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Have A Seat To Be Heard: The Sit-in Movement Of The 1960s

Emily Alkire

"If you're white, you're all right; if you're black, stay back," this derogatory saying in an example of what the platform in which segregation thrived upon.¹ In the 1960s, all across America there was a movement in which civil rights demonstrations were spurred on by unrest that stemmed from the kind of injustice represented by that saying. Occurrences in the 1960s such as the Civil Rights Movement displayed a particular kind of unrest that was centered around the matter of equality, especially in regards to African Americans. More specifically, the Sit-in Movement was a division of the Civil Rights Movement. This movement, known as the Sit-in Movement, was highly influenced by the characteristics of the Civil Rights Movement. Think of the Civil Rights Movement as a tree, the Sit-in Movement was not a separate entity away from the Civil Rights Movement. Rather, the Sit-in Movement was a branch of the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, the Sit-in Movement exhibited the characteristic of nonviolence that was first displayed in the Civil Rights Movement. Then, the Sit-in Movement contributed to the Civil Rights Movement's incentive, fueled by the actions of the intentional initiation of nonviolent protests. The Sit-in Movement had such a lasting impression in history that it generated a new way of thinking in regards to the topic of the Sit-in Movement when it was considered a current event as well as promoting new ways of thinking surrounding the movement over a half a century later.

The beginning of the Sit-in Movement rested on the shoulders of Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, and David Richmond, four African American North Carolina Agricultural and

¹ James T. Wooten, "Sit-In City Marks Decade of Change," *The New York Times*, February 2, 1970.

Technical College students.¹ On February 1, 1960, these four residents of Greensboro, North Carolina made their way to the F.W. Woolworth department store that was situated in the downtown area. Inside of the department store there was a lunch counter in which the seating was exclusively reserved for the white patrons of the Woolworth department store.² The idea for these four students was to sit down at the counter, order something, and see what happened. Of course, the expected outcome of this endeavor was not a positive one. This was the sentiment that was held those who later became known as the Greensboro Four, because they anticipated backlash of one form or another. One of these possible courses of action in reaction to their retaliation was the very real likelihood of being “thrown in jail.”³

One of the prominent influences that played a part for the Greensboro Four when they had spontaneously made the decision to conduct what Joseph McNeil had reportedly called “something like a boycott” was the event of the refusal of service received at a Greyhound station that McNeil had experienced while he had been making his way back to North Carolina from spending Christmas break in the north with family.⁴ Unsurprisingly, when the four college students sat down and tried to order something at the Woolworth lunch counter they were refused service due to the implemented “rule” of not serving African Americans at the counter, to receive something from the lunch counter, they would have to order it to go.⁵ After the apparent unwillingness to serve the four African American gentlemen, they followed the back-up plan that they had devised in preparation of being denied service that consisted of simply continuing to sit where they were until the Woolworth department store had

1 Charles E. Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*. 2014. 155

2 Carl Singleton and Rowena Wildin, *The Sixties in America*, Vol. III. III vols. 1999. 656.

3 Cobb, 155

4 David J. Garrow. *We Shall Overcome: The Civil Rights Movement In The United States In The 1950's And 1960's*. 1989. 24.; Franklin McCain, “Greensboro Lunch Counter Sit-ins,” *Witness*. BBC, World Service.

5 McCain, *Witness*

closed.¹ However, McNeil, Blair, McCain, and Richmond did not give up on their venture when the downtown Greensboro Woolworth department store’s business hours ended on February 1, 1960.

On February 2, 1960, the very next day, McNeil, Blair, McCain, and Richmond went back to the Woolworth’s lunch counter where they were still refused service. There was, however, something different on the second day of a sit-in that would make its way into the history books. The Greensboro Four were not alone this time. There had been “twenty-seven students – twenty-three from A&T and four from Bennett College, the historically black women’s college.”² The growth of this sit-in did not stop there because on the next day, every single stool at the lunch counter was occupied by a protester. There were enough students that made their way to the Woolworth lunch counter to fill every seat at the counter in as an attempt to be heard about the injustice that previous generations had been taught to comply with.³ The nonviolent protesting efforts of these students were met with concurrence and admiration by fewer than they had probably hoped for. February 6 was a testament to that sentiment; that day has become known as Black Saturday. The number of students sitting-in the Woolworth lunch counter had ballooned from sixty-three students to hundreds of students. The expeditious growth in number of students protesting at the lunch counter in downtown Greensboro triggered a large backlash from the white community. Some young white individuals undertook jeering at the protesting students, while some were waving Confederate flags, and some went as far as threatening violence upon those who only wanted the right to be able to have the possibility of enjoying a cup of coffee while sitting at the Woolworth lunch counter rather than being treated like a second-class citizen.⁴

