

are the ones that we looked for. . . . We were trying to make teachers out of these people who could barely read and write. But they could teach.²³

Even so pre-eminently middle-class an activity as teaching the poor can and should provide a large share of the leadership. Similarly, Horton, in his work with miners, had learned that they learned best when taught by other miners. "Formally educated staff members, it turned out, were never as effective in teaching as the people themselves, once they saw themselves as teachers." Horton never tried to teach Citizenship classes himself and "discouraged other well-meaning whites from doing so, too."²⁴ With SCLC, Mrs. Clark continued to exhibit a sensitivity to class privilege. She once chided Andrew Young for sitting down to breakfast at a time when there wasn't enough to share with the students. What he needed to do, she told him, was either find money to buy them breakfast or go hungry with them. She criticized Ralph Abernathy for his habit of being late for services at his own church in order "to flaunt his mastery over the common people." She spoke disdainfully of Negro women who came to civil rights meetings to play bourgeois games. "They were going to *be* there because they were going to show those beautiful clothes and those summer furs and the like, but they weren't listening."²⁵

She was never entirely comfortable as a member of SCLC's executive staff. SCLC's conception of leadership was very different from her own. It bothered her that people all around the country would ask King to come lead marches, so "I sent a letter to Dr. King asking him not to lead all the marches himself, but instead to develop leaders who could lead their own marches. Dr. King read that letter before the staff. It just tickled them; they just laughed."²⁶

Mrs. Clark idolized King, but she wasn't blind to his limitations, including his inability to treat women as equals. Women within SCLC circles were expected to neither ask nor answer questions, and that expectation applied to the wives of the leadership as well as to staff. "Mrs. King and Mrs. Abernathy would come and they were just like chandeliers, shining lights, sitting up, saying nothing." She was un-

willing to play chandelier herself, but it didn't make any difference. In executive staff meetings, "I was just a figurehead. . . . Whenever I had anything to say, I would put up my hand and say it. But I did know that they weren't paying any attention."²⁷

Septima Clark's Citizenship Schools became an important organizing tool for younger activists in Mississippi and virtually everywhere else in the South. They were a relatively non-threatening way to get people involved in the broader movement. Once you bring people together to talk about literacy, you can get them to talk about a great many other things. Once the schools became funded, they became a source of income for people fired from their jobs because of activism. Highlander also continued to be an important source of support for SNCC. Indeed, before SNCC launched its first statewide registration campaign in Mississippi, Highlander conducted a week-long training workshop for them. Mrs. Clark and Highlander had evolved a distinctive way of thinking about the process of social change. Through long experience working with impoverished communities, they had developed a faith in the ability of communities of the poor to provide much of the leadership for their own struggle and concrete ideas about how that ability could be nurtured. That faith and those ideas were shared by Ella Baker.

ELLA BAKER: "STRONG PEOPLE DON'T NEED
STRONG LEADERS"

Writing about the students he knew at Howard University in 1962, SNCC's Cleveland Sellers says that when he tried to talk politics with the guys in his dorm, they would grunt and change the subject. "They were much more interested in cars, fraternities, clothes, parties and girls" and the high-paying jobs they expected to have after graduation.²⁸ Yet the turbulent sixties were born among just such students. In Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960, four freshmen at North Carolina A & T College decided to go to the local Woolworth's and remain at the lunch counter until they were served. They were not served, although they stayed until closing time, but word of what they had done got back to campus before they did. The next day

they were joined by twenty more students. Within a few days, even though sit-in demonstrations had spread to more stores, there were more students who wanted to sit in than there were places for them to sit. Within two weeks, sit-ins and the boycotts that frequently accompanied them had spread to fifteen cities in five states.²⁹

By the end of March, students on at least twenty-one northern college campuses had become involved, usually by picketing or boycotting the northern outlets of some of the chains being hit in the South. Woolworth's and Kress were popular targets. Within the first year and a half, sit-ins had taken place in more than one hundred cities in twenty states, involving an estimated seventy thousand demonstrators and thirty-six hundred arrests.³⁰ Activity tended to be most intense in urban areas and in border states. Non-urban areas of Deep South states like Mississippi were not much affected.

The sit-ins had substantial impact. Some desegregation took place in at least one hundred cities. Although he did not support the sit-ins at first, Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution* eventually came to feel that "without question," the sit-ins were "productive of the most change. . . . No argument in a court of law could have dramatized the immorality and irrationality of such a custom as did the sit-ins."³¹

At the beginning some, probably most, of the young people involved thought that merely dramatizing injustice would be enough to produce change. It was seen as an aggressive form of moral suasion. However, the sit-ins, like the other forms of direct-action politics that were to develop around them, also meant directly interfering with the life of a community so that it had to respond. If the powers-that-be would not respond to moral suasion, they would have to do something about disruption.

