

*And he better not meddle.*

Right. But in the black community . . . freedom of the pulpit has never been a problem. That's always been a white problem. The black preacher's always been free to preach as he felt inspired—by God.

And what was so significant about what SCLC did, because it had a preacher leadership . . . it emphasized in the social struggle the moral aspects. Whereas they were there before, . . . the political and legal aspects overshadowed them. But with the coming of SCLC, the struggle was put in its proper perspective . . . in the moral arena, and that's what got people marching. It opened up people's eyes for the first time to how ugly and immoral segregation was. . . .

You see, what the bus thing did was simply more than withholding patronage from the bus; it was restoring a sense of dignity to the patrons, as best expressed by an oft-quoted black woman in Montgomery who said, "Since I been walking, my feet are tired, but my soul's rested." So that it was also, at the same time and a part of that, the beginning of self-determination. See, self-determination's some new phraseology, but prior to the bus boycotts, the determination of our freedom rested with the courts. With the bus boycott, *we* determined it. It didn't make any difference what the court said. The court could say what it liked, we weren't gon' ride—in the back of the bus. We'd walk.

## INTERLUDE

### JOHN LEWIS

#### *An Alabama Boyhood*

*He was born at Dunn's Chapel, a black sharecropper community about forty miles west of Montgomery.*

My parents rented land. They tended land that was owned by a very, very wealthy white landowner, who for many years had provided land for my mother's brothers, my mother's father, and other relatives to farm. So I was born on a piece of that land in 1940. In 1944 when I was four years old, my father bought a hundred and ten acres of land for three hundred dollars. I guess the man that he bought it from almost, in my estimation, gave it to him.

In this whole area it was really a black-and-white world. It was just rural Alabama; the land was not that rich; we planted cotton, corn, peanuts. But it was two separate worlds, one black and one white. From time to time when growing up, we would complete our work, and then we would go and work by the day, work in the cotton field pickin' cotton by the pound, particularly to get money for books or clothing for school in August or September.

I guess as a young child, I saw the dual system of segregation and racial discrimination. The grade school that I attended was a little one-room school, from the first through the sixth grade, and it was just a shack really. . . . From the seventh through the twelfth grade, we were bused through Pike County to the Pike County Training School. In many parts of Alabama, the high schools for blacks were considered "training

schools," and the county high schools for whites were called just "the county high school." We had the worst buses. We never had a new bus. The white children had new buses. Our school was a run-down school, and all that had an impact on me. . . .

We didn't have electric lights, we didn't have indoor plumbing, anything like that, until very, very late. I was a teenager, getting ready to go to college, matter of fact, before we got even the highway. We had unpaved roads, and for many years the county refused to pave the major road. They paved it up to where the black section of the county started. . . . Our house was on a hill, a red-clay hill . . . and the road, this highway, came right through our property. And when it would rain—it was a steep hill—people would get stuck in the mud and the ditches and that type of thing. The same thing would happen to the school bus . . . The bus may get stuck; you may be late gettin' to school. Or coming back from school in the evening, the same thing would happen. . . . That area was very, very poor, very, very poor. . . .

*Do you remember discussing it much among yourselves?*

Not—not really, not really. [A long pause] Not really . . . see . . . we didn't have a subscription to a newspaper. But my grandfather had a subscription to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, and we would get the paper maybe two or three days later—sometime it would be a week later—and we kept up with what was happening in Montgomery or in Alabama or the South by reading the newspaper after he had read it. But we really didn't discuss the whole question of segregation. It was something that existed and that we saw when we went to the town, into Troy, to the dime store. We saw the sign saying White Only or Colored. When you went to go to the water fountain, you *knew* not to drink out of that fountain that said White Only, that you were directed to drink out of the one saying Colored. You couldn't go to the soda fountain and get a Coke. Somehow we grew up *knowing* that you couldn't cross that line, but there was not that much discussing it within my family, not at all. It was a sense of fear, I guess, on the part of my parents, that we must stay in our place. There was a certain point where then you couldn't—you knew not to go any further.

