

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT FROM 1954 TO 1968

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To my daughters, Lily and Isabel -M

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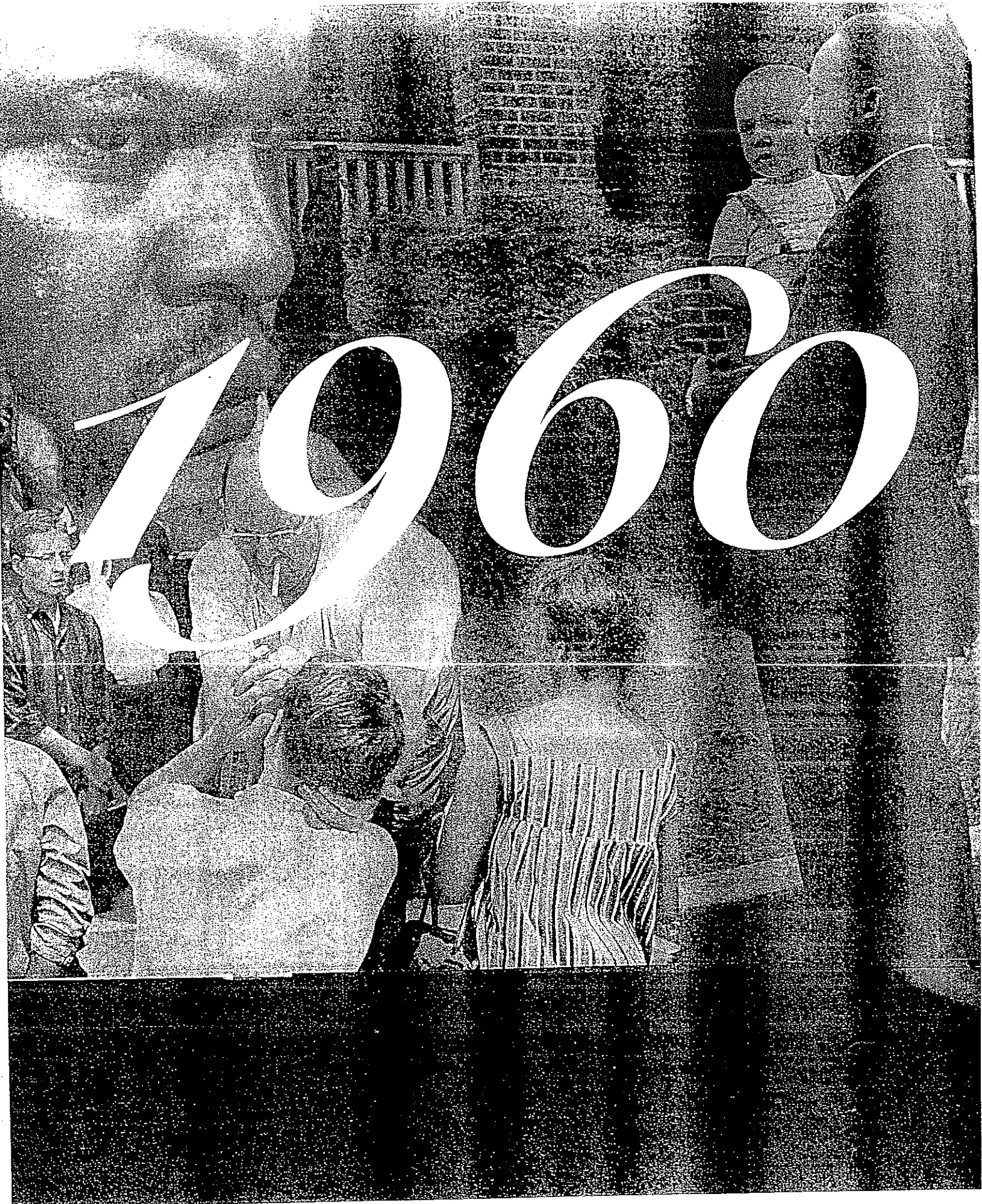
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1960