Taking a view similar to that of Jo Freeman, Aldon Morris has explained that the rapid spread of the sit-ins was made possible by pre-existing movement networks. Starting in the early 1950s, what Morris calls local movement centers had begun developing in the South, most of them church-connected and largely church-financed. Montgomery, Alabama, was the most widely known, but there were also centers in Birmingham, Baton Rouge, Nashville, and Petersburg, Vir-

ginia, among other places. After 1957, many of these centers would be connected under the auspices of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. During the first few weeks of sit-in activity in early 1960, leaders from these centers helped spread the idea by contacting student leaders around the South, by providing bail funds, meeting places, and contacts with adults experienced in nonviolence as ideology and practice. The support of these older activists was important in part because the Black colleges themselves, frequently dependent on white economic or political support, were not always free to support the burgeoning movement. Protesting students were often suspended or expelled from publicly supported Black colleges. Dr. King was among the adults involved in furthering the spread of the movement, as were Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham, Wyatt Tee Walker of Petersburg, and Floyd McKissick of North Carolina. Another supportive adult was the omnipresent Ella Baker. After using her enormous contact network to encourage the spread of the movement, she went on to play a critical role in shaping and stabilizing this massive outpouring of activist energies, a role understandable in the context of her long activist history.

James Forman, the most important administrator in SNCC during its early years, has said that without Ella Baker, "there would be no story of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee."³² When she was asked to account for her lengthy activist career, Miss Baker often launched into a description of growing up in rural Virginia and North Carolina just after the turn of the century. Like Medgar Evers, she took considerable pride in being from a family with explicit traditions of defiance and race pride, but her reconstructions of her childhood also emphasize a family tradition of just being concerned about people, being involved in one's community.

She grew up hearing stories about slavery from her maternal grandmother, a light-skinned house slave, a daughter of the man who owned her. Miss Baker's grandmother had refused to marry the equally light-skinned man chosen for her by her mistress. For that, she was whipped and demoted to work in the fields, but she married the man she wanted to marry, a dark-skinned man, a slave on the same plantation, a man proud of being Black almost to the point of

conceit. That kind of pride was not uncommon among the people who raised Ella Baker: "There was pride in Blackness. Even lighter skinned people wanted to be identified with being Black."³³ After the Civil War, her grandfather either bought or leased a large section of the plantation he had worked as a slave and tried to create a model Black community. He broke up the land into various-sized plots—twenty, thirty, forty acres—and settled members of the extended family on them. He was known to mortgage his own farm after the local rivers flooded, so that he could buy food for other families.

Ella Baker's mother was a good public speaker and an ardent church worker active in the efforts of local missionary societies. "I became active in things largely because my mother was active in the field of religion."³⁴ Her mother, like Clark's, was a strict disciplinarian who wasn't too concerned with listening to the opinions of children. Miss Baker had a more playful relationship with both her father and grandfather. Her grandfather, laconic with the rest of the world, liked to talk to her and listen to her. She was a baseball-playing tomboy, but her grandfather called her "Grand Lady" and took her on long horse-and-buggy rides, during which they discussed issues large and small. When he preached, he set up a big chair for her in front of the congregation, right next to his own seat. Her father was a waiter on the ferry that ran between Norfolk and Washington. With him, she could have a discussion, the kind of exchange of opinions that was seldom possible with her mother. Before she was out of grade school, she had acquired both a local reputation as an effective public speaker and a degree of skepticism about the real value of oratory. Her father, well aware of how highly Blacks valued good public speaking, used to speak derisively about preachers who were strong on style but, when you thought about what they said, there wasn't much substance.

She once described her childhood as a kind of family socialism.³⁵ Surrounded by kin, it was taken for granted that food, tools, homes, and responsibility for children would be shared.

Where we lived there was no sense of social hierarchy in terms of those who have, having the right to look down upon, or to evaluate as a lesser breed, those who didn't have. Part of that could have re-

sulted . . . [from] the proximity of my maternal grandparents to slavery. They had known what it was to not have. Plus, . . . [we had] the "Christian" concept of sharing with others. . . . Your relationship to human beings was far more important than your relationship to the amount of money that you made.³⁶

By her own interpretation, having been raised with an abiding sense of community was one of the motive forces behind her activism and

helped to strengthen my concept about the need for people to have a sense of their own value and *their* strengths and it became accentuated when I began to travel in the forties for the National Association of Colored People. . . . As people moved to towns and cities, the sense of community diminished.³⁷

Her model of the Good Life was not derived from the lifestyle of middle-class whites, as it was for some of her NAACP colleagues, nor from any pre-cut ideological scheme, as it was for some of her Marxist acquaintances. During the decades when Blacks were fleeing the South, physically and often emotionally, she was trying to recreate the spirit of the self-sufficient, egalitarian people who raised her.³⁸ Like the people at Highlander, she found in folk culture sources of strength, not something to be ashamed of.

She attended both high school and college at Shaw University in Raleigh, finishing as valedictorian of the class of 1927, with nearly twice the number of credits needed to graduate. Scholarship aside, the administration was undoubtedly glad to see her leave; she had been protesting the school's restrictive dress code for students, its policy of having students sing Negro spirituals for white visitors, and its policy forbidding men and women students from walking across campus together.³⁹ She claimed to have left college with conventional notions of personal success, but that seems to have included a desire to be socially useful.⁴⁰ After graduation she wanted either to study sociology at the University of Chicago—sociology was still thought of as a helping occupation—or become a medical missionary. The family's financial situation would not allow her to do either, so in the summer

of 1927, she migrated to New York, staying with a cousin her mother had raised. In New York, despite her record at Shaw, she could only find factory work and waitressing jobs. Her mother wanted her to go into teaching, but Miss Baker didn't want to do that, partly because a Black woman with a degree was expected to teach, partly because too many of the teachers she had known had been fearful people, afraid to have an opinion on anything or take a stand on anything lest they lose their jobs. She valued her opinion more than that.

