

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTARIES: The Making of “We’ll Never Turn Back” (1963) and “Dream Deferred” (1964) by Harvey Richards

**Written by Paul Richards, Ph.D.
Photos by Harvey Richards**

In 1963 and 1964, my father, Harvey Richards, made two films about the voter registration drives in Mississippi as part of the movement to end racial segregation in the United States. The films are “We’ll Never Turn Back” (1963) and “Dream Deferred” (1964). They were a collaboration between Harvey and Amzie Moore, a Cleveland, Mississippi resident and long time civil rights activist, designed to help organize and raise funds for the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The following is the story of how these films were made.

Late one February night in 1963, Harvey Richards drove his Oldsmobile station wagon full of sound and camera equipment, sporting a California license plate, up to the front door of Amzie Moore’s house in Cleveland, Mississippi. Cleveland, Mississippi is a small delta town in the northern part of the state, about half a day’s drive from New Orleans, Louisiana, where Harvey had spent the previous night. Amzie Moore opened his door and the two men, both 51 years old, met for the first time. Harvey was around 6 foot tall, trim at 180 pounds, dressed in a warm canvas jacket and kaiki baseball cap. Amzie dressed in a plaid shirt and worn kaki pants, looked out his front door at this unannounced white stranger. Harvey introduced himself briefly saying he’d been referred to Amzie by Jim Dumbrowski of the Southern Conference Education Fund in New Orleans. Dumbrowski was a well known civil rights activist,



Harvey Richards (baseball cap) meeting with Amzie Moore (white overcoat) and (left to right) E.W.Stepto, Bob Moses and unidentified man.

leftist and victim of House Un-American Activities Committee witch hunting. Amzie invited Harvey in and thus began one of the most interesting footnotes in the history of the southern civil rights campaigns of the 1960s which eventually broke the system of racial segregation and made Martin Luther King, Jr. into a national hero.

Driving four hours to a small Mississippi town unannounced with no phone call or letter to set up the meeting might seem strange except for the remarkable, even grim, circumstances surrounding that moment. Richards' goal was to make a documentary film about and for the southern voter registration campaign. Amzie Moore was an experienced, underground partisan in the cause of southern civil rights. Both Moore and Richards were experienced activist veterans who knew how to operate in the dangerous waters of the racist, anti-Communist sea that was the United States in the early 1960s. Without further ado, they just went right to work.

Richards Background

Harvey became a photographer in the 1950s, after years working as a merchant seaman, machinist and union organizer. Born in 1912, Richards had grown up in rural central Oregon, the son of a single mother who was a phone operator. Harvey said he was raised on the phone. Quitting school after the 8th grade like so many others of his generation, he went to work at age 14 in the late 1920s to help support his family. At 18, having moved with his mother and sister to Portland, he found work as a merchant seaman because of a "special interest in being able to eat regularly" as he put it. He took his first ship across the Pacific Ocean to China in 1930. He shared the cramped quarters in the aft of the ship with the crews of many voyages.

Before long he became the crew's shop steward (called ship's delegate), doing battle with the boson and the officers over how much of the ship's provisions budget would go into buying food for the crew and how much would go into the captain's pocket. He learned about the early maritime union struggles from the older men sailing with him to China and soon became a member of the National Maritime Union. Before his last voyage to the Mediterranean sea in 1934, Richards' union militancy and class consciousness had grown along the hard and fast lines that separated officers from the crews of the vessels he had sailed.

Coming ashore from his last voyage in 1934 in Boston, Massachusetts, Richards disembarked from a small freighter carrying an unusual group of Greek history teachers returning from a vacation in Greece. Richards had come to the groups' attention in the port of Piraeus, near Athens, where the ship docked due to engine trouble. A strike of longshoremen was underway in Pirae-



Harvey Richards, Merchant Seaman, 1933

us. Finding scabs coming on board to repair the freighter's engine, Richards, as the ship's delegate, went ashore to inform the striking longshoreman of what was happening.

He found the strikers assembled in a meeting at their union hall and told them about the strikebreakers aboard his ship. The union adjourned the meeting and marched en mass to the ship, delaying just enough to allow Richards time to return to the ship before they arrived. In the ensuing confrontation, the ship's departure from Greece was delayed for one week, making Richards as popular a man among the Greek history teachers (whose vacation was unexpectedly extended) as he was unpopular with the captain.

On the return voyage, Richards struck up casual friendships with the Greek history teachers during his off time, meeting with them on deck where they would find him sitting on a hatch cover reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Upon reaching Boston, Richards quit seafaring, staying at the home of one of the passengers until he found work with the WPA. He joined the Worker's Alliance, the WPA workers' union in Boston, where he came into contact with "loads of left wingers".

Between 1934 and 1940 Richards worked at a series of labor union organizer's jobs in Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. During this period, Richards became a dedicated union organizer and militant. "That was my life. There wasn't anything else." Finding himself drawn into the company and counsel of other working class labor militants, Richards joined the Communist Party during this period. In 1936 he married a comrade, Hodee Waldstein, a Bostonian with a Radcliffe education.