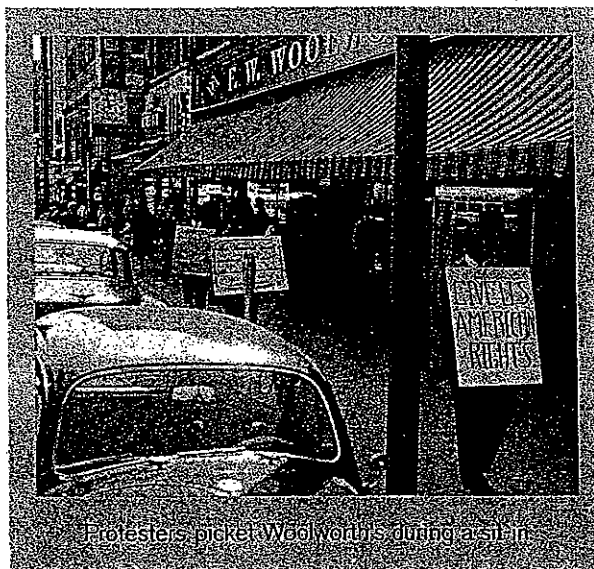
THE SIT-INS

"If it's possible to know what it means to have your soul cleansed—I felt pretty clean at that time . . . I felt as though I had gained my manhood, so to speak, and not only gained it, but had developed quite a lot of respect for it."

—Franklin McCain, one of the Greensboro Four

On the last day of January 1960, a North Carolina teenager named Ezell Blair Jr. announced to his mother, "Mom, we are going to do something tomorrow that may change history, that might change the world." Blair attended a black college in Greensboro called North Carolina Agricultural and Technical.

On Monday afternoon, February 1, he and three A&T classmates, Franklin McCain, David Richmond, and Joseph McNeil, went downtown to Woolworth's department store, took a seat at



Protesters picket Woolworth's during a sit-in.

the lunch counter, and ordered a doughnut and coffee.

"I'm sorry," said the waitress, "we don't serve you here."

Though white-only lunch counters were a fact of southern life, one of the students replied, "We just beg to disagree with you."

Before sitting down, they

had deliberately bought some school supplies. Holding up a receipt, they pointed out that they had just been served at a nearby cash register. One of the most insulting hypocrisies of segregation



From left, Joseph McNeil and Franklin McCain, two of the Greensboro Four, staged a sit-in at Woolworth's. The store desegregated its lunch counter on July 25, 1960.

five-thirty, half an hour before closing time. "By then," McCain recalled, "we had the confidence, my goodness, of a Mack truck." In a week, the Greensboro Four had grown to hundreds. Within two months, protests had taken place in 125 cities in nine states.

A NEW DIMENSION

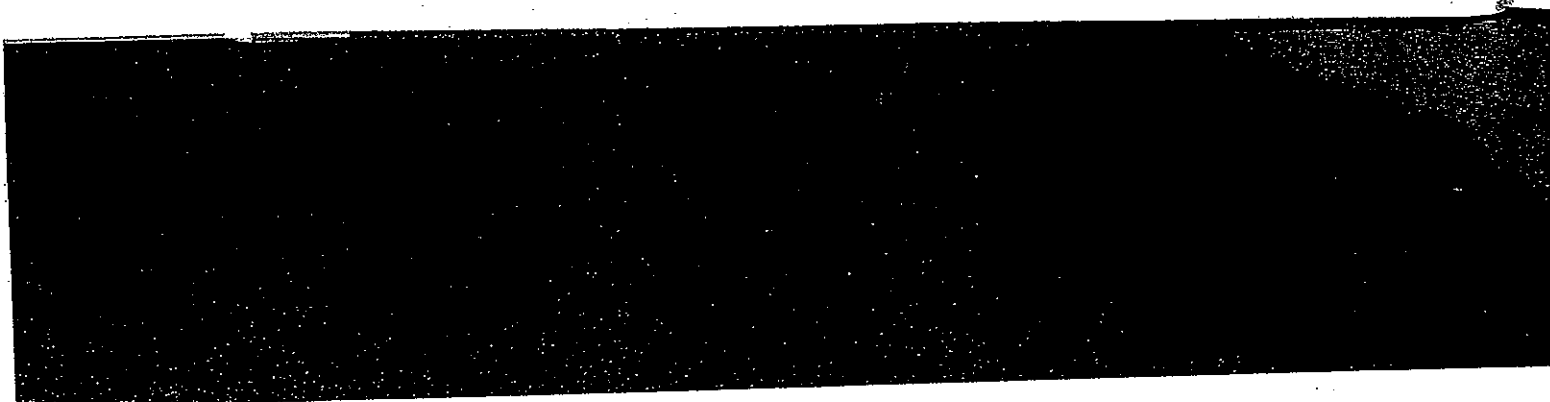
The sit-ins, as the lunch counter campaign became known, sparked a freedom flame that had

