

CHAPTER TEN
EMMETT TILL GENERATION:
AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOLCHILDREN
AND THE MODERN CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT IN THE SOUTH, 1954-1964

In the midst of the Civil War, an elderly man told a bystander, "I'se berry ol massa, büt de little ones—dey'l see it; dey'l see it yit." The old gentleman was shaking and trembling with the "spirit of freedom" as he watched Union soldiers drilling before going into battle in 1862. The gentleman had grown old in bondage and was now witnessing the foundations of slavery disintegrating around him. Grounded in his knowledge of the gloomy past, he linked his aspirations for a bright future to the younger generation. A century later, Martin Luther King, Jr., also tied his hopes for a better world to the younger generation and dreamed of the day when children, even his own, would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.¹

In each case, adults made wishful projections for their progeny's future. It is appropriate to ask what, more specifically, were these children to see and what roles would they play in bringing their elders' predictions to fruition. In doing so, this essay focuses on schoolgirls and boys in the South who participated in the modern Civil Rights Movement, and it seeks to determine how and why these children made the transition from scripted actors to viable activists. Scripted actors were children such as Ruby Bridges who admitted that when she was six years old the Civil Rights Movement came knocking on her door. She accepted the role at the behest of her parents and played it well. Several years later, Martin Luther King, Jr., assured the parents of black teenagers in Birmingham, Alabama, that their children, read activists, would be safe if they participated in the Children's Crusade May 2-7, 1963. In fact, King asked parents not to "hold them back if they want[ed] to go to jail." At this juncture, the children, according to King, were "doing a job not only for themselves, but for all of America and all of mankind." He added, "Somewhere we read, 'A little child shall lead them.'"²

This essay interrogates reasons for changes in the views of Civil Rights organizations regarding the use of children as active participants in mass demonstrations that exposed them to violence accompanying the massive resistance tactics of segregationists. Of equal significance is assessing the effectiveness of the youngsters' contributions

once they became active agents for civil rights. An examination of the impact of a Supreme Court decision and the circumstances surrounding the deaths of several black children are illustrative.

At first glance, these events appear disparate, but they are cojoined by time and racial hatred. The first, *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka* (1954, 1955); represented hope for the future for nine-year-old Linda Brown and millions of other black boys and girls who attended America's public schools. The second is a reminder of the aborted hope for growth and development due to the brutal August 27, 1955, murder in Money, Mississippi, of Emmett Till and the September 15, 1963, killings in Birmingham, Alabama, of Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, along with Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware. Defining moments, including the murders, affected black youngsters to the extent that many of them became "warriors" for equal rights in public places and schools across the South.³

Once slavery ended, a most pressing and prevalent interest of newly freed blacks was access to education. As an enslaved child Booker T. Washington fantasized about going to school and equated it to entering "paradise." Freedom created opportunities for Washington and millions of other former slaves to make that dream a reality. Ideally, an education would provide students with an adequate foundation for self-support along with the wherewithal to recognize social ills and identify solutions for those problems. Additionally, the education should prepare its recipients for making creative use of their leisure time.⁴

In the post-Civil War years, black parents, community leaders, and other interested persons, often with the assistance of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly called the Freedmen's Bureau, an official agency created by Congress March 1865 under the auspices of the War Department, and religious denominations, built schools, hired teachers, and enrolled children. The ex-slaves' excitement and greed for literacy was infectious regardless of their age or gender. By contrast, many white southerners preferred that newly freed blacks not gain educational access because, they believed, it would disturb the established social and economic order thereby eradicating the chasm that separated ex-slaveholders from ex-slaves. Mean-spirited whites harassed children, threatened teachers, and destroyed schools.⁵

Access to a quality education for black children opened one of the greatest battles over contested terrain in American history. To further exacerbate the situation, the U. S. Supreme Court upheld racial segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) through its "separate but equal" decision. The case involved transportation initially but spilled over into many facets of American society, including educational institutions. Throughout the nation separate but *unequal* schools, with inadequate curricular offerings based on ethnocentric notions, prevailed. America's children of color suffered the academic, economic, and social consequences of legalized segregation for more than a century.⁶

With the passing of time, rising levels of expectations among black Americans made mere access to education less and less satisfactory. African Americans, without regard for geography or gender, began demanding an education of the same quality as that received by whites under ordinary circumstances. The National Association

for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) responded to their demands and began initiating suits for equal education in professional schools prior to the *Brown* decision. The NAACP followed the "Margold Rule" or "Margold Bible," a guiding principle initiated by Nathan Margold, which asserted that the New Deal climate favored appeals for equal opportunities rather than demands for integration.⁷