Greensboro, North Carolina was not an anomaly; it was the catalyst that set off a chain reaction that became known as the Sit-in

1 Singleton and Wildin, *The Sixties in America*, 656.

2 Cobb, 155

3 Maurice Isserman and Micheal Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 33.

4 Cobb, 156

Movement. Interestingly enough, almost from the very beginning, these student-led demonstrations were seen as a part of a movement. This phenomenon could be attributed to the explicit intention that was defined in the genesis of the movement. The labeling of the sit-ins being a movement could also be tied to the notion that the “students from North Carolina State Agriculture and Technical College captured the spirit,” the purest kind of spirit that made their actions worthy of deeming them a part of a movement. The Greensboro students exuded what many caused many of the students that took part in the other demonstrations, their frustration as well as their belief and commitment to justice.¹

For some people, history is a collection of past events that are just words recorded on paper, to put it simply, some think that history is dull and boring. There is, however, a stark contrast between reading words on a page and listening to a person who lived through history to impart their memories, now historical recollections. The difference between reading about history and listening to it is being able to hear the emotion, the feeling behind the words that are being used to describe an even from the past animates history in a way that books never can. Although, the chronicle surrounding the sit-in on February 1, 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina is hardly insipid, the account that Franklin McCain gave during an interview, conducted by Alan Johnston, reanimated the epic history made at the Woolworth lunch counter.²

As McCain recounted his tale, he describes how there was a thought that crossed his mind after sitting on the stool at the lunch counter that left him with “the most miraculous and most wonderful feeling,” the thought that was connected to this sentiment was “the thought that there’s a kind of freedom I have now, that I’ve never had before.”³ This statement holds the remarkable and invaluable sense of what was the driving force behind many of those who took part in the demonstrations of the Sit-in Movement. The sense of liberation,

a kind of freedom that dismantles the notion of second-class citizenship. Interconnected with the sense of liberation that McCain spoke of, as a result of the actions that took place during the Greensboro sit-in, was the idea of “a new confidence” in correlation that change is possible, but only if “people are determined to secure all the rights, and all the blessings, all the liberties of democracy.”¹ The concept of this “new confidence” was another propellant in the Sit-in Movement because of the message of how things are done, such as not serving African Americans at lunch counters, is not unsusceptible to change if actions against the normalized injustice are executed in the best way possible.²

Sit-ins similar to the one that took place in Greensboro, did not go without retaliation from the white supremacist’s community. McCain makes mention of members of the Ku Klux Klan pouring water, condiments such as ketchup and mustard, they even took cigarette lighters and tried to light people’s clothes on fire.³ During his interview with Johnston, McCain recalls a specific encounter with a couple of white gentlemen that epitomized the central principle of nonviolence despite actions taken against him, as well as many others who were taking part in the sit-ins. In this particular incident that took place during one of the Greensboro demonstrations, a white gentleman spat in McCain’s face. What McCain did next shocked that man, and rightly so, he turned to that gentleman that had just spat in his face and said, “I love you, because you are my brother.”⁴ For a person to be degraded in that way while trying to progress towards a more just equality, but not respond to hate with hate, but to respond to hate with love speaks volumes. As the scenario continued, McCain said how the man that had spat on him had a look of amazement and could not believe what he had said, and at this point, the white gentleman’s companion decided that he wanted to see what McCain would do if he were to also spit in his face. So, he did. McCain did

