THE SOME PEOPLE OF THAT PLACE

are the people who tried to do something more
than just live as their mothers and fathers had before them….

the people who tried to change their lives
--and not just for each individually for self and family,
but for all their people.

The Some People of That Place are the extraordinary, ordinary people who created and sustained the 1960s Holmes County, Mississippi civil rights Movement.

I first used **The Some People** phrase in late 1966 at a Campaign Kickoff meeting to launch our 1967 local elections work. For the first time in 100 years, the black people of Holmes—a county with a population that was 72 percent black—were registered to vote. With work, African American registration could comfortably outnumber even the 101 percent white registration. Unifying the black community could make real the possibility of nominating and electing black local officials—a sheriff, constables, justices of the peace, a circuit clerk, supervisors, a state representative.

The local Movement leaders asked me—a white outside organizer in Holmes since 1964—to write a short piece… to set a mood, call up a feeling in the people, help them continue their work and become more united in their strength. The Kickoff meeting brought together many who had never worked in the organized Movement (the Holmes County Freedom Democratic Party [FDP]), what those afraid to join called "that Mess down at Mileston," among other names.

The Movement's base was the independent farmers and, then, day laborers and town dwellers. In late 1962, several black farmers—Ozell Mitchell, Alma Mitchell Carnegie, Ralthus Hayes (all in exhibit), Ben Square, and possibly others, all from Mileston in the rich delta part of Holmes—drove the 30 miles to Greenwood to a mass meeting for Freedom. Once there, they met and invited Bob Moses, Lawrence Guyot (in exhibit), and other young, black organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, "Snick") to bring a freedom meeting to their home community. They took the dangerous step of housing (and hiding) the organizers in their own farmhouses.

The Holmes local people struggled through threats and fear and actual harm to gain the right to meet and to go to the courthouse to attempt to register to vote. After many hundreds of courthouse attempts, a federal voting rights act was finally passed in 1965; federal registrars entered Holmes and registered several thousands of new black voters. The Movement then struggled to get enough registered to think about running candidates and even winning. Even though they'd survived and been successful over the four years, they were getting discouraged and tired.

The black professionals in Holmes—the teachers, preachers, and some businessmen—had just started coming to the FDP meetings in late 1966. The FDP

encouraged them to join; its leaders gave formal invitations to leading professionals to come to the Kickoff meeting. But the professionals were impatient with the slow, unparliamentary, confusing meetings of the grassroots people.

The leaders felt the old Movement people needed a boost, to remember their struggles and gains, and the new people needed something to give them respect for the Movement-educated activists and introduce them to a history they didn't know. All needed reminding that they needed to work together.

For this fairly delicate situation I wrote their history as a parable and titled it **The Some People of That Place.** I used no specific names or places, though what and whom I was writing about was obvious. And then I read it aloud…to the makers of that history. In other words, I read **The Some People** story aloud to the **Some People** themselves.

At the end of my reading at the Kickoff meeting, an excited Hartman Turnbow leapt to his feet, shouting, "That there is no story. No, sir, that's no story at all….That's history!" There followed foot-stomping, cheers, and applause. I felt a flood of relief along with a great excitement.

And the whole year of 1967 was exciting—historic for Holmes: 12 black candidates ran for the 22 offices up for election. Two teachers came forward to run for the highest offices—State Representative and Sheriff. Two of the 12 were winners, the first blacks in the county to hold public office—Griffin McLaurin, Constable, and Robert G. Clark, the State Representative…The 10 other local people who ran were victorious just in their having run, in doing what no one else had done in any of their lifetimes, in being a critical element in bringing change.

They did something more than just live as their mothers and fathers had before them….They changed their lives—and not just for each individually for self and family—but they worked to change things for all their people.

--excerpts from the text of the large-format, graphic work-in-progress, "**The Some People of That Place:** Getting Organized in Holmes County, Mississippi, 1963-1967, An Oral and Documentary Account of the Local Black People and Their Civil Rights Movement"

--Sue [Lorenzi] Sojourner, March 1999, The Tweed Museum of Art

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Sue [Lorenzi] Sojourner

Sue [Lorenzi] Sojourner was Southern-born (in Nashville, TN), but raised in Chicago, New England, and the West. After her graduation from the University of California-Berkeley, in political science and journalism, she and her late husband Henry Lorenzi lived and worked for five years as civil rights workers in Holmes County, Mississippi (1964-69).