*In 1954, when the school desegregation decision came down, you would have been about fourteen . . .*

I was fourteen and I remember that. I do remember the Supreme Court decision of 1954. . . . As I recall, we rejoiced. It was like a day of jubi-

lee . . . that segregation would be ended in the public school system. We thought that we would go to a better school . . . get better transportation, better buses, and that type of thing. But that didn't happen, so I never attended a desegregated public school. Then, a year later was the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and I think perhaps that incident, what happened in Montgomery, had the greatest impact on me, more than anything else. . . . I grew up with this whole idea of wanting to be a minister. I don't know where it came from. . . . I recall, when I was four years old, I remember baptizing a chicken, and the chicken drowned. I kept it under the water too long. I would preach to the chicken and baptize a particular chicken . . . Then one of my uncles, my mother's brother, had Santa Claus to bring a Bible. So I went through this whole idea, even going through grade school, of becoming a minister, and through grade school and high school, people referred to me as Preacher. . . .

But coming back to 1955, I think the Montgomery Bus Boycott did more than anything else. We didn't have television, but I kept up with what was going on, on radio, in newspaper, everything. In the papers that we got in the public school system in the library, I read *everything* about what was happening there, and it was really one of the most exciting, one of the most moving things to me to see just a few miles away the black folks of Montgomery stickin' together, refusing to ride segregated buses, walking the streets. It was a moving movement.

And I'd heard Dr. King even before the Montgomery Bus Boycott. There's a local radio station in Montgomery . . . a soul station . . . and Dr. King had a sermon. It was called "Paul's Letter to the American Christians," and some of things that he said sorta stuck with me. As you well know, his message was sort of social-political oriented. It was sort of the social gospel, making religion something real and using the emotionalism within religion to make it do something else for people, and that had an impact.

*Do you recall hearing him more or less by chance?*

Yeah, that's right, by chance, because I didn't know anything about him. I'd never heard anything about him. Now this was *before*—before the Montgomery Bus Boycott—when he first came to Montgomery and they would have different ministers preaching. And then when he emerged during the bus boycott, I took some particular note.

*How is that you happen to remember the name of that sermon?*

Well, I knew one thing, there was no such thing in the New Testament. You know, how can Paul be writing to the American Church? So what he

did, he took Paul's letters, . . . Paul's message to the church at Corinth, which is a place in the Bible, and so I remembered that. 'Cause he was saying that certain things that had been happening in America just shouldn't be happening. It stuck with me.

## II

## BLACK SURPRISE

THE STUDENT SIT-INS AND  
THE BIRTH OF SNCC

FRANKLIN McCAIN

*February 1, 1960: The South's First Sit-in*

*It was one of those group friendships that spring up among college freshmen. In their first semester at all-black North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro, he and Ezell Blair, Jr., David Richmond, and Joseph McNeil became inseparable. They would study together, eat together, and, "as young freshmen often do in college dormitories late at night, when they finish studying or when they want to cop out from studying . . . resort to the old-fashion type bull session."*

*Through the fall, their talks continued. He remembers them as "elementary philosophers," young idealists talking about justice and injustice, hypocrisy, how imperfectly their society embodied its own ideals. Slowly their talks swung to a debate as old as philosophy itself: at what point does the moral man act against injustice? ". . . I think the thing that precipitated the sit-in, the idea of the sit-in, more than anything else, was that little bit of incentive and that little bit of courage that each of us instilled within each other."*

The planning process was on a Sunday night, I remember it quite well. I think it was Joseph who said, "It's time that we take some action now. We've been getting together, and we've been, up to this point, still like most people we've talked about for the past few weeks or so—that is, people who talk a lot but, in fact, make very little action." After selecting the technique, then we said, "Let's go down and just ask for service." It certainly wasn't titled a "sit-in" or "sit-down" at that time. "Let's just