Ideas were easier to find than jobs. The smorgasbord political environment of the city intrigued her:

I went everywhere there was discussion. New York was not as hazardous as it now is. You could walk the streets at three in the morning. And so wherever there was a discussion, I'd go. . . . And maybe I was the only woman or the only black, it didn't matter. . . . You see, New York was the hotbed of—let's call it radical thinking. . . . Boy, it was *good*, stimulating!⁴¹

Her community involvement started almost as soon as she got to New York. In 1928, she organized a Negro History Club at the 135th street YMCA in Harlem. Between 1929 and 1932, she was on the editorial staffs of at least two newspapers, the *American-West Indian News* and *Negro National News*.

Given her childhood, organizing economic cooperatives probably had a natural appeal. Around 1930 she was among several young Negroes who wrote responses to a column in one of the Negro newspapers urging Negroes to form cooperatives. The young people formed the Young Negroes' Cooperative League, which proceeded to establish stores, buying clubs, housing developments, coop restaurants and other cooperative economic ventures in Black neighborhoods up and down the East Coast, as far west as Omaha, as far south as New Orleans. For the first two years, she was the League's national director, and in one form or another she was involved with coops for at least a decade.

Largely forgotten now, there was vigorous interest among Blacks in cooperative ventures during the Depression. In a report written

around 1941, she was still optimistic about their potential, noting that the mortality rate was high but those that survived were often valuable parts of their communities and sometimes forced other businesses to modify policies toward Black customers and employees. The high mortality rate she attributed partly to the fact that many groups, impatient to get started, launched their enterprises with insufficient capital, and partly to insufficient business expertise, problems compounded by the fact that initially, Negro wage earners of marginal economic status had been the most interested segment of the community.⁴²

The Depression played an important part in her rejection of "the American illusion that anyone who is determined and persistent can get ahead."⁴³ She worked with a variety of labor organizations in Harlem, including the Women's Day Workers and Industrial League, which focused on the problems of domestic workers. At one point, Miss Baker pretended to be a domestic worker in order to investigate the employment conditions of Black domestics.⁴⁴ Her awareness of the problem of change-oriented organizations betraying their founding ideals may have stemmed from her work with labor organizations during this period. In the early days, she thought,

basically, the labor movement was meeting the need of the non-powerful. . . . But I'm afraid it succumbed, to a large extent to the failures of what I call the American weakness of being recognized and of having arrived and taking on the characteristics and the values even, of the foe.⁴⁵

In 1964, when Blacks in Mississippi were fighting to form their own political party, she warned an audience that "we must be careful lest we elect to represent us people who, for the first time, feel their sense of importance and will represent themselves before they represent you."⁴⁶ This woman who spent so much of her life working for and creating social change organizations had a generic distrust of organizations, especially large ones, and of those who led them.

By the Depression, she had a clear conception of what good political work meant that expressed itself even in relatively mundane

projects. From 1934 to 1936 she was connected with the Adult Education Program of the Harlem library. A letter of recommendation written some years later by the librarian summarized her accomplishments:

Her work was particularly good in organizing and acting as adviser to Young People's Forum. The group appealed to was from sixteen to twenty-six years of age, one not ordinarily touched by our education activities. Miss Baker successfully formed an active organization, which she brought into touch with other youth groups in the neighborhood and city. The public meetings included forums on social, economic, and cultural topics, literary and musical programs, debates and contests. Prominent speakers were brought into these meetings, but it was Miss Baker's plan always to place emphasis on increased participation by the members themselves. . . . Although Miss Baker left us for a better position, many of these people still show an active interest in the library's community program.⁴⁷

Organizing means helping others develop their own potentials, and participatory social forms are a key part of that process. She was already a seasoned organizer. When she applied for an NAACP position, her application noted that she had been involved with the "Harlem Adult Education Committee, the Workers' Education Movement, the Consumer Movement, on both a national and local scale" and had maintained at least a speaking acquaintance with the leaders of "the articulate mass and semi-mass movements" in the area. Starting with the NAACP as an assistant field secretary in 1941, she found herself in a job that meant extensive travel through some quite dangerous parts of the South, raising funds, organizing new branches, and trying to make old ones more effective. She spent about half of each year on the road—especially in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia. She organized at least three hundred membership drives and often traveled twelve thousand exhausting miles a year to do it. Returning to New York from one long trip, she wrote a friend:

I am too weary to think; and even if I could think, I could not write. This race saving business is. . . . But who am I to weary of the noble task of molding the destiny of 13,000,000?⁴⁸

From the viewpoint of the national office, no part of her job was more important than conducting the membership campaigns upon which the organization's financial health depended. Some branches had the leadership to conduct effective campaigns. This was partly a matter of whether local leaders were willing to do the necessary "spadework," to use one of Miss Baker's favorite terms. In Birmingham, for example, "we have as chairman the Rev. J. W. Goodgame, Jr. . . . He is all preacher, but unlike most of them, he knows that it takes work to produce and he will work. We spent the morning visiting barber shops, filling stations, grocery stores and housewives, getting people to work."