The Richards returned to the West Coast in 1940. He went to work as a ship painter and then as a machinist's apprentice in the shipyards of San Francisco. There he became a journeyman machinist and shop steward working for Bethlehem Steel Corporation.

As rank and file militant in the International Association of Machinists Local 68, Richards worked throughout the Second World War installing gun turrets, large diesel engines, and huge propellers on Liberty ships and other ships of war. By the end of the war, Richards was the chief shop steward for the whole Bethlehem Ship Yards when the great strike wave of 1946 engulfed the yards, and most of the rest of the nation as well.

During the 1946 strike, he helped lead the workers as the chief picket captain in the shipyards. When the strike ended unfavorably for the workers, Richards found himself out of work and suspended from his local that had been taken over by the International office. His first marriage ended in divorce in the late 1940s. In 1951, Richards was expelled from the Machinists Union as a Communist, becoming the target of numerous subpoenas from various witch-hunting committees



Harvey in Golden Gate Park, 1940

of the government, state and federal. Not long after, he left the Communist Party.

When he remarried in 1953, he retired from the millwright work he had been doing since his expulsion from the machinist union. Achieving financial independence through his marriage to Alice Schott, Richards purchased his first still camera in 1955 to take with him on an unscheduled trip to New Orleans with no itinerary, one step ahead of the process servers trying to hand him a subpoena to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Between 1955 and 1959 Richards took hundreds of photos during several such unscheduled trips, including photographic tours of Mexico, Guatemala, Columbia, Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica. “In a sense”, he wrote in a letter in 1958, “I have served an apprenticeship.”

From the very beginning, Richards’ photography was part of his fundamental concerns with the lives of working people.

“My sympathies were with the downtrodden, with the persecuted, with the prosecuted, with the poor people. I identified with them. It was where I came from. And when I got to reading left wing literature and began to be able to measure such things as exploitation, all of these things fit together. It lent understanding to everything I had been looking at.”

As part of the pre-television generation, Richards had watched the new media mushroom into the front rooms of America and the world. He witnessed the isolation and decline of the communist movement at the hands of the anti-Communist crusade, played so effectively in the media. He was victim of the anti-Communist purge of unions which deprived the union movement of its militants. “And without militants,” Richards observed, “the union is worthless.”

And he saw that the media did not tell the whole story.

“Everything that you heard on television or on newsreels was terribly warped and twisted.... There was an enormous difference between the world I had seen with my eyes prior to the fifties and the world that I saw in the media. And ... prior to my going to the deep south, Martin Luther King might get five seconds, six seconds, seven seconds on an evening news broadcast. The only thing you would get about the conditions of black people in the south would be a few words from the traditional talking



Harvey in Guatemala, 1958

head. You never, nobody took cameras into the homes, into the work places, into the fields in areas like that. That is the principal reason why I wanted to go there with a camera. Not to try to do something that was better than somebody else was doing.”

In his 1950s trips to Latin America and to the southern United States, he photographed poor people in their homes, on the road and at work. When he returned to California, he showed his slides to small audiences of like minded people, friends, and community groups. Before long, he began taking trips into the rich farming lands of California using his camera to help union organizers and Catholic priests in their campaigns to improve the working conditions for agricultural workers.

“I took slides of women working in fields where there were absolutely no sanitation facilities, no toilets anywhere. Men and women working in large numbers with absolutely no toilets for women. An utterly deplorable situation. And their children, their little kids were there picking up onions, picking up potatoes, the whole bit.”

He gave away many copies of his slides to organizers, unions, priest, and legislators. He voluntarily testified before state investigating committees about what was going on. “This was the first use of visual materials on these questions. No body else would go out there. I was a lone bird out there.”

It was in this campaign for sanitation facilities in California agriculture that Richards made his first motion pictures. He realized that if slides were effective, motion pictures would be even more effective. Between his first movies in 1958 using a hand wound Bolex camera and early 1963 when he knocked on Amzie Moore’s door, Richards made seven 16 millimeter documentary films, with synchronized sound. He rapidly acquired more sophisticated equipment: the Arriflex S camera, the Perfectone, Swiss made, quarter inch reel-to-reel tape recorder. Then the Arri BL camera, the Nagra sound recorder. He built an editing studio in his home, including rewinds, counters, cutters, sound equipment (to convert audio tape to 16 millimeter magnetic stock), synchronizers and an interlock projector. He became a one-man motion



Harvey (back to camera) filming strikers in California in the 1960s.
Photo by Katie Peake, sister of Alice Richards

picture production company available for the activist movements that were springing up around him as the 1960s got underway.