The local whites labeled them “white outside agitators” for their work assisting the local Movement efforts to build a grassroots organization for voter registration, political education and candidacy, and community development. In addition to her organizing, [Lorenzi] Sojourner felt it important to document that historic time with her pen, camera, and tape recorder, and saved many documents and working papers in her Lorenzi-Holmes County Collection.

In 1999, she created “The Some People” exhibition for the Tweed Museum on Art at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. She then wrote and added text and more prints and documents and developed it into a touring exhibit, so it could be taken to the people in Holmes County. In 2001, the Holmes County Freedom Democratic Party exhibited it in Holmes for nine months. Since then, it has been shown at colleges, universities, community centers, and historical and philanthropic institutions in the South, Midwest, and East, including Haverford College.

Identifying as a writer since childhood and experiencing the extraordinary Movement people, [Lorenzi] Sojourner believed that someday she and Henry were going to (had to) write a book about the Holmes Movement. Indeed, the exhibit photos were originally shot to illustrate that someday book. But, when Henry died in 1982, they had not yet opened their materials. In 1996, she finally cleared her life for writing, moved into a housing cooperative for artists in Duluth, Minnesota, and has been working on the book, when not “distracted” by photography.

Excerpts from “GOT TO THINKING…How the Black People of 1960s Holmes County, Mississippi Organized”
by Sue [Lorenzi] Sojourner

THE SYSTEM OF RACIAL SEGREGATION

In 1963, in Holmes County, an oppressive, white-over-black system sustained the separation of races that slavery had created in Mississippi and the Deep South. A cruel, rigid segregation permeated all life and activities. In the 1960s, the nineteen thousand Holmes blacks were still the underclass for the eight thousand Holmes whites. The rule of Southern whites, so often outnumbered by the blacks, depended on denying democratic voting rights to blacks.

The following is excerpted from a story written for the Holmes County Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) elections organizing and was read aloud at the FDP Campaign Kickoff meeting in January 1967:

…Then, at that time…meeting for anything other than the usual church meeting...just wasn't...done.

The certain few who ran affairs knew...the only way they themselves stayed up was by standing on the backs of those below and that it was necessary to keep those below quiet and still and unmoving-otherwise they themselves would topple...

So the rulers above had always tried to force the ones below to be quiet, unmoving, bent down, and denied. They made it dangerous for any of those below to try to move or stand up. They used force and fear and violence so that all knew that it was dangerous to even think about trying to get up.

In addition...the rulers tried to make those below believe they didn't really want to get up, they shouldn't want to get up, it was wrong for them to get up, it was God's plan for them to be down. And, they made some of the people believe they weren't fit to stand, they weren't good enough to be up, it was only natural and right for them to be down, bent, and stood upon

...They gave rewards and let some of those below have it just good enough to think they were as good as the ones above and certainly better than those below. This served to split up those below…

The rulers made it so that the best way to get along was to deceive the ones below on behalf of those above. As time went on, most of those below learned to distrust each other. They believed they could do nothing together and certainly couldn't depend upon their brothers and sisters.

So…it was dangerous, really hard, in that time to have a meeting, to try to get people to get together to talk about change or Freedom or organizing…

Sue Lorenzi, 1966

Civil rights working in early '60s Holmes County was driving - driving dirt roads, mud roads, no roads, or occasionally gravel. Pavement roads were only found in the white folks' parts of town, which you stayed out of whenever possible.

Driving meant flat tires every day, wishing for a two-way radio in your car, getting stopped by Andrew P. Smith (the Sheriff) or his deputies or Moody (the State Highway Patrol), who were always out to get you.

HOW THE HOLMES MOVEMENT STARTED

Holmes County civil rights activities started in Mileston in early 1963. No other Mississippi county had as many independent black farmers as Holmes did - 800 black farmers owned 50 percent of the county's land. None had as many owning rich Delta land as the 110 black Mileston farmers did. The Movement's first catalysts arose from these Mileston landowners.

In the '40s and '50s, some Mileston farmers had gone to the semi-secret NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) meetings in other parts of the state - women like Alma Mitchell Carnegie and men like Ralthus Hayes, a sharecropper who became a very successful farmer.

In 1960, Southern black students started sit-ins and freedom rides - direct action demands for service at white-only lunch counters and bus facilities - that spread throughout the South and inspired blacks all over the nation. They formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, "Snick") in that year to sustain the momentum and to publicly and dangerously confront white supremacy.