Most branches were depressingly dependent on help from the national office: "What promised to be a well organized campaign here (Jacksonville, Florida) has turned out to be the usual thing of literally starting from scratch." Starting from scratch meant identifying a campaign chair, identifying workers and dividing them into competing teams, outlining a publicity plan, lining up speakers, doing advance canvassing of community groups, businesses, fraternal groups, churches, social clubs, unions, all while refereeing the personality conflicts that debilitated many branches.⁴⁹ It is hard to imagine a more effective practicum in the emerging social structure of Black communities. After being exposed to a broad spectrum of ideologies and change-oriented organizations as a young woman exploring New York, she now was making innumerable contacts and friends among southern leaders while being exposed to the widest possible variety of grassroots leadership styles and organizing tactics.

What she saw ran the gamut:

Rome [Georgia] manifests all the expected symptoms of a branch that has had the same president for 24 years; and a community that thinks nothing can be done in the South that would challenge the

status quo; and hence makes of the NAACP meetings occasions for demonstrating literary, musical and oratorical abilities. However, I think our visit has served to "shock" them into greater action, as one "leader" put it.

Factionalization within branches required her to act as "Mother Confessor to the Little Folk":

The outlook for this trip does not appear very rosy. . . . For instance, how can I create an alert and dynamic branch in West Point [Virginia] where the not-more-than three hundred colored residents are divided by one "fraction" after the other, when I am here but for a day and a night?

On another Virginia trip:

All in all the branches visited were in a healthy state. Where they are engaged in securing school transportation, equal salaries for teachers or some local program . . . community response and support of the NAACP is no problem. The newer branches . . . exist largely on being new. Less active branches suffer from lack of functioning committees which places too much responsibility on the branch presidents or one or two officers and a lack of local programs which often springs from a lack of knowledge as to how to go about developing one.⁵⁰

The problem was deeper than not knowing how to develop a program. Many local officers thought their entire reason for being was to support the national office; running a local program didn't occur to them as an option:

As his answer to those who wish to know what the branch is doing locally Mr. Gilbert of Titusville [Florida] states that he hopes the time will never come when the branch will be *needed* locally (meaning, of course, that he hopes Brevard County will have no lynchings or race riots or the like).⁵¹

In an area where Blacks suffered every racial indignity—one nearby school had twenty-six classrooms for 1,876 students—local leadership saw no role for the branch in speaking to day-to-day injustices. It was a national problem, not just a southern one. While visiting the Albany, New York, branch, she repeatedly heard the opinion "that if cases were not brought to the branch, it could not be expected to seek them and that as long as it helped some unfortunate person in the South through its apportionment to the national office, the branch had fully justified itself."⁵² She steered the conversation to local matters. It turned out that while the local schools were technically integrated, Black youngsters were almost automatically shunted into the dummy academic track. She began helping them map out a strategy for changing that. Every branch could find some local concern to work on. "Any branch which says it has nothing around which it can build a program is simply too lazy to concern itself with things on its own doorstep."⁵³ As soon as you can say you've done something, anything, people will respond, because they want action, not talk.

From her perspective, the national organization was victimized by its own success. It was successful enough with its program of attacking the legal base of racial oppression that its very success blinded the organization to its shortcomings. The legal strategy "had to be" directed by lawyers and other professionals, leaving most of the huge mass base of the NAACP—four hundred thousand members by 1944—little meaningful role in the development of policy and program except raising funds and cheering the victories as they came. Her criticisms were similar to those of many Deep South leaders. She thought the leadership was overly concerned with recognition from whites, a concern that helped prevent the organization from taking a confrontational stance even when such a stance would have made tactical sense. She thought the program was overly oriented to a middle-class agenda and not nearly strong enough on the kinds of economic issues that meant most to working-class Black people. The Second World War, she thought, had generated a more aggressive mood among Negroes, and the organization seemed unwilling or unable to capitalize on it. Perhaps above all she found the organization too centralized; too many decisions were being made in New York. "The work of the

National Office is one thing but the work of the branches is in the final analysis the life blood of the Association."⁵⁴

She intended "to place the NAACP and its program on the lips of all the people . . . the uncouth MASSES included." She advocated regional offices so that local leaders would have a source of assistance nearer than New York. She suggested that at annual conferences, "instead of staff members making speeches, several delegates [from local branches] be designated to talk out of their branch experience." She argued that the overall structure of fieldwork in the Association made no sense. Three or four field workers were responsible for the whole country. They barely had time to organize membership campaigns, let alone help branches develop local programs. Getting the man or woman in the street need not be all that difficult if the organization made it a priority:

We must have the "nerve" to take the Association to people wherever they are. As a case in point, the mass-supported beer gardens, night clubs, etc. in Baltimore were invaded on a small scale. We went in, addressed the crowds and secured memberships and campaign workers. With the results that were well summed up in a comment overheard in one club, "You certainly have some nerve coming in here, talking, but I'm going to join that doggone organization."⁵⁵

Part of the problem, she maintained, was simple class snobbery. Like Septima Clark and Myles Horton, Miss Baker was sensitive to the way in which such class antagonisms, real or imagined, could undermine everything. An important part of the organizer's job was to get the matron in the fur coat to identify with the winehead and the prostitute, and vice versa. Significantly, she adds:

And so you have to break that [inability to identify] down without alienating them at the same time. The gal who has been able to buy her minks and whose husband is a professional, they live well. You can't insult her, you never go and tell her she's a so-and-so for taking, for *not* identifying. You try to point where her interest lies in

identifying with that other one across the tracks who doesn't have minks.⁵⁶

Everyone has a contribution to make. The organizer has to be aware of class exploitation, sensitive to class snobbery, without losing sight of the potential contribution to be made by those who do succumb to it. Just as one has to be able to look at a sharecropper and see a potential teacher, one must be able to look at a conservative lawyer and see a potential crusader for justice.