And yet, because of the anti-Communist climate, the hostile media and repressive conditions in the country at the time, few people ever called on Richards' services. Instead, Richards volunteered his help. He would show up, shoot film, record sound, go home to edit and produce a film that would then be offered free of charge (or for lab fees) to those he filmed. It was an ironic hallmark of those times that movement people often were at a loss to know what to do with the films or what to make out of this middle aged, bald headed white man who took so much trouble on their behalf.

Richards photography of the southern civil rights movement in 1963 occurred in the context of the harassment and danger heaped upon the early civil rights movement. Harvey's first wrote to Jim Dumbrowski of the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) in New Orleans in 1958 to inquire about the feasibility of doing an audio-visual project for the voter registration campaigns going on in the South. SCEF was a leftist group favoring integration and voting rights for blacks and associated with the Highlander Folk School of Myles Horton.

Nothing came of the early correspondence largely because few activists had the time or inclination to answer his inquiries. On January 15, 1960 Dombrowski wrote Richards a letter containing the peculiar flavor that marked so much of the efforts of this movement film maker to arrange projects for protest movements under the gun.

"I have approving letters [Dumbrowski wrote] from Anne and Carl Braden and Aubrey Williams [of SCEF] concerning the Southern film project. However, all agree that the project would be extremely hazardous and furthermore, they are concerned about the possibility of outlets for making use of the finished product. The chief difficulty is a guide, and the only person that I know of would be Carl Braden. He is willing to undertake it. However, the chances are good that he will be in jail, before 60 days, for perhaps a year. As you know he was convicted of contempt for failure to answer questions by the House Un-American Committee."

Braden had been subpoenaed before HUAC July 30, 1958 where two leading southern segregationists, Representatives Willis of Louisiana and Tuck of Virginia, had led the inquisition against Braden and SCEF. His appeals were running out in 1960, two years later. The victims of segregation and the victims of the anti-Communist crusade had the same enemies.

So without any final arrangements, Richards decided he had to go south to arrange things there. He was determined to make a film with or without a guide. He left California in early February 1963 driving to New Orleans to find Dumbrowski.



Harvey's Oldsmobile in Mississippi, 1963.

Dumbrowski referred Richards to Amzie Moore in Cleveland, Mississippi as a possible contact to begin his filming efforts. Richards then drove unannounced to Cleveland where Amzie Moore opened his door and his world to Richards' camera.

Moore became the guide that made the film both possible and successful. Amzie Moore found in Richards a way to document the Mississippi movement, by letting Richards accompany him into his neighbors' homes along the back roads of Mississippi where he had risked his life in anonymity and obscurity for so many years in the cause of civil rights.

Amzie Moore's Background

Amzie Moore had traveled a very different road to that first meeting with Harvey at his front door. Amzie Moore was thirty years old when he first became aware of the "freedom movement" in 1942, when ten thousand blacks had assembled at the Delta State Stadium to hear black speakers discuss the conditions of the race in Mississippi. In that same year, Amzie Moore was drafted from a segregated state into a segregated Army. "I really didn't know what segregation was like before I went into the Army," Moore reflected many years later. (Moore quoted in James Forman, *Making of Black Revolutionaries*, p. 278). "It was the first time I really knew how evil segregation really was."

In the Army, Moore "kept wondering why were we fighting? Why were we there? If we were fighting for the four freedoms that Roosevelt and Churchill had talked about, then certainly we felt that the American soldier should be free first." But segregation followed Moore everywhere the Army sent him-to Los Angeles, to India, to the Himalayas, to Burma. In India, he listened to the Japanese radio broadcasts "day and night" about segregation, claiming that the Japanese were fighting for the emancipation of the colored races. Moore was given the job of lecturing African American troops about these broadcasts in order to counter their effects. He flew "from Lashie to Kuming to Mishinaw, Burma, to give these lectures. We were promised that after the war was over, things would be different, that men would have a chance to be free. Somehow or another, some of us didn't believe it, others did."

Amzie returned to Mississippi in January 1946 to find that local whites had organized a "home guard" in response to