By the end of the 1940s, it was clear that the NAACP abandoned the Margold principle in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and asked for the integration of schools. *Brown*, a class action suit, included five cases appealed to the Supreme Court on behalf of children in Kansas (*Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka*), South Carolina (*Briggs v. Elliott*), Virginia (*Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*), Delaware (*Belton v. Gebhart*), and Washington, D. C. (*Bolling v. Sharpe*). The Supreme Court agreed with the argument saying "To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority . . . that may affect their minds and hearts in a way unlikely to ever be undone." With this reasoning, fortified by sociological studies, the Supreme Court declared *Plessy v. Ferguson* unconstitutional in its May 17, 1954 decision. The following year, in *Brown, II* the Court said school districts were to desegregate with all "deliberate speed." Many schools eliminated racial barriers through busing, pupil placement plans, and freedom of choice alternatives. Others offered mass resistance and maintained segregation.⁸

Without regard for how quickly or slowly school boards reacted to the *Brown* decisions, the Court ruling impacted upon millions of black and white American children in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Schoolgirls and boys did not initiate the action. Rather, it was on their behalf yet they were very much at the center of the desegregation struggle in public schools across the nation. Once the action began, the children were the only ones who could enroll, attend the classes, and integrate the schools.

The graphic image of the fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, walking with books in hand amid an angry mob of hateful whites gathered outside Little Rock's Central High School September 4, 1957, shouting racial epithets and demanding a lynching while Arkansas's National Guards stood by with raised bayonets in defiance of the Supreme Court, remains an indelible imprint in the minds of all who saw the events unfold on television or viewed the photograph in the print media. Equally poignant is Norman Rockwell's 1965 painting, "The Problem We All Live With," which depicts a small black girl with books and ruler in hand while surrounded by federal marshals as they all walked past a stark granite wall dripping with the fleshy particles of a blood-red tomato that some unseen protester had smashed upon the wall slightly below the scrawling word "NIGGER."

At base, the images are similar. Both schoolgirls were "tender warriors" on the battlefield for educational equality. One, a teenager, was quite grown up. Her school board had decided to begin integration at the high school level and the other, a six-year-old, was not so grown-up. Her school board had decided to begin integration at the elementary level. Despite differences in their ages and grade levels, both children exemplified dignity and serenity as they walked calmly past mobs of angry segregationists, male and female. Neither child looked to the left or right but kept her sights fixed on a higher goal directly ahead of her. The similarities end here. One student walked alone and faced hostile authority with fixed bayonets intent upon defying the

federal law while the other had the comfort of knowing armed men dedicated to upholding the federal law walked along with her.⁹

Although Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With" is generally said to represent Ruby Bridges who attended New Orleans' William Frantz Elementary School in 1960, a spokesperson for the Norman Rockwell Family Trust claims the painting was a general representation of school desegregation at the time. If this is true, the photograph of "The Problem" is well placed on the cover of Melba Pattillo Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry*, which commemorates the fortieth anniversary of integration at Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas.¹⁰

In the initial days of integration, no one could fathom the extent of the danger they faced. Years later, Beals wrote, "As I watch videotapes now . . . I wonder what possessed my parents and the adults of the NAACP to allow us to go to [Central High School] in the face of such violence." A white teacher in Clinton, Tennessee, also pondered about the school crisis in 1957 and wrote, "I often think, how can they [black students] stand it? I couldn't let my little boy go through what those children face every day." Ernest Green, one of *those children*, at Central High School, said "I didn't have any sense of the danger that occurred. I figured it would be uncomfortable, but I could deal with the discomfort in relationship to what I was as the bigger picture."¹¹

Neither parents, pupils, teachers, school administrators, civil rights activists nor the federal government had any precedence upon which they could uniformly gauge white reaction to school integration in the 1950s. In some instances, including several Arkansas communities as early as 1954, desegregation proceeded without notable turmoil while in others places, campuses turned into virtual battlegrounds with distractions ranging from the burning of an effigy to explosives, police, national guards, federal marshals, paratroopers, and detectives along with the potentially violent mobs of cheerleaders for segregation. It was against this mixed background that the young son of twenty-eight-year-old Louise Gordon of Clay, Kentucky, asked why he could not go to the school nearest their home rather than to one eleven miles away. Gordon admitted, "I'd never even thought of it," but she responded: "If you have the guts to go: I got the guts to take you." The young mother admitted that she died a thousand deaths each day until 3:00 PM when classes ended and she knew that her son was safe.¹²