Given her populist stance, it is surprising that she became one of the Association's national officers. In April 1943, she was in Alabama when a letter from Walter White, national secretary of the Association, caught up with her, bringing the news that she had been appointed national director of branches. Despite her surprise ("Were I not more or less shock-proof," she wrote White, "I would now be suffering from a severe case of hypertension caused by your letter of the 15th"), she accepted the position and brought her agenda to it during the time when the Association was experiencing the most rapid growth it had known.⁵⁷

From the director's chair, she was able to push regionalization and to reorganize membership campaigns in order to leave field workers more time for working with branch programs. Perhaps most characteristically, she was able to establish a training program for local leaders. Her superiors were skeptical about how much demand there would be for such programs, but by late 1944 she had won permission to do one training conference on an experimental basis. The theme for that first conference was "Give Light and the People Will Find a Way." Response was so good that the conferences became a permanent feature of the Association's program. She ran at least nine more of them in the next year and a half, usually holding them over a week-end and typically attracting a hundred or more delegates each time.⁵⁸

Similar in structure and intent to Highlander workshops, the conferences (one of which was attended by Rosa Parks) were both skill-enhancing and consciousness-raising. Before they came, delegates were asked what issues they wanted addressed. What they asked for

ranged from basic issues of organizational development (getting committees to function, holding on to members, mounting publicity campaigns) to more substantive requests for information on what to do about police brutality or employment discrimination or about re-integrating veterans into the community. The conferences then presented other local leaders who had successfully addressed the same kinds of dilemmas or national officers with some pertinent expertise. At the same time they tried to help local leaders find more effective ways to attack local problems the conferences also tried to help them see how local issues were, inevitably, expressions of broader social issues. While she was never satisfied with the thoroughness of the conferences, delegates themselves seemed well pleased, as with the 1945 Texas delegates who praised their conference for "a wonderful fellowship and [the] contacts . . . and the many and varied benefits resulting from the exchange of experiences and expert information."⁵⁹

The conferences were a well-established feature of the Association's work when she resigned from the Association in May 1946. Her resignation letter gave three reasons for her leaving:

I feel that the Association is falling far short of its present possibilities; that the full capacities of the staff have not been used in the past; and that there is little chance of mine being utilized in the immediate future.

The letter registered her complaint about the "inclination to disregard the individual's right to an opinion" as well as the "almost complete lack of appreciation for the collective thinking of the staff," the latter witnessed by the paucity of staff meetings during the "critical and portentous" war years. She was also disturbed by a demoralizing atmosphere among the staff occasioned by a supervisory style tantamount to espionage. Her public reasons for resigning reflected the criticisms she had long been making of the Association—lack of imagination in program, lack of democracy in operating style.⁶⁰

She worked for a while as a fund-raiser for the National Urban League and continued to work with the NAACP at the local level. She became president of the New York City branch, which, in her phrase,

she tried to "bring back to the people" by moving the office to a location more accessible to the Harlem community and by developing a program in which Black and Hispanic parents actively worked on issues involving school desegregation and the quality of education. For her, the point was that the parents worked on the issues themselves rather than having civil rights professionals work on their behalf.⁶¹

In the mid-1950s, with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison, she helped organize In Friendship to offer economic support for Blacks suffering reprisals for political activism in the South. Even before the Montgomery bus boycott, the group had been discussing ways to develop the idea of a mass-based southern organization as counterbalance to the NAACP. When the boycott came, they saw it as the potential base for developing something. From that idea, developed by several groups simultaneously, grew the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

It is not clear whether without outside encouragement the local leadership in Montgomery would have sought to build something larger from the boycott. According to some observers, the momentum had stopped, and no plans were being made to carry on. When Baker asked Martin Luther King why he had let things wind down, she apparently offended him, not for the last time:

I irritated [him] with the question. . . . His rationale was that after a big demonstration, there was a natural letdown and a need for people to sort of catch their breath. I didn't quite agree. . . . I don't think the leadership in Montgomery was prepared to capitalize [on what] . . . had come out of the Montgomery situation. Certainly they had not reached the point of developing an organizational format for the expansion of it.⁶²