1 William T. Martin Riches. *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance*. 50.

2 McCain, *Witness*

3 McCain, *Witness*

1 McCain, *Witness*

2 McCain, *Witness*

3 McCain, *Witness*

4 McCain, *Witness*

the unthinkable, yet again as he turns to the second man who spat in his face and said, "I, too, love you as well, because you are my brother and I will treat you with respect." The lack of retaliation that McCain displayed was an essential characteristic for the Sit-in Movement, as well as an effective one. After McCain did not react to the demeaning acts of the two white gentlemen with violence or any kind of retaliation that they were expecting, they left Woolworth. The effectiveness of this sit-in did not stop at shocking and deterring a couple of white guys who held the white supremacist views who were looking for trouble.¹

The Greensboro Sit-in left a lasting effect on Martin Luther King Jr., the Civil Rights Movement leader. While talking to Johnston, McCain spoke of how King said to McCain and his three sit-in companions, "You know, just before you boys stage a sit-in, I was in a quandary, because I had absolutely no idea what to do next. And you, in essence, saved me."² It is unlikely that King meant that these four students had saved him in the literal sense, more likely, King meant that they had saved him in a metaphorical sense. Meaning that King had probably come to some sort of a standstill in regards to how to progress the Civil Rights Movement or how to generate more inspiration to motivate action. As previously mentioned, the "new confidence" that McCain described became a byproduct of the Greensboro Sit-in and effectively inspired people to spread the Sit-in Movement. The reach of inspiration that originated the Greensboro Woolworth lunch counter did not stop there. The impact of the Greensboro Sit-in provided an impetus for a spate of sit-ins that, by the end of the week that the Greensboro Four first took their seats at the lunch counter, had spread to about twenty-one cities and by the end of the second week, actions taken to enact sit-ins had spread to approximately one hundred and twelve cities.³

One of the cities that found inspiration from the student-led sit-in that took place in the Greensboro Woolworth's was Montgomery, Alabama. In a news article that records the account of

1 McCain, *Witness*

2 McCain, *Witness*

3 McCain, *Witness*

a participant by the name of James McFadden. In this account, McFadden said how he "used to be a student at Alabama State College," but was expelled because, after an investigation, he was found to be one of nine students that were "the real organizers" of the sit-in that took place in Montgomery.¹ In addition to the expulsions of nine college students, there were three new ordinances that were passed by the city government that prohibited public demonstrations as well as gatherings.² As McFadden explained in the article, "Montgomery is the deep, hard SOUTH,"³ and this geographical location was accompanied by the notoriously racist attitude that, to this day, is associated with the deep south. This pro-segregation attitude was definitely a large contributor to what Martin Oppenheimer, a now retired associate professor of sociology and labor studies at Rutgers University, has classified in *The Sit-In Movement of 1960* as the failure of the sit-in that took place in Montgomery.⁴ Although this Alabama sit-in did not have the same favorable outcome that occurred in Greensboro, NC, it reinforced the notion that there was not going to be blind compliances with social injustices such as segregation.

Similar to the students who orchestrated the sit-in in Montgomery, there were students in Jackson, Mississippi that felt that they could make a difference in their community by following the example of the individuals that organized the Greensboro sit-in. An African American college student, Anne Moody recorded her account of the Jackson sit-in in her memoir, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. The Jackson sit-in that Moody describes is similar to the Greensboro Sit-in as it also took place in a Woolworth's store. Apart from Moody, there were two other classmates named Pearlena and Memphis that initiated this particular sit-in. Similar to the Greensboro sit-in, when the three students took their seats at the lunch counter, the waitresses ignored them at first, and then told them that they could not

1 James McFadden, "A Participant's Account: The Alabama Sit-ins", 1960. Emphasis added.

2 James McFadden, "A Participant's Account: The Alabama Sit-ins", 1960.

3 James McFadden, "A Participant's Account: The Alabama Sit-ins", 1960.

4 McFadden; Martin Oppenheimer, *The Sit-In Movement of 1960*, (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc.) 90-91.

serve them there. After the waitress retreated, due to fear of the violence that was inevitable to ensue, the proceedings of the sit-in, as retold by Moody, started to get more interesting.¹