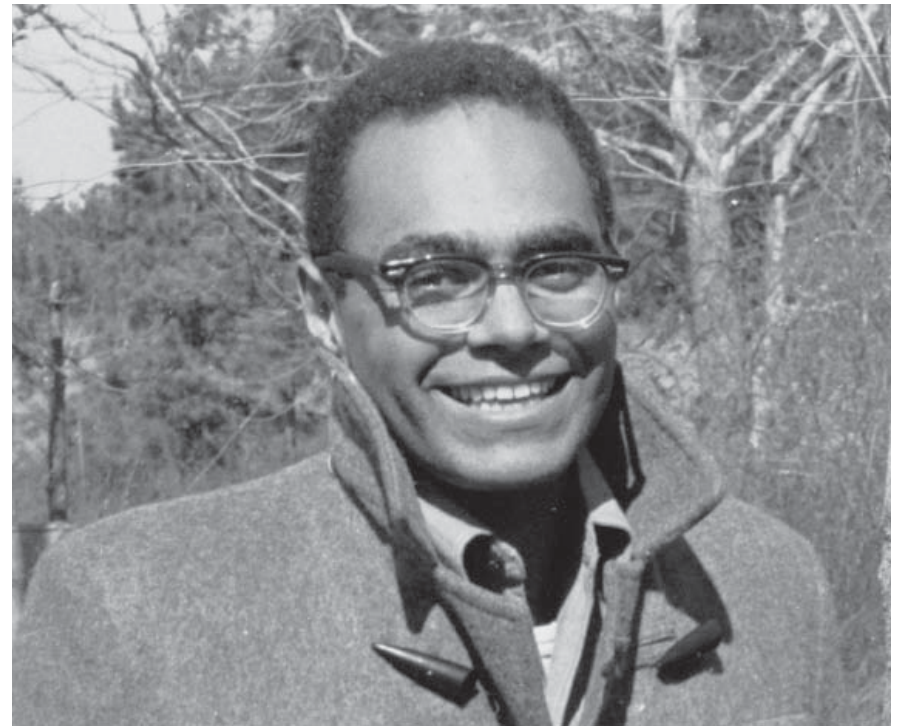
Amzie Moore, 1963

the returning African American soldiers. “For about six or eight months, at least one Negro each week was killed.” But African Americans were no longer as isolated and friendless as they were before the war. The Federal government had ordered all its facilities desegregated during World War II. Moore called the FBI, which sent in special agents to investigate some of the killings. The violence slowed.

In 1950, Amzie was involved with many African Americans from all over the Mississippi delta in organizing the Regional Council of Negro Leadership. Thirteen thousand African Americans came out to its first meeting in May 1950, which adopted the goal of obtaining first class citizenship. The second meeting of the Regional Council in 1952 heard from Thurgood Marshall who had argued the *Brown v. Board of Education* case before the Supreme Court.

After the *Brown* decision came down in 1954, it didn’t take long for the white backlash to begin. In October 1954 the White Citizen’s Council organized in Indianola, Mississippi. Violence against Blacks escalated. In January 1955, Moore became the president of the Cleveland, Mississippi NAACP which quickly increased its membership from 87 to 564. The infamous murder of 15-year-old Emmett Till occurred in September 1955 in Mississippi in the midst of this rising tide of African American voter registration activity. Moore called the Justice Department in 1956 to get them to investigate persistent efforts to prevent African Americans from voting. Nothing happened, leaving Mississippi activists unprotected against the rising tide of racist violence and intimidation.

In 1960, Robert Moses met Amzie Moore through his association with Bayard Rustin and Ella Baker, militant leftists within the civil rights movement, who had met Moore during the 1950’s. Moses became the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s leader in Mississippi voter registration activity where he took up the struggle Amzie Moore had been leading for 15 years. SNCC was the militant wing of the civil rights movement. And Amzie Moore was their adviser in the state. They faced the most brutal conditions, with the least support and the most powerful enemies. But just like in the trade union movement of the 1930s, the militants made the difference, propelling the issues into public attention, making a crisis for the status quo. And this was just what Richards wanted to document.



Robert Moses, 1963 in Mississippi

Filming We'll Never Turn Back

It was in the context of the reign of racist, anti-Communist violence against the voter registration project in Mississippi that Richards, a left militant, drove silently into the delta to find Moore, a civil rights militant and pillar of the black movement. “Phone calls would have been stupid,” Richards reflected. “You never knew who would be listening. To move in dangerous areas required anonymity. And you had to keep moving, never staying long enough in any area to come to the attention of the wrong people, or long enough for them to identify you.” In fact, the whole film project occurred on the move.

And it could not have been different. Both sides were on the look out for communists. The segregationist, of course, saw communists under every bed. But even the civil rights leaders had to be on guard. Bayard Rustin had been forced out of SCLC due to his personal and political deviance. Robert Moses and James Forman (the other main leader of SNCC) were both accused of communism within the civil rights movement and from outside it. James O’Dell, the chief fund raiser for SCLC, was red baited out of his job by the combined efforts of the Justice Department, President Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover himself. Because of the growing positive links between the civil rights movement and the justice department in the 1960s, the civil rights leadership came under increasing pressure to purge anyone even remotely connected to communist politics or a communist past. Only SNCC stood up for the civil liberties of all, refusing to red-bait.

In full awareness of this thorny context, “lone bird” Richards arrived at Amzie Moore’s that February 1963. Everything happened fast. They sat down, came to an agreement and started working within days. Moore arranged the filming locations, invited the people to be photographed and arranged to meet Richards at appointed times in agreed upon locations. Maps were laid out to make specific recommendations about routes into and out of the backwoods areas. It was important that no one follow Richards into the filming sessions.