Levison and Rustin felt that the fledgling SCLC needed an experienced organizer and were able to talk a reluctant Ella Baker into taking the job.⁶³ Some of the ministers involved had substantial political experience before Montgomery—Martin Luther King was not among them, though—but none had the depth and breadth of political experience that Miss Baker could offer. In 1957, she went South

intending only a six-week stay. She wound up staying two and a half years, becoming the first full-time executive director. At the beginning, she used to joke, SCLC's "office" was her purse and the nearest phone booth. She was responsible for organizing the voter-registration and citizenship-training drives that constituted the SCLC program during this period, which she did largely by exploiting the network of personal contacts she had developed while with the NAACP.⁶⁴

As with the NAACP, she had trouble getting her own thinking built into the programs of SCLC. She wanted the organization to go into some of the hard-core counties where Blacks were not voting at all. Prophetically, she tried to get the organization to place more emphasis on women and young people, reflecting her sense of how southern Black organizations worked:

All of the churches depended, in terms of things taking place, on women, not men. Men didn't do the things that had to be done and you had a large number of women who were involved in the bus boycott. They were the people who kept the spirit going [the women] and the young people.⁶⁵

Being ignored was hardly a surprise to her:

I had known . . . that there would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister. . . . The basic attitude of men and especially ministers, as to . . . the role of women in their church setups is that of taking orders, not providing leadership.⁶⁶

Many SCLC preachers could go out and give stirring speeches about human equality and then come back and treat the office staff as if they were personal servants, never seeing the contradiction, although Miss Baker repeatedly pointed it out.

SCLC as it actually developed was a far cry from her sense of an effective social action organization. For all its faults, the NAACP had at least been a disciplined, tightly run ship, dependent on no one personality. SCLC's internal culture could be frustratingly disorganized, and its dependence on centralized, charismatic leadership was a lead-

ership style of which she was most skeptical. She was certainly thinking of King, but not just King, when she said:

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he *is* the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.⁶⁷

Under the best circumstances, traditional leadership creates a dependency relationship between the leaders and the led. Talk of *leading* people to freedom is almost a contradiction in terms. "Strong people," she said in one interview, "don't need strong leaders."⁶⁸

My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice. . . . People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves.⁶⁹

Thus, leadership should be a form of teaching, where the leader's first responsibility is to develop the leadership potential in others: "I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others."⁷⁰ Just as she was out of step with SCLC on the nature of leadership, she held her own opinions about nonviolence: "I frankly could not have sat and let someone put a burning cigarette on the back of my neck as some young people did. . . . If necessary, if they hit me, I might hit them back."⁷¹

She was similarly skeptical about the long-term value of demonstrations, preferring to emphasize the development of stable, ongoing or-

ganizations at the local level. Nor was she particularly enamored of large organizations, with their tendency to make the individual irrelevant. She thought that one of the most sensible structures for change-oriented organizations would have small groups of people maintaining effective working relationships among themselves but also retaining contact in some form with other such cells, so that coordinated action would be possible whenever large numbers really were necessary. For this reason, she admired the cell structure of the Communist Party: "I don't think we had any more effective demonstration of organizing people for whatever purpose."⁷²

It is impossible to say how deeply she was disturbed by being marginalized inside the organizations she worked for. She said many times that being shoved to the side and ignored did not necessarily bother her because her ego wasn't involved in that way. Such statements should probably be taken as reflecting more her ideals than her actual feelings. By this time, she had worked with any number of leaders and would-be leaders whose effectiveness was undercut by their egos, and it was only natural that she try to distance herself from them.

Her thinking was so fundamentally different from that of the men who ran SCLC that it is hardly surprising that few of her ideas were implemented. One of her suggestions did bear fruit. She tried to convince SCLC to build a program around the citizenship training schools that had been developed by Septima Clark and the Highlander Center. She was, again, unable to get this idea adopted while she was with SCLC, but after her departure in the summer of 1960, SCLC did take over the citizenship schools.

A memo she wrote in the fall of 1959 conveys some sense of her thinking just before the sit-ins began and just before she left SCLC. Addressed to SCLC's Committee on Administration, the memo tries to expand on the idea of SCLC as a "Crusade for Citizenship." To her, she says, the word *crusade* denotes "a vigorous movement, with high purpose and involving masses of people."⁷³ To be effective, she continues, such a movement must provide a sense of achievement and recognition for many people, particularly local leadership. The memo outlines four concrete steps by which such a crusade might be realized. SCLC, she suggests, could start searching out and sponsoring indigenous leadership, especially in the hard-core states. The examples

she gives are all of people working on voter registration in Mississippi, people whose work, she feels, could be strengthened with some of the resources SCLC could draw on. It sounds very much like an elaboration of the In Friendship idea—find someone who is already working and support that person.

The second idea calls for recruiting one thousand ministers to participate in house-to-house canvassing for voter registration. Each would be asked to give only eight hours a month and if each worked for ten months, she estimates, three hundred thousand persons could be contacted personally. The same emphasis on working directly with people is reflected in the third idea, a campaign to reduce illiteracy. She thinks SCLC could coordinate women's groups, church groups, and sororities in a campaign using the Laubach literacy method. The Laubach program asks that each person who learns teaches someone else, a feature she must have found appealing. She sees the idea as an investment in developing people: "The real value to S.C.L.C. would be that more people would be equipped with the basic tools (reading and writing) and would then be ready for effective social action." As with most of the other ideas, she mentions several people or groups who might be helpful, another reflection of her extensive contacts within politically active groups.