Moody recalls that as people began to understand what was happening, some of them left the Woolworth's. In a stark contrast to the impending violence that was going to befall the three college students, Moody mentions "a middle-aged white woman who had not yet been served rose from her seat" and approached the trio, who had taken their seats at the lunch counter moments before, and displayed a positive attitude. She said that she would have liked to stay them, however her husband waiting for her. Shortly after she spoke to Moody, Memphis, and Pearlena newsmen confronted the middle-aged woman who continued to express her "sympathy with the Negro movement."² This woman that is only identified as middle-aged presents an interesting standpoint that differed greatly from the majority of the surrounding community. Her opinion on the matter of the sit-ins shows that even in the southern states, such as Mississippi, there were at least a few that were open-minded in regards to the mission set by the Sit-in Movement.

Having looked at three individual sit-ins and how the immediate surrounding community reacted, *The New York Times* article, "Civil Rights Act: How South Responds" written by Claude Sitton, who was known for his coverage on the Civil Rights Movement, allows for a bigger-picture look at how the south responded to the 1964 Civil Rights Act during the 1960s. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was partially made possible by the efforts of the Sit-in Movement as Sitton stated in the article, "the issue of racial discrimination in public accommodations," in tangent with the Civil Rights Movement was on February 1, 1960 when the Greensboro Four took their seats at the F.W Woolworth lunch counter. In the article, Sitton reported that as a whole, the South was in a state of compliance in regards to the 1964 Civil Rights Act that included the desegregation of public establishments. Despite the overall compliance of the south, there

were some areas of the south that were not quite as readily willing to adhere to 1964 Civil Rights Act.¹

In a newspaper article from 1970 called "Sit-In City Marks Decade of Change," written by James T. Wooten, there is a kind of a reflection on the events that took place in Greensboro, NC on February 1, 1960. One of the people that Wooten talked to was a Greensboro citizen by the name of Walter T. Johnson Jr. in regards to the sit-in that had taken place there a decade before. Johnson recounted how the four North Carolina A&T University students were denied service when they asked for a cup of coffee. Then, he talked of how things had been changing during the decade following the success of the Greensboro sit-in, it was in this section of the article that a bittersweet feeling started to exude from Johnson. As Johnson ran through the list of changes that the decade of change had brought such as the integration of an airport, audiences at sports games as well as a few positions of public figures, the tension of an emanate interjection of a contrary preposition. At this point, Johnson divulged that he did not believe that "the patterns and the attitudes where it's really important haven't changed much since 1960."² This sentiment stemmed from discrimination that Johnson stated is not hard to find in place such as schools and company promotion policies. Wooten's article serves as a testament that even after a decade of steps taken to integrate change in regards to segregation, they were only steps that were taken in the correct direction, not the end goal of equality that was predetermined a decade earlier.

Just as Wooten provided some reflecting insight on the matter of the Sit-in Movement, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore also presented interesting points in her *New York Times* article entitled "Colin Kaepernick and the Myth of the 'Good' Protest." The opening focus of the article was on quarterback Colin Kaepernick and his protesting racial injustice as well as the criticism that he received for kneeling during the national anthem. Gilmore argues that Americans today who criticize Kaepernick for his action simply "don't really

1 Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, *Takin' it to the Streets* (New York: Oxford University Press) 17-18.

2 Bloom and Breines, 18

1 Claude Sitton, "Civil Rights Act: How South Responds," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1964.

2 Wooten

understand how protests work” because of the misconception of the idealized “good” protests that our textbooks teach us. One example that Gilmore give concerning this issue is the idealism that surrounds the Greensboro sit-in. She points out that the concept of what is known as a sit-in today has been around since the 1940s. In fact, the Greensboro students modeled their protest after those that took place during the 1940s. Gilmore comes to the conclusion that white Americans deep investment in the myth that the civil rights movement quickly succeeded are based off of the widely-spread misconceptions that individual protests were more effective than the actual movements that the protest were a part of.

Progress that was brought about by movements such as the Sit-in Movement has brought us, as a society, a long way from where we started. This is apparent in concept that it is no longer considered out of the ordinary for a person that is not white to be able to walk into any store and receive the kind of service that a white person would receive. However, as shown by Wooten and Gilmore, progress is not a stopping point, it is one of many stepping stone to reach total equality.

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