?

Birmingham has made a lot of progress . . . progress that they just didn't decide to make, but progress that came through agony. Of course, you know the bombings and certainly the Sixteenth Street thing.* During the demonstrations, you remember, lot of people getting shot and killed. Over here in the western section, little boy was shot by whites. Police shot one man, member of my father's church, in the back, shot gun. You know, blacks had started throwing rocks and this sort of thing.

You remember when the motel was bombed** and how the group gathered and turned over taxicabs, set them on fire, and this kind of thing. Now that was the night I was afraid, and I think the Birmingham police were afraid. I saw a black come up behind the Gaston Building with a knife, a long knife in his hand, and he shook it at the policeman, said, "I want that suit you got on. Gimme that suit." I've seen the time when that policeman would have dashed there and got that Negro. Policeman didn't move, just looked at him, and he didn't go. The black man tried to get him to [a soft, beckoning voice]: "You come on back here." Policeman didn't go, you see.

And the policemen had to get us, the black leaders, to get in the cars with them, because in some areas blacks were throwing rocks in the dark, and if a police car would move, they would just bombard it with rocks. And they were trying to get to the alarms—there were fire alarms and stores broken into, those kinds of alarms—and they were trying to maneuver, and every time they'd move, they'd be bombarded. So a number of us rode with 'em. I was scared that night, and I put my head out the window: I wanted them to see I was black. [Laughs]

That was a terrible night, when blacks went wild. I knew then that we

*Through the years there had been over fifty racial bombings in Birmingham, culminating with the deaths of four black girls in the explosion at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on Sunday morning, September 15, 1963.

**On the night of May 11, only one day after SCLC and city officials had agreed to a desegregation plan, a bomb ripped the black-owned motel where SCLC had its command center. Ralph Abernathy: "Dr. King and I shared the same room in the A.G. Gaston Motel. It was a large room on the second floor, corner room, and we held our conference there. The strategy committee met, and within a few minutes after we left that room in order to get a plane to come to Atlanta, the motel was bombed. . . . If he and I had stayed in that room for thirty more minutes, we would have been killed." See Ben Allen.

were not going to be able to long hold this element on check. And then afterwards, when the Sixteenth Street bombings took place and I went to the scene, dashed to that scene, . . . I found a group of young blacks with a pile of rocks, and every car that passed with a white driver in it, they were tearing it up. Of course, I went there and I said, "Brethren, *don't*, don't, don't do this. This isn't the way." Angry mood. "All right, you're one of 'em, you're with 'em." No talking to them . . . not going to be reasoned with, you see. So I had to go away from there. . . . I said to myself, "Not going to be long till this thing is going to take a new turn." You see, that's another element coming in, with "Burn, baby, burn," and this kind of thing.

That was the forerunner. . .

What I saw at Sixteenth Street, what I saw at the motel, was the forerunner of what happened. Later it was "Burn, baby, burn," and Carmichael.* That came later and I saw it coming. I saw it coming.

*Stokely Carmichael, the militant SNCC leader who popularized the Black Power slogan.