been that stores in the South, as Franklin McCain put it, "don't separate your money in this cash register, but, no, please don't step down to the hot dog stand."

The youths sat at the counter for an hour. They were heckled by a black dishwasher, and tared at by a white policeman. An elderly white woman cheered in a loud whisper: "You should have done it ten years ago!"

The store manager turned off the lights at

been barely flickering since the Montgomery bus boycott ended in 1956. Between 1957 and 1960, there had been scattered student sit-ins mostly outside the Old Confederacy, but black colleges had never been hotbeds of activism. Critics accused them of merely turning out James Crow, Ph.D.s, black people who wanted to do well as opposed to do good. Yet it made perfect sense for college kids to take the lead. As Movement soldiers, they had big advantages over the grown-ups:



no job to lose, no family to support, easy communication with one another at school, hormones that made them fearless, and fewer years of absorbing the damaging effects of segregation. Plus, twirling on a stool at a soda fountain—an activity only white kids got to do—still seemed like freedom itself.

At the time, Martin Luther King Jr. had just turned 31. The main thing he and the Movement's other veterans had accomplished since the bus boycott was to form a preacher-led group of southern activists called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). SCLC's do-nothingism thus far had come to frustrate one of its founders, Fred Shuttlesworth, a hotheaded Baptist minister from Birmingham, Alabama. When Shuttlesworth visited one of the North Carolina sit-ins that February, he called SCLC headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, the hometown to which King had recently returned. "You must tell Martin that we must get with this," Shuttlesworth said to the staff director, Ella Baker, "and really, this can shake up the world."

The sit-ins were, as Shuttlesworth said, "a new dimension." In the previous mass movement, the bus boycott, the protesters had not disobeyed the law they considered unjust; they simply stayed

off the buses. This form of protest is called "passive resistance" because it doesn't confront the system head-on. What was different about the sit-ins was that the kids were actively disobeying segregation laws that they felt were unfair and immoral. This direct action, or civil disobedience, had been one of Gandhi's favorite methods in India. With the exception of Shuttlesworth, the ministers of SCLC had shied away from direct action, partly because if you broke the law, you might have to suffer the consequences and go to jail.

PROUD PRISONERS

For a black college student hoping to move up in the world, going to jail was especially humiliating because whites tended to stereotype blacks as criminals. But as the sit-ins spread outside North Carolina, and the police started making arrests, going to jail for the Movement became a badge of pride. One of the goals of Gandhian nonviolence was to "fill the jails" with political prisoners so that the unjust laws being broken could no longer be enforced.