Leaders of the NAACP believed desegregation in Little Rock Nine, perceived to be a moderate city, would not be tumultuous. But on September 4, 1957, when the Little Rock Nine, Minniejean Brown, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed, Elizabeth Eckford, Terrance Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carlotta Walls, approached Central High School, they saw the Alabama National Guard and State Police under the direction of Governor Orval Faubus, seemingly without the consent of Mayor Woodrow W. Mann, preventing them from entering the school. Chaos reigned supreme and was replete with racial epithets, threats of lynchings, and physical assaults. President Dwight D. Eisenhower evaluated the crisis and deployed more than 1,000 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division to Central High School to enforce the law and end segregation. Helicopters and bayonets added to the show of force.¹³

Governor Faubus responded to the crisis in a September 26, 1957, televised address and told viewers, "We are now an occupied nation." In asking for calmness, the

governor reminded his audience of the supremacy of the U.S. army when used, he said, against "a defenseless state." Faubus charged that the federal government had made a "grave and grievous" error in deploying the troops to enforce peace. The governor vilified the soldiers when he warned that an "impetuous or thoughtless act [by] a white student could result in the penetration of a bayonet." Faubus did not shift his mantle of concern to the black students who braved the gauntlet inside and outside the school. In situations where black children faced hostility from vicious white mobs, they made the transition from the role of scripted actors to nonviolent activists.¹⁴

Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry*, based in part on a diary she kept in 1957, describes days at Central High School as nothing short of hellish. "I got up every morning," she wrote, "polished my saddle shoes, and went off to war." Clearly, this was not the paradise Booker T. Washington had envisioned. Beals's catalogue of abuses ranged from fellow students stepping on the backs of her shoes, to throwing a caustic substance into her eyes, squirting ink on her clothes, bombarding her in the toilet with burning tissue tossed over the petitions, to threatening to lynch her.¹⁵

Ernest Green described the guerilla tactics used by some white students, male and female, as "hand-to-hand combat . . . trench warfare," that tested the mettle of black students entering previously all-white schools in Little Rock and elsewhere. Once enrolled, peers, parents, organizational leaders, and the African American public expected the school children to shoulder the responsibility of peacekeepers. Beyond that, the nation's eyes were upon them. Theirs was an awesome assignment, and the youth knew that responding to abuse in kind was certain to bring trouble, perhaps expulsion.¹⁶

Vivian Carter Mason oversaw the orientation for the small group of black students entering Norview High School, Norfolk, Virginia, in the 1950s. She acknowledged that the students had to grow up and leave their childhoods behind. Black students were to ignore anything "aimed at them in a detrimental and provocative manner" while applying "themselves with great vigor on the job of mastering the academic work required of them." Finally, according to Mason, the black students were to respond positively to white students who were friendly toward them. The black students had, said Mason, "accepted the role of pioneer." Beals acknowledged that she and her eight friends paid for the integration of Central High with their innocence and youth.¹⁷

The harassment of the "Little Rock Nine" was not vastly different from what other blacks in previously all-white resisting schools faced elsewhere in the South. The Kentucky-born Margaret Anderson, a white teacher in Clinton, Tennessee, during its throes with school desegregation in 1957-1959 wrote:

The few Negro children, trying to learn under fear, and sustained by a great American courage, in their more than two years in our school have endured every possible form of torment from the smallest harassment to threats of murder. "If you come back to school, I'll cut your guts out!" could be heard in the halls. Eggs smashed on their books, ink smeared on their clothes in the lockers, knives flourished in their presence, nails tossed in their faces and spiked in their seats. Vulgar words constantly whispered in their ears.

Anderson continued and recounted an especially vitriolic incident, in a study hall when 150 white students created such a threatening commotion the lone black

student left the auditorium. When she rose to go, the white students "applauded as if they had scored a great victory," said Anderson.¹⁸

The incident disturbed the teacher to the extent that she could not sleep and berated herself. She asked, how "I [could] call myself a teacher, knowing that a child, any child, had been persecuted under my supervision." Following a telephone conversation with the student, whom the teacher identified only as "Victoria," the two of them discussed the incident. The black girl related how the white children had barraged her with filthy names, which she said "I could take that," but the defining moment came when a white boy looked as if he "was going to touch me," she said. The teacher apologized for her own behavior and "told her how ashamed [she] was" of her own failure to control the situation the previous day. Victoria, truly the triumphant one here, responded: "I understand. I don't want to cause no trouble."¹⁹