She notes that the literacy project could provide a "respectable channel" for helping the cause for those who would be uncomfortable being identified with the more militant aspects of the struggle— again, there is work for the matron in the fur coat. The final idea calls for training teams in techniques of nonviolent resistance, with the teams to be composed of persons committed to doing spadework in their local communities. She may not have been personally committed to nonviolence, but she was willing to use it. None of the ideas reserved a central place for Dr. King.

The memo was dated late October 1959. The sit-ins would start in February 1960, less than four months later. With Ella Baker's help the sit-ins would develop into an organization that would lead a more "vigorous" movement, involving masses of people; that would share her skepticism about the long-term value of centralized leadership; would stress the development of indigenous leadership and would work directly with the people; would go into the hard-core areas of

the rural South that other organizations had shunned and that would, far more than previous organizations, make it possible for women and young people to take leadership roles. The young people who formed SNCC were the product of a number of political influences, but Ella Baker's was among the most significant. In its organizational structure, its program, its ideology, early SNCC would be almost exactly the kind of organization Ella Baker had been trying to create for almost three decades.

The actual formation of SNCC took place in April of 1960. Soon after the sit-ins started, Ella Baker decided that they needed some coordination. With eight hundred dollars appropriated by SCLC, she arranged a conference of sit-in activists at Shaw University, her alma mater, where she was still in friendly contact with one of the deans. More than two hundred delegates attended the meeting, twice the number she had hoped for. The Reverend King spoke, as did the Reverend James Lawson, who had been working with a group of activist young people in Nashville. The fiery Lawson, the young people's Martin Luther King, as some called him, received a standing ovation from the students.⁷⁴ Miss Baker's own speech, titled "More Than a Hamburger" got a more polite reception. She tried to get them to see sit-ins as a wedge into a broader array of social problems affecting Blacks. She also warned the students against letting themselves be coopted by older groups. According to Julian Bond, students at that point just weren't ready to see past hamburgers: "To our mind, lunch-counter segregation was the greatest evil facing black people in the country."⁷⁵

Helping people see the connection between personal troubles and larger social issues was a central concern of Miss Baker's. It is also typical of her, though, that, having made the point, she apparently did nothing to push it, perhaps as a result of her feeling that it was important for young people to learn to think things through for themselves and decide things for themselves. Within a few years, the young people of SNCC had learned on their own to see more clearly the connections she was pointing them toward. A number of descriptions of her emphasize her willingness to let people think through issues on their own.

SNCC's Courtland Cox said:

The most vivid memory I have of Ella Baker is of her sitting in on these SNCC meetings that ran for days—you didn't measure them in hours, they ran days—with a smoke mask over her nose, listening patiently to words and discussions she must have heard a thousand times.

Much of her interaction with students took the form of her asking questions, sometimes quite aggressively, rather than telling them what they had to do. Still, she could get her points across, and one of her frequently stressed points was a warning against dogmatism. Mary King, who worked closely with Ella Baker, claims that:

At a very important period in my life, Miss Baker tempered my natural tenacity and determination with flexibility and made me suspicious of dogmatism. . . . She taught me one of the most important lessons I have learned in life: There are many legitimate and effective avenues for social change and there is no single right way. She helped me see that the profound changes we were seeking in the social order could not be won without multiple strategies. She encouraged me to avoid being doctrinaire. "Ask questions, Mary," she would say.

Similarly, Tim Jenkins notes that SNCC's original approach was just to attack all the ministers as Uncle Tom sell-outs. "One of the major contributions she made," he says, "was to help us see them in some way that was positive and [see] some way we could coordinate our efforts [with them] and be non-threatening to them."⁷⁶ Another of her contributions was the style of interpersonal interaction she modeled for the young people. One of the reasons Bob Moses wound up working for SNCC rather than SCLC was his feeling that Ella Baker cared about him as a person in a way that Martin Luther King did not. Diane Nash said, "When I left her I always felt that she'd picked me up and brushed me off emotionally." According to Moses, partly because of Miss Baker SNCC evolved an operating style with certain characteristics:

Whenever you want to really do something with somebody else then the first thing you have to do is make this personal connection, you have to find out who it is you're really working with. You really have to be interested in that person to work with them. . . . You saw that all across the South in the grassroots and rural people. That was their style and Ella carried that style into this other level. . . . She's sort of shepherding the SNCC people through this maze and in doing that part of the initial steps is always making these personal connections with all of them as they come through.⁷⁷

The Raleigh meeting reflected her distinctive style. She kept the press out of policy sessions. She was aware of the advantages of publicity, but she was aware of its drawbacks as well. She was also at pains to see that the representatives of northern colleges met separately from those of southern colleges. The students from the North were better educated, more articulate in terms of political and social philosophies. The southern students, in contrast, came with what she saw as "a rather simple philosophical orientation, namely of the Christian, non-violent approach,"⁷⁸ but they had been the ones actually involved, demonstrating their capacity for suffering and confrontation in ways that the northern students had not. They were the ones who suffered from the problem and it was important to her that they be allowed to determine the shape and substance of the response to it. The southern character of the movement had to be preserved.