Students had already taken over lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee, as well as in Virginia, South Carolina, Maryland, and



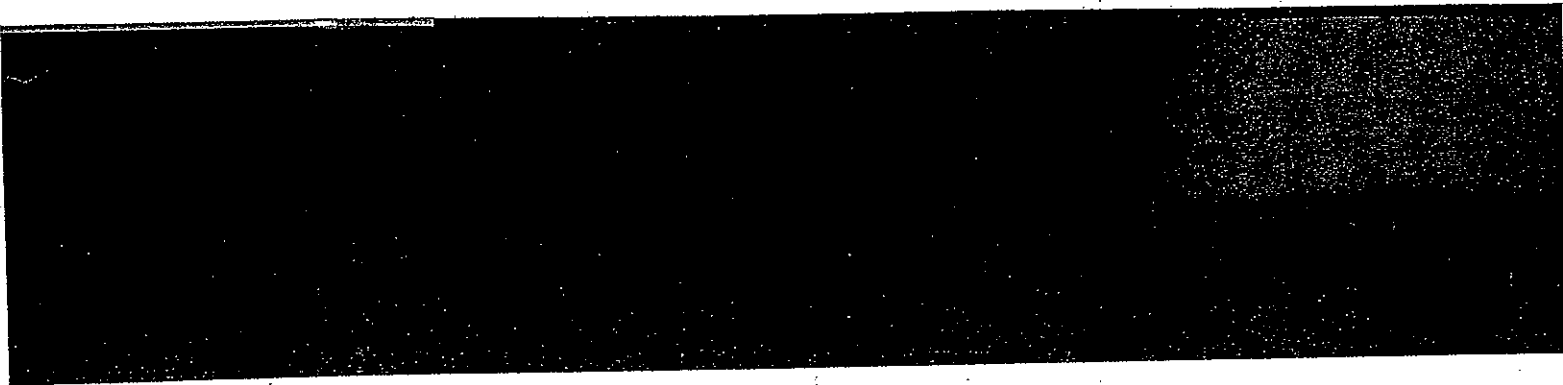
Martin Luther King Jr., holding his two-year-old son, Martin Luther King III, observes a cross that was burned in his yard in April 1960 after the sit-ins spread to Atlanta.

particularly his father, Daddy King, who were trying to put the brakes on the protests. After much soul-searching, on October 19, 1960, King went with some college students to the Magnolia Room restaurant at Atlanta's finest department store and got himself arrested.

The jailing of King set off a national uproar. Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy took time out from running for president to telephone King's wife, Coretta Scott King. (That gesture was at least partly responsible for swinging the black vote that won the presidential election for Kennedy two weeks later.) The pattern of King's career—and the dynamics of the civil rights era—had been established: King was the man who could command the

Kentucky when sit-in fever reached King's Atlanta. He found himself torn between the feisty kids and the more cautious older black leaders,

spotlight and get the results. But he often needed the young people, like those lunch counter pioneers, to push him to the next frontier.



THE BIRTH OF "SNICK"

Once they launched the sit-ins, the students decided to organize into a movement that would take the struggle beyond the lunch counters and go after "more than a hamburger."

But should the students become a youth arm of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), or should they form their own independent group? On Easter weekend of 1960, college kids from around the South came to a meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina, to sort out the future of the young people within the civil rights movement.

Some of SCLC's members, particularly Ella Baker, were critical of how their organization revolved around King. They were impressed with the students' "group-centered" approach, with no single person in charge and decisions made democratically.

Although SCLC put up \$800 to make the Raleigh conference happen, the 300 students voted to remain separate from SCLC and make their own way to freedom.

The new group they formed was called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. It would be known as "Snick," after its initials. SNCC became the most important Movement organization next to King's own SCLC.

For some of those present at SNCC's creation in Raleigh, the most memorable thing about that meeting was an old gospel hymn they had learned. Back in the 1940s, striking black workers had sung it on the picket line. It was

a "powerful, welling thing," said one reporter at the SNCC meeting. Soon that song, "We Shall Overcome," became the anthem of the civil rights movement.



Ella Baker, one of the creators of SCLC, engineered the formation of SNCC as a separate student group and remained its favorite adult adviser.