Minnijean Brown, the most controversial of the "Little Rock Nine," was far less retiring than "Victoria." According to Melba Pattillo Beals, Brown was prone to saying "exactly what she was thinking as though she weren't afraid of anything or anybody." Brown was not ordinarily disruptive but exuded an air of "confidence-slash-arrogance," which white students labeled as "an attitude." In either case, her demeanor was annoying to the white students who vilified Brown in an attempt to justify their own rude behavior. One of the white students at Central High School in 1957 remembered Brown well and said, "She walked the halls *as if she belonged there*."²⁰

The choice of words used to describe Minnijean Brown reveals discomfort with the young woman who had presence and defied expectations. Brown was an ordinary teenager who wanted a "normal" high school experience. There was nothing "normal" about the bullying harassment from white peers who realized that Brown, unlike the other black students, was prone to react to their goading.

For some students, the presence of Minnijean Brown and the others among the "Little Rock Nine" disrupted their lives and interfered with their opportunities to have a glorious academic year filled with football games, pep rallies, sock hops, and business as usual. Other white students were not disturbed particularly by the "Little Rock Nine," if "they," read black students, stayed in their "places." Trouble came when the black students acted "badly," meaning protested the violation of their rights, or behaved as if they "belonged" there. Few, if any, of the white students actually conceded openly that the "Little Rock Nine" or any other black student had a right as taxpaying American citizens to an education equal to that received by white boys and girls in the public schools. Most whites saw Central High School as their school and believed it belonged to them exclusively.²¹

Central High School, a massive state-of-the-art structure containing 100 classrooms, opened in 1927 with nearly 2,000 students. The imposing building, selected by the American Institute of Architects as the Most Beautiful High School in America, had cost \$1.5 million to construct. The building's architectural style, complete with a water fountain and dual staircases presented the picture of an academic sanctuary. The classical statues high above the triple arched front entrance signified "Ambition, Opportunity, Preparation, and Personality." The expansive curriculum and high quality programs prepared students to achieve their ambitions. In short, Central was "THE" high school to attend, consequently any number of white students from outside the city moved into town, lived with host families or relatives, paid tuition, and enrolled. Being

there gave them a sense of importance because Central High School had a fine academic reputation, respected athletic programs, and its students excelled.

The differences in the size and condition of the physical facilities, curricular offerings, and instructional materials at Central High School and the all-black Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, located a relatively short distance away, were stark. Many students who attended Dunbar High School lived closer to Central High School, which is located in a racially mixed neighborhood. Central High School's location had nothing to do with the white students' sense of privilege.

Benjamin Fine, a *New York Times* education reporter, who comforted Elizabeth Eckford after the guards prevented her from entering the school, witnessed the reaction of several white girls when they realized the black students had indeed entered Central High School September 4, 1957. Fine wrote:

The crowd let out a roar of rage. "They've gone in," a man shouted. "Oh, God," said a woman, "the niggers are in school." A group of six girls, dressed in skirts and sweaters, hair in pony-tails, started to shriek and wail. "The niggers are in *our* school," they howled hysterically. One of them jumped up and down on the sidewalk, waving her arms toward her classmates in the school who were looking out the windows, and screamed over and over again: "Come on out, come on out." Tears flowed down her face, her body shook in uncontrollable spasms . . . Hysteria swept from the shrieking girls to members of the crowd.²²

Many white students believed they alone were entitled to attend Central High School and did whatever, with reference to badgering, harassing, or other threatening behavior, they could get away with to assure that the "Little Rock Nine" did not share in *their* entitlements. White students who disagreed with the segregationists were generally too intimidated to speak out in support of integration or to call a halt to their peers' offensive behavior. As a result, the "Little Rock Nine" were moving targets for hostile actions.²³

It appeared that Minnijean Brown's threshold for suffering abuses in silence was lower than the other black students at Central High School. Following a series of ugly incidents, in and out of the school cafeteria, and a suspension, the school board voted to expel Brown. For the segregationists, this was a sweet victory. Of the decision, Elizabeth Huckaby, a Central High School administrator wrote:

So Minnijean was out. It was an admission of defeat on our part, I felt. But I was sure that Minnijean's continued presence in Central High would have been a hazard to the other Eight. Her suspension, dated February 6, read: "Reinstated on probation January 13, 1958, with the agreement that she would not retaliate verbally or physically to any harassment but would leave the matter to authorities to handle . . ."

