

ANDREW MARRISSETT

An SCLC staffer recruited off the streets of Birmingham.

I used to drive the church bus. It was on a Sunday, and I was driving the bus, and I just happened to detour to go down by the park where the demonstrators would always be. What really sticks in my mind then and sticks in my mind now is seeing a K-9 dog being sicced on a six-year-old girl. I went and stood in front of the girl and grabbed her, and the dog jumped on me and I was arrested. That really was the spark, I had an interest all along, but that just took the cake—a big, burly two-hundred-and-eighty-five-pound cop siccing a trained police dog on that little girl, little black girl. And then I got really involved in the Movement.

That changed my whole way of thinking. I was born a great Baptist. All my life I'd been through the Sunday School thing and the Bible School and church on Sunday morning and in the afternoon and at night and prayer meetings and choir rehearsals and traveling around. I was into that Christian thing, like most of my people are now, where they're so blindly engrossed, . . . not really looking at what was going on around them. Like at that time, Birmingham was the most segregated city of its size in the nation.

You grew up in Birmingham. When did you become aware of that?

This is the old cliché, but I'm going to say it because it's true with

me. . . . While we were downtown at Kresse's or Pizitz or Loveman's and I had to use the restroom, I would have to be taken out in the alley. That is an old cliché, but that held true in Birmingham. "Bull" Connor ran that city. I mean, he totally ran it. The mayor didn't have no say, the sheriff, the council. . . .

I knew something was wrong, but . . . I didn't have any idea of the value of being able to go to every counter in the store, including the lunch counter. I had read about Greensboro.* I knew about the sit-ins when they started here, but it just didn't ring no bell. So I always tell people that dog incident really rung my bell.

Go ahead. After you got tangled up with the dog . . .

Well, what they did was they drug me away to jail, and I was an unknown . . . When they taken pictures of me and everybody else, I was put down as "civil rights worker." So when the SCLC got folk out of jail, I got out . . . that night I went to the mass meeting, and I met people like Andy Young, Dorothy Cotton, James Bevel. Of course, Ralph Abernathy then was Martin's true aide. . . . I dedicated my life then just to being involved in that movement, life or death, and bringing in other people like James Orange, Elizabeth Hays, and Robert Seals.

He and his three friends became totally involved in the Movement, and all eventually joined the SCLC staff.

What we finally wound up doing, the four of us, was being the kind of teachers, the workshop leaders for tomorrow's demonstration. We would meet at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church . . . that's the one that got bombed . . . we would meet in there and have workshops and make sure that students and people that was involved knew what they were marching for, knew why they were marching, priming them, for tonight's mass meeting. . . .

Of course, you know about the three thousand that was sitting on the side of the curbstone, crying to go to jail at the height of that movement, when the compromise was signed.** Well, we were responsible for all that. We would sneak people down . . . we would coordinate, we would do all kinds of tricks. Cops would have all our main trails blocked off, lined up; you know, there was thousands of cops from all over the country,

*Where he was living in 1975.

**He is talking about the great May 7 demonstration referred to by Rev. Gardner.

see.* We would get girls with the big coats and dresses, and they would put their [picket] signs up under there, and we would go down to the Trailways bus station. That's where we would meet. Then we'd all get in there and everybody would orderly break out in twos. You know, that kind of thing, just harass the cops.

The cops did what [in response]?

They would start arresting. Old foolish "Bull" Connor, when he would come, he'd say, "Bust heads," or "Put the water on 'em," or "Carry 'em to jail." So at that last time, "Bull" Connor was going round and round and round and round. "All them niggers, all them niggers, where they coming from?" They used school buses, yeah; three thousand people went to jail that day, and then they finally— Now I wasn't in on negotiations. That wasn't my thing. I was action.

He recalls growing up in Birmingham. ". . . where I came from, I had to fight my way through. You know, I had to be mean or else I wouldn't survive." He reflects on my observation that Birmingham represented Dr. King's greatest triumph in teaching nonviolent discipline, because of the high level of suppressed rage among the city's blacks.

If you can say that Birmingham and Selma was the most sustained discipline in the nonviolent movement, I can agree. I would have to agree that Birmingham was, because of the kinds of people that were involved. We used to have to run people home, because they would bring their guns and that kind of thing. We'd have to go up and say, "Hey, man, lookie here, you know, if you want to kill cops, you go on over there and form your own little group, but don't kill them in this nonviolent line here. You'll get somebody killed."

And I'd say, "After the meeting tonight, I'll come over here and help you kill some coppers, but don't be throwing a damn garbage can, I mean, like at a tank."

How common was it, people wanting to bring weapons to the demonstrations in Birmingham?

At first, very common, because the syndrome was, "I got a chance to kill me a cracker." That's what they used to call white folks in Birmingham . . . "Honkie" came in later. But anyway, it was that rage that you spoke about, where there were two things that black men wanted to do:

*In this case, *all over the country* means "all over the state of Alabama."

one was screw white girls, and two was kill white men. Okay? Because all this stuff had been built up in them all their lives . . . We used to have a little story about the father be done worked down all day. He come home and fusses at the wife because the food ain't ready, she fussed at the oldest kid and then on down the line to the youngest kid. He kicks the cat, the cat chases the dog, and the dog chases the rat, and this go on and on and on through all that frustration. But that was it. What was the question again?

The original question was, how common was it for people to bring weapons?

Oh, yeah, right. I mean at first it was very common until—well, Dr. King, of course, was *the* influence at the mass meetings. And our job was to every time we saw a guy that was really, really enraged and we thought we could at least talk to right then, we would try to get him to the mass meeting and get him involved. We would sit beside him or close around him, a group of us, and get him involved in the spirit, and we would sing the songs and do the chants and freedom-now things, and then we'd hear Dr. King speak, and that would quiet down the angriest lion, because he just had that thing about him, that halo that he would shine.