In 1962, SNCC organized Freedom Meetings in Greenwood in the county next to Holmes. Driving the 30 miles to see what was going on in Greenwood was a bold act for Mrs. Carnegie's younger brother Ozell Mitchell. He and other Mileston farmers had to journey on remote roads where being seen and identified with organizing could bring physical and economic harm.

The danger increased when they invited the SNCC organizers to set up a meeting at Mileston. In March 1963, Mitchell and others got the Sanctified Church in Mileston to allow meetings in their building - a great risk in the face of increasing church burnings throughout the South.

They housed John Ball and four or five other SNCC organizers. Mrs. Carnegie opened her home to the outside workers, just as she had, in the late '30a, to the Southern Tenant Farmers Union organizers working in Black Belt counties. For most of the other Mileston families, housing outside organizers was a new and brave act.

HARTMAN TURNBOW SPEAKS

A Mileston farmer and fiery orator, Hartman Turnbow inspired people during the Movement's first stage. He gave rousing talks in Mileston and at the early Countywide meetings Encouraging those already active, he also moved to action many who were deeply afraid of white segregationists' violence.

In a 1967 interview, Turnbow described how he saw change happen in Holmes and Mississippi:

That lynching I was telling you about - that one with the burning with the 'cetylene torch- that'n was a turning point. It just...made a Negro mad, got to thinking he'd rather die any way but to be all burnt up with a torch while he's still living…

The Negro ain't gonna stand for all that beating and lynching and bombing and stuff ...They found out' when they tried to stop us from redishing that every time they bombed or shot or beat or cut credit...it...just made him angry and more determined to keep on...and get redished .

The reason that Negroes have stood up...is... they's not scared. The lynchings and killings frightened the Negroes and kept them scared for a long time. But the lynchings were different from now. A lynching was just one Negro dead. Each one that got lynched was just one Negro gone.

But this now, this is something that we is in together. We was all together trying to do something. So every time they come shooting or bombing it just made us all mad and more determined to go on.

July 1967

TRYING TO “REDISH” (REGISTER)

At their meetings, the Mileston farmers learned about registering (pronounced “redishing”) and voting. At that time, blacks in Mississippi and throughout much of the South could not exercise these basic constitutional rights. After several meetings, they decided to take their first public step to claim those rights.

One April morning after several weeks of meetings, 14 men and women gathered at Ozell and Annie Bell Mitchell’s farm on the highway between Mileston and Tchula to drive the 20 miles to the county Courthouse in Lexington. Courageously, they would each ask for an application to register.

They knew registration was critical to gaining their rights and that, for whites, the registration application was more a formality than a “test” to pass, as it was for blacks. But interpreting a section of the state constitution was part of the form and definitely a test graded by the circuit clerk. They knew that, even after filling out the 21-question form, it would take 30 days for Clerk McClellan to let them know if they passed. As it happened, none got registered that day (or that month or even that year). The circuit clerk rarely “passed” African-Americans.

But those first 14 knew they had to take the steps to the Courthouse, whether or not they “passed.” The organizers had prepared them well and notified the Justice Department of their plans.

They arrived in Lexington that morning, parked away from the Courthouse, and walked quietly by twos and threes-but not an organized march, so as not to be inflammatory to the whites. The Justice Department or someone had notified the sheriff, for he and nearly 30 “auxiliaries” confronted the 14 at the Courthouse door, demanding to know what they were doing. Hartman Turnbow, with no prior plan, stepped up and said, “We’s come to redish.”

Because Turnbow spoke up first, he was the first to be let into the Courthouse - into the circuit clerk’s office. The others waited their turn under the big tree on the Courthouse lawn near the Confederate monument.

Turnbow didn't get the forms to fill out before the office closed for noontime dinner. When it reopened that day, and for the next two days, they were called in one at a time to speak with and be tested, and berated, by the circuit clerk. Taking such steps - and living through them without getting killed - was a heady victory.

Soon after the first Courthouse attempt, nightriders drove onto Turnbow’s farm and

firebombed his home where he, his wife, and teenaged daughter were sleeping. In unprecedented actions, Turnbow leapt up, grabbed his rifle, shot back. The whites scattered. The Turnbows were uninjured, but the Sheriff arrested him for arson of his own home. SNCC got Movement lawyers in Jackson to help them get him out of jail.