A name-calling and purse-throwing incident was not sufficient to expel a student, but, according to Huckaby, "Minnijean . . . was our difficulty. It was just that she and our impossible situation would not mix." Minnijean Brown was expendable.²⁴

As the student body learned of Brown's expulsion, the racists began the "One down, eight to go" campaign with highly vocal support from the avowed segregationist Sammie Dean Parker, a junior, which subsequently led to her own expulsion.²⁵

With regards to Brown's expulsion and the other abuses suffered by the "Little Rock Nine," the memories of black and white students are poles apart. White students are inclined to say the black students exaggerated incidents that were nothing more than "boys-being-boys" or simple acts of "making mischief." While this may be true, they did not direct their venom at other white students. Whites who were opposed to blatant actions by the segregationists were probably called "Nigger lovers" and endured some wrath from the dominant group. But, the fact remains that white students responsible for the harassment of black and selected white students were not behaving with camaraderie in mind.²⁶

The "boys will be boys" supporters were not without a distaff side. It was girls who set fire to the toilet tissue and tossed it into the restroom stall occupied by Melba Pattillo Beals. Furthermore, photographs of "twisted scowling faces with open mouths jeering" belonged to white girls as they harassed Elizabeth Eckford. In fact, the expressions of hostility catapulted Hazel Bryan into the "poster girl of the hate generation" position. By contrast, Elizabeth Eckford became the "poster girl of passive resistance." The Yin and Yang of racial sentiments raise questions about the origins of diabolical behavior exuded by one adolescent and the dignified actions of another.²⁷

Acceptable behavior and peaceful actions were key to survival for black children at Central High School and any other school in the midst of contested terrain for integration. To garner any semblance of a normal high school experience, most of the black children did whatever was necessary to avoid attracting attention. Ostensibly, they accepted rejection by white classmates along with exclusion from extracurricular activities. As if oblivious to their surroundings, black students maintained quiet nonconfrontational postures.²⁸

The experiences of Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to enroll at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, differed from those of black children in Little Rock, Arkansas, and Clinton, Tennessee, since she was the lone black student in a school that, ordinarily had an enrollment of 576. The majority of whites boycotted the school with the encouragement of the state legislature, and only a handful of white children attended Frantz school during the 1960-1961 school year. A noisy crowd of angry segregationists protested as the black first grader entered and exited the school each day.²⁹

At one point, the little girl misinterpreted the mob's shouts and flying missiles as Mardi Gras activities. Bridges's age and innocence did not prevent her from incorporating the chant "Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate" into her rope-jumping rhymes after school. Despite this childish immaturity, the sight of a black doll in a small coffin held by an adult surrounded by white children terrified her. Bridges did not misconstrue the taunts of the pallbearer or the woman who promised to poison her each day as she entered the school. The threats frightened Bridges to the extent that she had some difficulty sleeping and refused to eat lunches her own mother prepared.³⁰

Once inside the school, Bridges had no classmates, no recess, and no meals in the cafeteria. She was the proverbial "outsider" inside but, unlike the "Little Rock Nine," she did have an openly concerned teacher. The teacher extended herself to the child and greeted her daily "with a compliment about how nicely she was dressed to help

make her feel special," wrote Barbara Henry, "as she was, and to make her feel more welcome and comfortable." A mutual friendship developed between the teacher and pupil. Henry explained: "I grew to love Ruby and to be awed by her. It was an ugly world outside, but I tried to make our world together as normal as possible." Henry's efforts were successful and the child responded by imitating the teacher, Boston accent included.³¹

The atmosphere within Henry's classroom was as normal as possible for this curious form of segregation within a supposedly integrated school. Ruby Bridges remembered that she and Barbara Henry did "everything together, reading and word puzzles, spelling and math. We sang songs and played games. Since I could'n't go outside, we pushed desks out of the way and did jumping jack exercises" in the room.³²

Before the end of the school year a few white children returned to Frantz where they met Ruby Bridges who still had trouble understanding what was occurring around her. The moment of realization came when a little white boy said, "I can't play with you" and explained his mother forbade it because Bridges was "a nigger." It was the catalyst to understanding that the brouhaha outside was about the color of her skin. The "Little Rock Nine" knew from the outset that the chaos enveloping Central High School was related to color.³³

Without regard for the students' age, gender, grade, or location, there were commonalities among them, including family support and religious beliefs. The faith of Ruby Bridges came to the fore one day as she approached the crowd of hecklers, stopped, faced them, and appeared to speak. When Henry asked what she had said to the mob, Ruby explained that she had maintained a daily ritual before and after school. She prayed for the people who harassed her. On the morning in question, the child had forgotten to say her prayer and stopped to do so. From the teacher's window, it looked as if she were speaking to the crowd. Instead, Bridges prayed:

Please, God, try to forgive those people.
Because even if they say those bad things,
They don't know what they're doing.
So You could forgive them,
Just like You did those folks a long time ago
When they said terrible things about You.