Film locations emerged naturally as Moore included Richards in on the regular rounds of his activities to register voters. Later, Moore set up some meetings with the sole purpose of filming. Moore scouted the locations to discuss the filming with other civil rights activists, farmers and students. They discussed the subject of concern (voter registration activity in a racist society) to give



Amzie Moore’s House, Cleveland, Mississippi
Photo: by Paul Richards, 2005

everyone time to think about what they would say, or whether they even wanted to participate. Then, Moore would return at a later date, usually within days, with Richards and the film equipment. And whenever filming was taking place, civil rights workers kept a look out for approaching cars or trouble. Fortunately, no trouble occurred.

We'll Never Turn Back consists of two types of scenes. First were those scenes set up by Amzie with voter registration activists. Second were scenes Harvey shot while driving around rural Mississippi in his quest to keep moving, to keep a step ahead of being identified.

The first type of scene was shot in locations where voter registration activists normally met, in homes, churches and meeting halls. *We'll Never Turn Back* features many of the main participants in the early voter registration drive that broke open the heart of segregated Mississippi. The film opens with a few words by SNCC's chairman Charles McDew. Then, E.W. Steptoe, a NAACP leader in Mississippi, is shown greeting Bob Moses at the front steps of a rural home, far from the main roads. They are joined by a group of black civil rights workers and walk inside. E.W. Steptoe was one of the early activists who invited Bob Moses to come into Amite County in 1961 to register voters. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qdr2d0BmFXY> for a clip of E.W. Steptoe from *We'll Never Turn Back*.)

In 1963 when *We'll Never Turn Back* was filmed, virtually no one outside the southern movement focused on the lives of people such as E.W. Steptoe and Amzie Moore. In fact, they were not only unknown but also in considerable danger. Danger of being fired, evicted, of being beaten or even killed. Because of this, Richards made the decision not to identify many of them in his films. Some, however, identified themselves on camera, no longer fearing the consequences of their daring. Others did not.

Meetings of civil rights activists and voter registrants occurred as a basic part of the voter registration drive. In order to register to vote, people had to read and interpret the Mississippi State constitution. SNCC provided copies of this document and classes for interpreting it to potential voter registrants. College graduates failed this test when their skin happened to be the wrong color. Nevertheless, it was the hurdle the movement had to jump over if they were to register to vote. And the movement to get the vote arose in the hearts of the most uneducated, poverty stricken, oppressed sharecrop-



E.W. Steptoe, right, with Amzie Moore and Hollis Watkins, 1963

pers who were not only ready to face the wrath and violence of segregationists, but also their own limitations in the face of 18 pages of small print.

Filmed in closed-in rooms, with cloth or cardboard draped over the windows to prevent the bright lights from escaping into the view of the hostile outside, Mississippi sharecroppers told their stories simply into the eye of the camera. Steptoe started it off, telling his story of working for the right to vote. Fannie Lou Hamer appears next with her story of eviction after 18 years on the Marlowe plantation for the crime of registering to vote. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIZ2a2J5v3g> for a clip of Fannie Lou Hamer in 1963.) Then, Mrs. Magee spoke from her bed to tell of being thrown off land she owned after attempting to register, of having a road built through her land, her welfare being cut and suffering a nervous breakdown. An unidentified man (probably Mr. Magee) sitting in a chair in front of his “nine head of girls” tells his story of eviction and wandering after registering to vote.

Several people told about the shooting that occurred at the house of Hattie Sessions in 1962 wounding two SNCC workers (both women). Hattie Sessions spoke on camera but went unidentified. Charlie Cobb, a SNCC activist, gave a second account of the shooting and its aftermath. Then Curtis Dawson told his story of accompanying Preacher Knox and Bob Moses into Liberty, Mississippi to try to register. Moses was beaten during this incident, which was later written up in some detail in Taylor Branch’s *Parting the Waters*. And the film showed the widow of Herbert Lee and her nine children. Herbert Lee was murdered in 1961 after volunteering to drive Bob Moses around Amite County during his voter registration activities.

Appearing along with the sharecroppers were the young SNCC activists, boys and girls, young men and women from rural Mississippi who looked into the camera and spoke their own minds about the struggle to end segregation. No one used a script. The camera was set up in various locations where people were invited to sit, or stand, and speak. Neither Harvey nor Amzie told anyone what to say. They used their own words speaking in a simple straightforward manner whose genuineness and sincerity



Hattie Sessions Pointing at the bullet holes in her house, 1963

cannot be missed.

The SNCC workers who spoke were a remarkable group. Besides the leaders, like Julian Bond, Charles McDew and Bob Moses, young people such as Hollis Watkins, Charlie Cobb, Curtis Hayes, Samuel Block, Willie Peacock, James Jones and Charles McLaurin appeared on camera. They told stories of beatings, threats, shootings, and confrontations with segregationists that had appeared no where before and seldom since. They told stories of jail and resistance. But the man behind the whole event, Amzie Moore, did not appear in the film.