THE WHITE NEWSPAPER COVERS: “THE FIRST 14”

The White Citizens’ Council’s weekly newspaper, the HOLMES COUNTY HERALD, gave the first day’s events front-page coverage in its Thursday, April 11, 1963 edition. With big headlines and photos, the paper ran interviews of most of the First 14 blacks who attempted to register to vote.

Such coverage was not positive publicity or “good press.” It was dangerous business for these beginners in Movement action. Everyone’s name was printed in the news story. From then on, every week, a circuit clerk’s list was printed of all who tried to register, thus announcing to the local whites just who the new troublemakers were - who should be targeted for reprisals.

Despite the danger, fear, and harassment, the Mileston “first movers” felt victory in taking those steps together. They had planned and carried out an action - meeting in Mileston and driving to Lexington together to try to register. The replication of such actions throughout Holmes and the South, piece by piece, brought state-sanctioned segregation to an end.

MEETINGS AND SONG ARE ESSENTIAL

In 1963-64, establishing the right to meet was the crucial first step in getting organized. Meetings are the glue that holds a community together, and throughout the South white segregationists did their utmost to sabotage meetings among blacks organizing. For more than a year after the September 1964 opening of the Holmes County Community Center at Mileston, the highway patrol and sheriff staked out it and whatever other places the Movement was using for “opening up” new communities.

The police harassed with tickets and fear but were only initially and partly successful. By the end of the second year of organizing, 20 communities were meeting weekly and there Weren’t enough patrolmen to cover the widespread Movement activity.

Song and music protected, cradled, and inspired all those in the Struggle. Every meeting began and ended with song, and often the music was able to bring the participants and the community through difficult times.

Note: Sue Sojourner recommends the two-cd set Freedom Is a Constant Struggle, *songs of the Mississippi Movement from the Cultural Center for Social Change.*

EARLY MILESTON

The community meeting at Mileston in March 1963 was the first Movement meeting in Holmes. It became a regular Wednesday night meeting and was one of the first activities to move into the Community Center in fa111964. Caladonia Davis, Alma Mitchell Carnegie and Mileston women gathered there in early 1965. Possibly, they were waiting for the regular meeting to commence. Or, perhaps they were having their own meeting. They were the older women of the community. All of them are farmers. At that time, they wee in their fifties and sixties, with Mrs. Davis in her seventies.

THE OLDER WOMEN OF MILESTON

The California carpenter who built the Community Center at Mileston for the Holmes County Movement had been a political radical in the 1930s, was aware of how critical meeting places are to community organizing. The first Mileston young adults who worked with the Community Center director and managers included Rosie Head and Elease Gallion. Rosie and Elease were in their twenties when the Movement and outside workers sparked their hearts and minds. Rosie was living with her children and parents and Elease was living on her father's farm when the Greenwood meetings started. Elease attended those, worked with the COFO (Council of Federated Organizations) volunteers in 1964, and then trained to run the Center.

Both of them shared the load with three other local staff. All five handled day-to-day Center programs for the children – a kindergarten, library, and social events – as well as coordinating health, clothing, welfare program, and responding to harassment, legal, emergency issues, and voter registration education for adults.

THE BLACK CANDIDATES IN THE 1967 ELECTIONS

In the 1967 county elections, black candidates ran for the first time since Reconstruction 100 years before. Twenty-two county offices were open - from Constable to Sheriff to Mississippi State Representative. Twelve black candidates sought to win 12 of those offices. Ten of the 12 had been Movement leaders since before 1966. The other two were Robert Clark and Robert Smith, both schoolteachers who became active in the Movement in 1966.

Eight of the 10 candidates were farmers – T.C. Johnson, Ed McGaw, Jr., Ward Montgomery, John Malone, Willie James Burns, John Daniel Wesley, Griffin McLaurin, and Ralthus Hayes. The sought positions like Supervisor, Justice of the Peace (JP), and Constable in the county's five districts, or "beats."

Unlike many Delta counties, Holmes had only one female candidate. She was Mary Lee Hightower, a town dweller, running for County Circuit Clerk, scraping a living with her laboring husband and young children. JP candidate Vernon Tom Griffin had no land, but ran his brother's rural store.

Of the 12 candidates, two were elected – Griffin McLaurin, Young Constable, and Robert G. Clark, the first and only black in 1967 to sit in the Mississippi House of

Representatives.