The prayer was meaningful for Bridges whose mother helped her to cultivate a belief in its efficacy.³⁴

Melba Pattillo Beals claims she survived the tumult at Central High School because of support from her loving family, a strong faith in her God, the assistance of the NAACP, and a white classmate, known only as "Link." Additionally, reading a book by Mahatma Gandhi, a gift from her grandmother, added a new dimension to her confidence needed to survive the 1957-1958 academic year at Central High School. She employed passive resistance tactics and played "mind games" to gain control of negative circumstances created by tormentors.³⁵

Regardless of their sources of sustenance, the children involved in school desegregation frays across the South fought their battles collectively and individually, with dignity, and won praise. Indeed, they were the tender warriors on the battlefield for equality and eventually received recognition as such. Of course, the "Little Rock

Nine" have received more national attention because of federal intervention, media coverage, and the Congressional Gold Medals for their actions in 1997.³⁶

With or without publicity or medals, the children became self-styled activists and employed weapons of the weak. They prayed, engaged in passive resistance, and stared down tormentors. As they did so, the warriors within gestated. Melba Pattillo Beals described the metamorphosis when she wrote, "The warrior growing inside me squared my shoulders and put my mind on alert to do whatever was necessary to survive." Fighting for survival became so much a part of her, it pushed Beals into the sorrowful lament, "Please God, let me learn how to stop being a warrior. Sometimes I just need to be a girl." Other children not involved in school integration plans also became warriors, or fighters for civil rights, because of spontaneous moments such as the Civil Rights Movement knocking on their doors or external forces such as the murder of the fourteen-year-old boy, Emmett Till in 1955.³⁷

After seeing the *Jet Magazine* containing a photograph of Emmett Till's mutilated body, Joyce Ladner, a Forrest County, Mississippi, youngster, asked her sister Dorie "How could they do that to him?" "He was only a boy," one of the girls exclaimed. In actuality, he was not *only* a boy, he was a boy their ages. Joyce said she was eleven or twelve and her sister was older. Deeply affected by the August 27, 1955 lynching, the sisters empathized with Till's family and worried about the safety of their brother, father, and themselves. Despite the tremendous fear of foreboding danger, the children made a hasty daily jog to a local store in Palmers Crossing, their hometown, near Hattiesburg, Mississippi, for a copy of the *Hattiesburg American*. The youngsters, who seemed to know of the killing almost immediately, had to know more about what had happened to the boy affectionately called "Bobo" by relatives and friends. Gender and geography separated the Ladners from Till, yet they identified with him because he was their age.³⁸

The widespread media coverage of Till's funeral made it impossible to claim that the murder was an illusion. Unlike the families of other lynch victims, Mamie Bradley, Till's mother did not grieve privately. She included the public by authorizing a four-day memorial service complete with an open casket viewing so the world could see what the lynchers did to her son. More than 10,000 mourners paid their respects and an even larger segment of the population saw graphic photographs of events in newspapers and magazines. Afterward, a public hungry for more details about the child's death followed the trial through the newspapers across the nation. The Till murder and trial were the first major media events of the modern Civil Rights Movement. It served to publicize as well as to politicize the lynching.³⁹

Till's death ignited the inspiration for many black children of his generation to fight the discrimination surrounding them in the 1960s. Tommie Lee Hudson, who was twelve years old at the time of Till's death, said, "It put fire in you." Joyce Ladner maintains that the Till murder

served as a grave incident that showed people how intractable a problem could be and how difficult a solution would be. So when the spark came in Mississippi to sit in the public library, for example, people who participated had been incensed by the Till murder. The Till incident was the catalyst.

For Ladner the linkages between Till's death and emerging activism by young blacks were clear. In fact, she coined the phrase "The Emmett Till Generation" as an expression of that belief.⁴⁰

Young activists of the 1960s included persons who associate the inspirations for their actions with the Till murder. Others had vague or no recollections of the murder but joined the Civil Rights Movement as it came to their neighborhoods or towns. This was probably the case with the six-year-old child who marched May 3, 1963, in Birmingham's Children's Crusade and was arrested. It is appropriate to ask about the extent to which such young children understood the circumstances surrounding them and the consequences of their actions. Did the young black boys and girls in Mississippi during Freedom Summer (1964) who greeted civil rights volunteers with the salutation, "Hey freedom!" understand that they were in the midst of a social and political revolution?⁴¹