Julian Bond, 1963



Hollis Watkins, 1963



Herbert Lee's son, 1963

The second types of shots were the driving-around shots. These included candid shots of the homes of Mississippi sharecroppers, rural black schools, men chopping wood for fuel, women drawing water from hand pumps and 55 gallon barrels on the porch. Driving around rural Mississippi, Harvey found black children playing on wood porches or in the dirt with pieces of broken bicycles. He filmed them staring deeply into the camera of this strange white man who had stopped to ask politely for permission to take their pictures. Seldom did Harvey pass on without offering five dollars to a parent to buy something for the children.

And throughout the film, Richards played the freedom songs he recorded in church meetings he filmed. In many of the songs, SNCC activist Hollis Watkins sang the lead vocal. All of the singing carried with it an authenticity that is moving and unforgettable

Filming took two weeks. Harvey was away from his home in California for four weeks total. It took two months to produce the first version of his film which he entitled *Freedom Bound*. After some phoning and letter writing, he invited SNCC to make its own additions to the film. Charles McDew viewed this early version during a fund raising tour of the San Francisco Bay Area. He suggested some editorial changes that Richards added after filming an interview with McDew in California.

The result was *We'll Never Turn Back*, named after the title of the freedom song. The film included a pitch for funds for

SNCC and its head shots of Charles McDew speaking in front of a wood panel backdrop. The title change is best understood by quoting James Forman's letter from the LeFlore County Jail, written in April, 1963 shortly after the film was shot.

"We love "We'll never turn back."... Every night when the lights are out we sing this song. It is beautiful and it symbolizes our state-the entire song. "(p. 301, *Black Revolutionaries*).

And so the film ends with this song sung by the Mississippi freedom song singers, Hollis Watkins doing the lead vocal.

Post Production and Distribution

During the months of March, April and May, while Richards worked in his home editing studio to produce the finished film, he also distributed sound recordings he had made of Bob Moses, Amzie Moore, Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes. He duplicated the tapes and sent them out to radio stations, schools and political groups. He also sent the tapes to James Lawson in Memphis and to Moore in Cleveland, Mississippi. Amzie wrote back on April 1, 1963 thanking Harvey for the letters and tapes. "I really love them all they are wonderful," he wrote. He went on to say that both Moses and Foreman were in jail in Greenwood at the time. "We don't know what will happen to them.... Things are red hot around Greenwood. As you know the office in Greenwood was burned down two weeks ago. Its hard to find a place to go, everybody is filled with fear."

Once the film was finished, Harvey found himself isolated, a publicist of a movement with only the weakest links to the movement itself. On June 2, 1963 Harvey wrote Bob Moses:

"The film that I shot in Mississippi in February is finally finished. A print was ready in time to project it at the various meetings where Block and McLauren spoke on their fund raising tour of the Bay Area. I gave them a print for use in Miss. and they were going to use it while speaking in Los Angeles. I have mailed another print to your Atlanta office but so far have received no comment. It has been suggested that circulation of the film be restricted for a time to allow SNCC exclusive use for fund raising purposes."



Children on the porch, Mississippi, 1963

Richards' greatest fear was that his efforts would be wasted due to lack of distribution. He was anxious to get the materials out in a timely manner. That same month, Richards phoned James Forman in Atlanta only to learn that the print had been sent to New York City for reviewing there. Someone would write to Richards about it soon, he was told. Richards wrote Amzie Moore on June 25, 1963 that he had sent a print to Atlanta and had given a print to Sam Block while he had been in the Bay Area on a fund raising tour. He asked if Amzie had seen the film and told him that he was planning a second filming trip to the South.

“Personally I consider that my trip to Mississippi was worth while. In the first place, Amzie, a number of people in radio and TV were surprised that I could get in and out with the footage and I am certain that the tapes and the picture provoked a number of people into greater activity in support of the freedom movement in the South. Much is written and spoken these days about Freedom in the South. But very few people out here understand that the fight for freedom is a fight to escape from hunger and tyranny. And this is why I would like to return to the South.”

Weeks went by. No word came. Meanwhile Richards began negotiations to have Brandon Films in New York distribute *We'll Never Turn Back*. The BBC in London bought a print. Berkeley Friends of SNCC bought three more copies. But nothing was heard from the South. In July, Mike Miller, from Bay Area Friends of SNCC, wrote Harvey a postcard from Atlanta saying that the SNCC office still had not seen the film and would Harvey “rush” a copy to Atlanta. Harvey wrote Miller on July 5 telling him that two prints had gone south so far with no word about their having arrived or being viewed. He went on to say he'd sent a copy to Brandon films to see if Brandon could help with “wider distribution”. He was writing again to Miller in Atlanta to make certain “that SNCC was not interested in any negotiations that I might have with Brandon... I think the film has a potential and I do not want it to collect dust simply because other people are too busy to write a letter.”

Within days, Sandra Hayden wrote back on



Voter Registration Activists, many of whom appear in *We'll Never Turn Back*.
Mississippi, 1963

SNCC stationery apologizing about the confusion.