ROBERT CLARK WINS BIG

Robert Clark was a popular schoolteacher and coach before he ran for and won the position of State Representative in 1967. Coming from a large, well-respected, schoolteaching, landowning family in the hills, he was one of the first professionals to be stirred with political aspirations. He made overtures to the county Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) – declaring interest, regularly going to FDP meetings, then listening with respect to what the grass roots could teach him.

His intense energy and drive, personable character, sharp mind, and vast personal/family/FDP connections launched him into the highest elected position for a black in the state in 1967. He retired from nine four-year terms in 2003 as Speaker Pro Tempore, second in power only to the Speaker of the House. His younger son Bryant Wandrick Clark was elected to his seat with campaign help from Robert, Jr. Both of Clark's sons are lawyers.

EDGAR LOVE

Edgar Love, who had lived and worked as a sharecropper on a Delta plantation with his family for most of his 21 years, agreed in late 1965 to be part of the voter registration campaign that the Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) was broadcasting over the local radio station.

The Voting Rights Act had just become law, and Edgar read the FDP script aimed at plantation folks, preachers, schoolteachers, and others who still hadn't tried to register. "Hello," he read. "I'm Edgar Love, and I live on a plantation...and I'm going to register to vote..." When he got home after the broadcast, he found his white landlord had kicked him off the plantation.

In some ways, it was a relief to be told to leave, as it was impossible to get out from under each year's constant, overwhelming debt to the owner. Only death, running away, or being kicked off brought debt relief.

Edgar immediately started as a full-time FDP organizer, initially focusing on plantation workers and then becoming a key countywide staff person.

In the summer of 1967, the campaign for electing the black FDP candidates (who were running as Independents) involved Edgar for a good portion of his time, as did the long-running boycott to force the firing of a bad Lexington cop.

On a hot July day in 1967, Edgar spoke to a crowd gathered in front of a truck. Then, concerned about boycott progress, he and Mrs. Davis, a local Lexington leader, led a march around the Courthouse to City Hall where they confronted Sheriff Andrew P. Smith, Deputy Billie Joe Gilmore, and a white town policeman. It was just one of many attempts to remove the brutal policeman from the force.

BERNICE PATTON MONTGOMERY

By 1967, the Movement had created a significant number of antipoverty programs and had obtained federal funds to support them. Bernice Patton Montgomery of the hill community of Poplar Springs (Sunnymount) was a prime Movement leader who took on Holmes's first large federally funded development, the Milton Olive Program for Children.

Mother of nine, on land she and her farmer husband owned, she was the only Holmes County schoolteacher involved in the Movement in the early ’60s sixties. She went to the Courthouse to try register in late 1963 and persistently continued trying until she “passed the test” in late 1964.

The other teachers all watched her at contract time to see what the county was going to do to such a rebel. In late 1964 she was the first teacher to “pass the test.” Fortunately and exceptionally, Mrs. Montgomery did not get fired. None of her colleagues took the same risks with their livelihoods.

She directed the large child and health service program from 1966 until she left Holmes in the mid-1970s to develop elderly care service in Jackson. Although suffering ill health, she continued working in Jackson into her late seventies, until she suffered a stroke in the spring of 2000.

MOVEMENT CHILDREN

THE CHILDREN

Young people played a significant role in the Holmes Movement. During the Freedom Summer of 1964 (when the three Civil Rights workers were murdered in Neshoba County), more than 500 outside white and black college students came from all over the country to work in Mississippi. The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was the umbrella group created by SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), and the SCLC (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) to run the Summer Project. Thirty-five COFO students came into Holmes, with a high priority to work with young people.

They created Freedom Schools for hundreds of Holmes youngsters. Learning history, politics, singing, and poetry, the children also sometimes canvassed with the volunteers, knocking on rural doors before most Holmes towns were “safe” for the Movement, or “opened up.” They spread information about meetings and urged adults to go to the Courthouse to try to register to vote.

In 1965, nearly 200 Holmes black children in the first through fourth grades took the clearly dangerous path to enroll in and integrate the white-only schools. And in the following years, more enrolled as the higher grades were gradually added.

PECAN GROVE

In the winter of 1964-65, the last few COFO organizers dared to open the office in Lexington, in "the Grove," in a three-room shotgun shack. To operate in town, near whites, was much more risky than in the security of black rural areas where the Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) had taken hold and spread. The Lexington FDP office became the hub of the county Movement, the resource for political, legal, and economic development in the geographical center of the county.