If her attempts to get students to think in terms of a whole social structure that needed changing did not go very far, Miss Baker was more immediately successful in her attempt to keep one of the established civil rights groups from absorbing the new student movement. The established groups were very interested in doing so. CORE, which had never established an organizational base in the South, saw the student movement as the solution to that problem. The NAACP, which had been less than enthusiastic about the sit-ins at first, was interested in the fund-raising and public-relations advantages of being associated with the most interesting thing going on in the South. Many of the sit-inners had been NAACP youth chapter members. SCLC was also

interested and appeared to have the inside track. King was widely known and respected; SCLC had bankrolled the conference, it had been organized by one of their staff, and many SCLC leaders knew the student leaders and had worked with them over a period of time.

Miss Baker was adamantly opposed. She walked out of an SCLC staff meeting where strategies to bring the kids on board were being discussed. At the Raleigh meeting, her position prevailed, partly because some of the young people were skeptical of older leaders, even Dr. King, and partly because King, perhaps not wishing to look like he was trying to empire-build, did not push the issue as hard as he might have.⁷⁹ All this aside, Julian Bond is likely quite right when he says that the students were just excited about the possibility of running things themselves.

You were running your own little group. You had your own office. You may have had your own bank account. *You* made decisions. You sat down with whoever was the biggest nigger in town before you came along. You spoke with white folks, made them tremble with fear. It was very heady stuff.⁸⁰

It was also very idealistic stuff. The statement of purpose adopted a month later reflected southern Christian ideals, leavened with this new nonviolence:

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from the Judaeo-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. . . . Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overcomes injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of

hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.⁸¹

SNCC would never become a very large organization and would seldom receive as much publicity as some of the other civil rights organizations did. Nonetheless, it is not too much to say that it did a great deal to invent the sixties. Bernice Reagon calls the civil rights movement the "burning struggle" of the decade, in that it was the movement that stimulated and informed those that followed it. In the same sense, SNCC may have the firmest claim to being called the burning organization. SNCC initiated the mass-based, disruptive political style we associate with the sixties, and it provided philosophical and organizational models and hands-on training for people who would become leaders in the student power movement, the anti-war movement, and the feminist movement.⁸² SNCC forced the civil rights movement to enter the most dangerous areas of the South. It pioneered the idea of young people "dropping out" for a year or two to work for social change. It pushed the proposition that merely bettering the living conditions of the oppressed was insufficient; that has to be done in conjunction with giving those people a voice in the decisions that shape their lives. As SNCC learned to see beyond the lunch counter, the increasingly radical philosophies that emerged within the organization directly and indirectly encouraged a generation of scholars and activists to reconsider the ways social inequality is generated and sustained. SNCC's entry, along with the expanded visibility of the similarly aggressive CORE, pressured older civil rights organizations into a reconsideration of tactics. It put the NAACP in a position where it was forced to support some direct-action projects, even though that ran counter to the organization's essential style. Similarly, it is likely that SCLC's return to direct action in 1962 has to be understood in the context of SNCC and CORE having stolen the initiative in 1960 and 1961. SNCC strengthened the negotiating position of the older organizations. In 1962 or 1963, even King was considered too radical by many of the powers-that-be. The development of a left

wing in the movement, essentially SNCC and CORE, made centrist organizations like SCLC more acceptable. Given a choice between the relatively reasonable ministers of SCLC or the sometimes brash, frequently uncompromising young people of SNCC, business and political leaders were likely to choose SCLC. It very soon became impossible to think of the NAACP as "radical" at all.⁸³

SNCC is so different from the better-known civil rights organizations that it is easy to see it as a sharp break with the past. In fact, while SNCC was primarily an organization of young people, it was an organization that owed a great deal to a much older generation of activists. Philosophically, the distinctive style of work SNCC would carry into the hard-core South drew directly and indirectly from the congealed experience of people like Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Myles Horton, experience acquired in exactly the kinds of communities the SNCC kids would work in.

The three of them took remarkably similar lessons from their experiences. They were all radical democrats, insistent on the right of people to have a voice in the decisions affecting their lives, confident in the potential of ordinary men and women to develop the capacity to do that effectively, skeptical of top-down organizations, the people who led them, and the egotism that leadership frequently engendered. Therefore, they were committed to participatory political forms because people develop by participating, not by being lectured to or told what to do. They might all be called localists in terms of how they thought programs should be developed but they were hardly parochial. They all thought that if one worked on "local" problems with an open mind, one was likely to learn that the roots of those problems lay elsewhere. They all liked to think of themselves as non-dogmatic, able to hold strong beliefs while remaining open to learning from new experiences. All of them found in southern folk culture, Black or white, a set of values more sustaining than those of bourgeois culture and a code of conduct for governing interpersonal relationships. What Bob Moses said about Ella Baker could have been said about all of them: they were taking the style and substance of the rural South and elevating it to another level. If many of Mississippi's early Black leaders seemed to have an expansive sense of citizenship, these three

had an equally broad sense of community, intolerant of invidious distinctions among people and concerned with the well-being of individuals as such.

The SNCC organizers who started working in the most feared counties in the Deep South in 1961 and 1962 had to learn a great deal quickly but they were not starting from scratch. They were heirs to a complex intellectual legacy shaped by older people whose thinking had been informed by lifetimes of practical experience, a legacy reaching at least as far back as Miss Baker's grandfather's farm.