“What seems to have happened [wrote Hayden] is that the film came into the office when no one was around but Jim Forman, he sent the film to New York to be screened and shown to some of the NY reviewers, the person taking the film to NY was arrested in Danville, Virginia, and the film is now in the trunk of his car in Danville.”

She said that having Brandon distribute the film might raise some problems since SNCC wanted to be in touch with those who viewed it for fund raising purposes. But she felt that Brandon might make arrangements to keep SNCC informed about distribution.

Richards became worried about getting the film out at this point, having received no word in response to his film from the south and having been informed that one print was lost and the other sitting unseen in Mississippi. He wrote Hayden saying he felt no obligation to the Atlanta office to turn down Brandon’s offer to distribute *We’ll Never Turn Back*. In order to “get prints into circulation” he felt “the best arrangement possible at the moment” was to send the negative to Brandon.

On July 29, 1963 Hayden sent Richards a check for \$100.00 to buy two prints (\$50.00 each represented lab costs at the time). This was the first concrete expression of interest he had received. On August 3, Richards sent the two purchased copies, and donated two more. The four prints arrived August 10 and were immediately put into use. One copy went to the National Student Association annual congress and another to a series of student religious conferences in the south. In correspondence that month, Richards and Hayden agreed that no matter how the Brandon deal worked out, SNCC could buy as many copies of the film as they wanted for lab costs at \$50.00 a print. Eventually, with cooperation from Brandon, SNCC bought 20 copies that were circulated in the south and in northern cities through the Friends of SNCC organizations.

The film was shown at the 1963 national convention of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Mike Miller wrote again telling about film showings by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) at its citizenship training classes, and at meetings in Ruleville, Clarksdale, Greenwood “and is now moving [through] the Delta circuit. It’s great for boosting morale.”

Dream Deferred

During the remainder of 1963, Richards wrote to Atlanta to Sandra Hayden, Mike Miller, and Danny Lyon, a photographer on SNCC’s staff, about the possibility of another film. Although Richards and Amzie Moore



Mississippi 1964

had collaborated with no problems on the first film, Richards wanted to explore the possibilities of making a second film with broader appeal to the SNCC organization outside Mississippi. Several letters went back and forth between Richards and the Atlanta office on the subject of script outlines and personnel, but all to no avail.

The problems of direct collaboration with SNCC personnel in making a film were insurmountable. Danny Lyon, a still photographer on the SNCC staff, wrote enthusiastically and naively about making the film on the movement with Richards. Lyon wrote Richards that “SNCC has grown enormously in many directions and only a new kind of film could really be of use.” It must be a film “to sway people or truly bring them something new”, even though *We’ll Never Turn Back* “has been of great use to SNCC.” In order to accomplish this, Lyon proposed driving to California to “spend a few weeks working with some of your equipment.”

Richards wrote to Lyon his view of a second film, trying to bring some realism into Lyon’s thinking.

As for the end product.... I think of a film only in terms of it being a useful tool for SNCC. Certainly it would be a fine thing if a second film could be accepted for a national TV showing. But if it was accepted, I would wonder if I had pulled its teeth in the editing. I’ll be satisfied if it will impress small audiences who have gathered together around civil rights problems. I’m afraid that a forceful film on SNCC activity will be ignored by Northern Negro organizations...but that is all the more reason why such a film must be made.

“In plain language” Richards outlined the specific conditions under which he was prepared to work on another film in the south.

“One of the main reasons why I can make short documentaries [he wrote] is that almost all of the work is done by myself. In the past I have done ninety percent of the editing... “Outside” expenses are almost limited to a sound transfer, an interlock and then the lab work ... once the original is matched.

“I am not prepared to spend more money on a second film on the South than I spent on the first one.... The camera and sound equipment would remain under my control and direction. The exposed film would likewise remain under my control and in my possession and the editing work would be done here at my home. At the moment, I don’t know of any other practical arrangement.”

In October, in the midst of his unsatisfactory exchanges with the Atlanta office, Harvey received a letter from Amzie Moore answering his letter of June, four months earlier. “I didn’t want to write you because Jim Forman told me that SNCC was going to make a picture,” Amzie wrote. “As of this date October 20, 1963 Jim has done nothing toward making a picture. Now if you can find the time and think that it can be better than the other picture then I would suggest that you come back to this area in late November.” Moore’s invitation was accepted, Richards wrote Moore:

At this point I have many more fully developed ideas about filming in the South than that evening in the Church basement when we first discussed an outline for the film “*We’ll Never Turn Back*.” And, doubtless, so do you. Perhaps the most serious mistake on my part was the concept that a picture could be made to please everybody.

Nothing further was heard from Moore until Richards knocked on his door again in Cleveland Mississippi in February 1964.