To be sure, some children were only aware of the Civil Rights Movement when it was within their environment; however, it is important to mention that local NAACP youth council chapters existed in the South following World War II. As a result, an organizational structure was already in place that could channel the activities of boys and girls who were sensitized by Till's death. Children outside these organizations moved more spontaneously into the activist role as the movement spread, or as they heard about atrocities, such as the bombing of the Birmingham church and the beating of two teenagers who staged a 1963 "sit-in" in Selma, Alabama.⁴²

During the years that lapsed between the *Brown* (1954, 1955) decisions and passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) a decade later, thousands of black children participated in mass demonstrations, boycotts, and/or school integrations. An estimated 70,000 persons, without regard for age, color, or gender, participated in mass demonstrations in 1960 alone. Nearly one-half of that number was arrested and some spent time in jail. Time served in jail became a badge of honor for them to wear proudly. Brenda Travis, a teenager from McComb, Mississippi, is only one example of a youngster who seemed to put interests in equal justice before personal ambitions. She participated in a lunch counter sit-in, was arrested, dismissed from school, and sentenced to one year of detention in a center for juvenile delinquents. Although released after serving only six months upon the condition that she leave McComb, the reprieve was not enough to make Travis relocate or refrain from future participation in the movement. When asked if she would join other protests, she responded, "Of course."⁴³

Black teenagers, such as Brenda Travis, were far less likely than their parents and other elders to accept segregation and remain in their "places" as blacks had done for generations. "Parents," wrote a reporter for *The Saturday Evening Post*, "measure how far Negroes have advanced since World War II: the[sic] child measure how far they have yet to go." Differences in perceptions of progress help to explain the contrasting behavior of the older and younger generations of blacks. The media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement along with its coverage of independence movements in fourteen West African countries gave pause. If blacks the world over were gaining their freedom, why could it not be done in the United States? Inspired by the changing times and angered by a negative comment from a young white acquaintance, one young black reacted and said, "I have an obligation to act, to protest, to demand equal rights." Even more poignant are the words of a thirteen-year-old African American boy in Mississippi who wrote, "We are trying to get freedom . . . because slavery is the next thing to hell . . . we want our freedom now . . . If I have to die[d] for freedom I don't mind."⁴⁴

Ironically, the adult leaders of the struggle for civil rights in McComb, Mississippi, were reluctant to include children because they did not wish to alienate parents who objected to "using" their offspring. Also, civil rights leaders were troubled by the possible results, violence, school expulsions, incarcerations. Indeed, black teenager civil rights demonstrators from McComb's public schools were expelled and incarcerated. Once released, they could not return to the local school but were compelled to complete their education in a special program established for them at Campbell College in Jackson more than fifty miles away. Despite these realities, children in the movement served as an incentive for other teens and adults.⁴⁵

By Spring 1963, the movement's initial reluctance to use children gave way to a new philosophy of incorporating boys and girls as a significant entity in the fight for civil equality. This decision came in Birmingham, Alabama, after weeks of ostensible failures to integrate public places. Mass demonstrations led to mass arrests and raised important questions. If civil rights leaders languished in jail, who would lead the movement? If fundraisers were in jail, who would raise money to post bails? Clearly, leaders and fundraisers were indispensable and needed outside assistance to carry on business as usual rather than languishing inside locked cells. Who, then, were suitable candidates to fill their places in jail? The most vulnerable to physical danger but least susceptible to economic and political pressures were children.⁴⁶

After considerable debate, the civil rights leaders in Birmingham agreed that juveniles should be among the demonstrators. After all, children were participating in the Civil Rights Movement in increasing numbers with or without consent from parents and civil rights leaders. In fact, children were highly visible in civil rights campaigns in Mississippi and Georgia. With the endorsement of the civil rights organizations; high school, junior high school, and some elementary school children in Birmingham, Alabama, joined in the Spring 1963 mass marches, dubbed the "Children's Crusade," as wave after waves of demonstrators left area churches, especially the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church across the street from Kelly Ingram Park.⁴⁷

The use of young girls and boys in mass demonstrations ultimately served a dual purpose. First, children filled the need for more troops who protested, were arrested, and filled the jails. Their actions called attention to the plight of blacks, young and old, within a highly segregated society. More than 2,500 protesters of all ages participated in the May 7, 1963, demonstration in Birmingham. Before the children went back to school in September, more than 3,300 blacks, varying in age, had been arrested. Second, to see the willing participation of youth and the brutal treatment of young demonstrators at the hands of the Birmingham police generated a media frenzy and further politicized public opinions about law enforcement officials who aimed high-powered water hoses at demonstrators or threatened them with trained attack dogs. Television viewers watched as sheets of water lifted and tossed demonstrators about. Equally as graphic was a chilling photograph of a dog attacking fifteen-year-old Walter Gadsden. Although he was not a civil rights demonstrator, the photograph carried no such explanation. Viewers would only see the dog lounging at the youngster. A story in *The Atlanta Constitution* summarized events of May 3, 1963:

Snarling police dogs chased away crowds of Negroes and fire hoses flattened youthful demonstrators Friday as hundreds of Negroes tried to stage antisegregation marches.

Five Negroes reported they were either bitten by the leashed dogs or injured by water hoses which a fireman said had pressure of 50 to 100 pounds. Whether using hoses or dogs, the treatment of the youthful demonstrators precipitated national outrage.⁴⁸

Several days after the Children's Crusade began under the auspices of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King, Jr. announced that Birmingham's officials had agreed to a desegregation plan for the city. The Children's Crusade figured importantly in the negotiations. Historian Glenn T. Eskew, author of *But for Birmingham*, posits "the children's crusade broke the stalemate in local race relations [and] broke the stalemate on the national level as it forced the president and Congress to draft legislation that ended legal racial discrimination" with the passage of a civil rights act the following year.⁴⁹

Rather than a joyous and peaceful aftermath of the Children's Crusade and the end of racial discrimination in Birmingham, a September 15, 1963, dynamite blast at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church opened a gaping hole in race relations. The explosion occurred as the congregation was preparing for its annual Youth Day Celebration. Three fourteen-year-old girls, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, died along with their eleven-year-old friend, Denise McNair.

Confusion, panic, and hate erupted. Spontaneous rock-throwing fights broke out between blacks and whites as they learned of the children's deaths. The police attempted to break up one fight and ordered the sixteen-year-old Johnny Robinson, an African American allegedly involved in throwing rocks at whites, to stop. He failed to halt, and the police shot him in the back. Finally, the thirteen-year-old Virgil Ware died from a gunshot wound inflicted by sixteen-year-old Michael Lee Farley, a white Eagle Scout, who had attended a segregationist rally earlier that afternoon. The boys had not met nor had they engaged in any confrontations. Ware was riding a bicycle with his brother when Farley, riding a motorized scooter, fired at the two brothers in passing.⁵⁰

The tragedies surrounding the bombing redirected the world's gaze at Birmingham. The Honorable John Lewis, who headed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1963, admitted that the bombing murders was a "very, very dark moment for the civil rights movement," but it galvanized the movement and caused civil rights advocates to intensify their efforts. Martin Luther King, III, son of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was only a child himself at the time, remembered how disturbing the event was for his father. "It evoked sympathy and empathy across the nation," said King. Mark Potok, spokesperson for the Southern Poverty Law Center, concluded that the bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was a watershed in the Civil Rights Movement that awakened the "conscience of white America, a conscience that had been sleeping for a long time."⁵¹

Indeed, in a letter to the *Birmingham News*, Marjorie Lees Linn, a thirty-three-year-old white woman, who had spent the greater portion of her life in Birmingham asked, "How can responsible, clear-thinking white people possibly believe that there is any excusing such acts or for that matter any excusing their own prejudice against the colored race?" Linn's criticism of the dastardly act was tantamount to breaking ranks with other whites, including the segregationists, whether she supported them

or not. Certainly, it was a moment of reckoning for her when she realized there was "no way to avoid looking into the monstrous face of prejudice and bigotry."⁵²

What could interested persons, black and white, young and old, do about looking into the monstrous face of prejudice and bigotry? After the funerals of the children killed in the church bombing, members of SCLC and SNCC gathered and talked with Martin Luther King, Jr. The overarching question was what could they do to continue the fight for civil rights. The group eventually decided to "turn up the heat . . . in Selma [Alabama]" and to stage freedom votes in Mississippi.⁵³

Mass demonstrations had already begun in Selma. The day following the Birmingham church bombing, black teenagers picketed the Dallas County Courthouse, "the first such open defiance" writes John Lewis, in the city's history. By the end of Freedom Summer in Mississippi, 1964, and the passage of the Civil Rights bill, hundreds, if not thousands of black children had participated in the various facets of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, many had gained a deeper comprehension and appreciation of the concepts of liberty and equality. As the old gentleman had said nearly one hundred years earlier, "De little ones—dey'l see it; dey'l see it yet." The evasive yet effervescent "it" was something that many of the girls and boys were experiencing thus they could give deeper meaning to the greeting "Hey freedom" as if they were reacquainting themselves with a long-lost friend.⁵⁴