Before Richards left for his second trip to Mississippi, however, all talk of collaboration with the Atlanta office dried up. In January, Lyon wrote Richards that events had forced him to change his plans to help out on a film project with Richards. Forman had appointed Lyon to head up “what is in essence the creation of a department of propaganda... [to] produce pamphlets, posters, tapes, eventually films directed at the North and South.” He added that “Personally I am very sorry for having committed myself to something I was not really capable of doing.” The letter ended with a solicitation for a 16-millimeter camera so that SNCC could make its own movies.

Dream Deferred was another tour of Amzie Moore’s world. Geographically, it ranged wider than the first, traveling to Alabama. It also filmed more daylight than the first, including filming SNCC offices in Selma, Alabama with an integrated staff of young people busy at typewriters and mimeograph machines. But it told the same story and was based on the same one man, “lone bird” approach to filming that marked all of Richards photography.

The second film was more analytical than the first. And it included shots of Amzie Moore (without identifying him by name) with his gray, close cropped hair, describing the plight of the hungry, poverty stricken black sharecroppers, displaced by the mechanical cotton picker, chemical fertilizers and buried under a mountain of debt. Black sharecroppers were shown in crowds waiting with empty boxes to collect SNCC sponsored food donations, and in head shots speaking about the difficulties of making a living in farming. A narrator explains how racist violence, the KKK, the segregated police state and the chain gang maintain the exploitative, oppressive conditions. Sharecroppers appear telling more stories of violence against them in their attempts to vote. And reflecting the thinking of his whole generation, Moore expresses his hopes for early industrialization to finally wipe out the plantation economy and solve the problem.

The film then turns to the SNCC voter registration drive activities at Rust College, an all black institution in northern Mississippi. Amzie had taken Richards to the campus, a single three story brick building, to meet with SNCC activists. Moore gathered up students from several classes to meet with Richards. Sitting together in a room, the eight or ten students were at first perplexed, wondering who this filmmaker was who had interrupted their studies. During the discussion, one of the students asked Richards what film he had made about the voter registration drive. When they learned it was *We’ll Never Turn Back*, smiles broke out all around. They had all seen the film and happily agreed to participate in the making of *Dream Deferred*. Their faces and voices fill the middle portions of the film, telling about their activities in the voter registration work



Amzie Moore, as he appeared in *Dream Deferred*, 1964

that was going on.

From Rust College, the film switches to the SNCC voter registration office in Selma, Alabama where an integrated group of young people tells about breaking segregation's laws and practices. In September and October of 1963, they reported, the Selma, Alabama SNCC staff had helped organize high school students to march on the court house, to sit-in at segregated lunch counters and to help register black voters. The demonstrations resulted in mass arrests. Many of the arrested students told their stories to the camera in early 1964.

Fannie Lou Hamer participated in the second film while speaking to a church gathering as a candidate in the freedom votes that occurred in 1964 in which SNCC staged mock elections to demonstrate that disenfranchised blacks were ready and able to vote. Freedom candidates, such as Mrs. Hamer, polled as many votes as the official candidates in most areas in which they ran. The film introduces the Congress of Federated Organizations (COFO) that allied SNCC, CORE, NAACP and SCLC together to run the voter registration efforts in Mississippi.

Dream Deferred gave Richards and Moore a second chance to collaborate in an audiovisual project to present the world of Amzie Moore to the public. The film presented the understanding of two militants of the significance of the voter registration project for undermining the powerful segregationist congressional delegations that held progressive legislation in check in Washington and held the Black people of Mississippi in poverty.

Conclusion

Having grown up looking at bulletin boards full of photographs taken during my father's film trips, having viewed my father's films again and again over the last forty years, I am only now coming to understand what I have been seeing. Looking at the faces and hearing the voices of the southern sharecroppers and their environment so full of broken down shacks, dirt roads, deprivation and sorrow, I wondered over the years who these people were. I wondered how my father had found them. Why had he picked these particular folks?

Now, in the light of the writings of Taylor Branch, Clayborne Carson, James Forman, and others, and having interviewed Harvey, I begin to appreciate who these people were. They were associates of Amzie Moore, a man in the forefront



Paul and Harvey Richards
Menlo Park, CA, 2000,
One year before Harvey passed away.

of the struggle, a man who lived in danger and shared the risks with others of a like mind. I have discovered that the people in my father's films were among the bravest pioneers of the movement to break segregation. And I have discovered that his films do something that few other films have ever done: give voice to the bottom rung of our society.

By sneaking into the south, sharing the danger and allowing Amzie Moore to call the shots, Harvey had captured on film the self-expression of a movement that was cresting on a wave of historical change destined to transform an entire culture. There was no script. The people sat down in front of the camera and told what they thought about the racist society they lived in. He provided the excluded, the oppressed, the persecuted with an instrument to voice their own concerns. This, to me, is the essence of what his films convey. It may not be film making at its height. It is not the full story of history. It is just the part that is always left out, the part that seldom leaves any records of itself, which historians are constantly guessing about. For once, it is possible to look directly into their faces and know what they did and thought. And for this, we owe a debt of thanks to Harvey and Amzie for making these films.

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