

## **A School Story: Integrating Belvedere School**

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### **Abstract**

This ethnography of Belvedere, Mississippi black students integrating the high school during Freedom of Choice (1966) posits that school experiences were an important part in the formation of identity in the South during Civil Rights. This article explores the relationship between individual activism existing conjointly and separate from school integration/desegregation by placing actions of two black students within their historical context between the Civil Rights Act (1964) and desegregation of public schools (1970) in hopes to contribute and shed light on places like Belvedere, which avoided civil rights violence but remained largely unchanged.

### **Introduction**

In 1999, the small town of Belvedere, Mississippi experienced two extraordinary weeks that included a demonstration over the allegations of police brutality in the death of a young black male (*South Reporter*, 1999). The mayor, Eddie Lee Smith, Jr., a former civil rights leader and the first black mayor in the county, sided with the police. This affair led to a serious schism between the black and white communities, one that had been building since the 1970s. During the Movement, the county avoided civil rights violence, although it was near Memphis. Today, Belvedere has to deal with all the problems of larger urban settings, such as crime, drugs, and charges against its schools.

It has experienced more violence, segregation, and economic growth than in the previous 100 years, including a 70 percent increase in population (Bureau of

the Census, 1990). The city is a drug route between Memphis and Birmingham. In 1989, Eddie Lee Smith, Jr., who participated in local politics since the 1960s, became the city's first black mayor. Smith, like Belvedere, is trying to deal with the changing economy and politics of a historically divided black and white community changed forever in the 1960s.

Belvedere has always been attractive to me. As a teacher at Montgomery Academy, I experienced one side, and in 1995 this experience led me to ask questions about my own racial and ethnic identity. As I experienced race relations in town, I believed them to be amicable. I could not be closer to the truth, and further from the reality. The uniqueness of this North Mississippi town is what inspired me to tell its story. I hope to avoid what Lee D. Baker (1998) calls the attempt to settle past wrongs by writing a revisionist recount. Civil Rights historiography has tended to emphasize the extraordinary and the exciting over the mundane. In this paper, I want to examine change and resistance in the Movement, specifically the battle for the desegregation of the public schools (Dittmer, 1995; Eagles, 2000).

## **Historical Context**

I hope to contribute and shed light on places like Belvedere, which avoided civil rights violence but remained largely unchanged. It is based on six months of fieldwork conducted in Mississippi drawing on interviews of persons involved in the Movement between 1964 and 1974. Their experiences have been complemented by the use of newspapers, local, state, federal documents on education, politics, law, and archives. Finally, I depend on the information gathered by the State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission of Mississippi.<sup>1</sup> The records for the most part offer general information on persons and their whereabouts between 1956 and 1977. However, some reveal the cooperation of local members of the community to stop desegregation. The key is that even though the majority of these were White, many Blacks cooperated with the state in the effort, mostly as informants. The Movement needs to be reexamined. Conventional historiography focuses on the violent revolutionary aspects of the Movement, such as those that occurred in the Mississippi Delta. Most places changed slowly, which in the end might have caused more segregation, but it is where researchers should begin in order to deal with current questions of race relations in rural towns. Second, this paper addresses the paradigm of whites as resistors and blacks as activists. This is not a necessary truth as both groups lined up across class lines, social positions, education, and even against the federal government.

Discussion on desegregation should center on the role of schooling during the integration of African-Americans into the school system and the forging of black identity in the face of the rapid social change caused by the Movement after 1964. I seek to demonstrate schools as influential in the formation of identity, reinforcing the position blacks held in society, with only a few fighting against the repression

to redefine their identity. In this paper, I will show the particular history of a school in the late 1960s, a small segment of a larger history as a group of young students attempted to integrate an all white school. The courageous efforts are placed within the context of their time. Shedding light on this moment will allow the reader (and the writer) to address the larger issue of public ownership of schools by humanizing a historical event through an ethnographic sketch of schooling. As a historian, I first attempt to create a contextual landscape that will allow the reader to understand the history of Belvedere during the Movement. Removing social context (time and place) from the Movement robs people of their experience and does not let us compare them to those of others who the civil rights literature describes.

Beneath the formal language of the U.S. Courts' rulings, plans of desegregation, appeals and defendants' protests; real men and women — real boys and girls — were living, working, and making their way in the chaotic collapse of southern apartheid. What follows explores their circumstances through the voices of two individuals who participated in Freedom of Choice embedded within the history of Belvedere from 1964-1968. Freedom of Choice afforded blacks the opportunity for partial integration by allowing all students to attend the school of their choice. It chiefly applied to black students. Not a single white student from Belvedere attended the black schools. The relative peace that was kept around the school was eerily quiet compared to the rest of the state where children were chased down and beaten by mobs.

#### **Foundations of Change: 1964**

In 1964, Mississippi Freedom Summer marked a significant turning point in the civil rights campaign in Belvedere. The “fifteen to twenty” white students from Ohio staying at Rust College were the catalyst in the Movement.<sup>2</sup> The white staff arrived to work at the Freedom Schools that Frank Smith was setting up in the county (Dittmer, 1995). Perhaps more critically, the presence of the “outsiders” galvanized the white community to action in discrediting the “outsiders” by associating them with racial, sexual, and social deviancy.

On July 23, 1964, Investigator Scarbrough reportedly visited Senator George Yarbrough of Red Banks, owner of the *South Reporter* who planned a feature story on “known communists who are affiliated with the Mississippi Project and who have been active in Montgomery County” (State of Mississippi State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission 2-20-2-2-1-1-1). Scarbrough carried reports which he had “personally made which I felt would aid the editor in his item concerning communist activities in Mississippi and in Montgomery County” (State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission 2-20-2-2-1-1-1). In addition to his own personal investigations, he reported, “I gave him other documented articles concerning known communists, who have been active in what is known as the ‘Mississippi Project’” (State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission 2-20-2-2-1-1-1).

Rust College teachers and students furnished a large share of the leadership in the successful boycott in neighboring Benton County. The Commission estimated

that the boycott by the “Negro school has been 90 percent effective” (State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission 2-20-2-37-1-1-1). In 1965, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was also operating five freedom schools in the neighboring Benton County, an extremely rural area. The investigator reported that the Freedom Schools “teach very little out of the regular prescribed text books but spend most of their time teaching Negro history and hate against the white race and rebellion against any authority” (State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission 2-20-2-37-1-1-1). Local whites, however, seemed less worried than the State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. They believed that the blacks would not take any drastic action. Perceptions of the locals seemed to be in line with the process of being polite. No one raised it as an issue. It was not any different than all the other black businesses in town.

The Freedom School in Montgomery County met at Belvedere, in Asbury Chapel, where their slogan was “One Man — one vote!” (State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission 2-20-2-5-1-1-1). Their pamphlets advertised that in order to be a first class citizen, the person must first register to vote. Classes were held at 8 a.m. on how to register and circumvent the newly placed resistance obstacles, such as reading tests. After class, selected citizens would march to the courthouse on the square, about one mile away, and attempt to register. The activists wanted Blacks to register with the newly formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Prior to the boycott, Skip Robinson sent out letters on behalf of the United League of Montgomery County (UL) stating that “We have check [sic] the registration books but we was unable to fin[d] your name. If you have registered, or if you have not, please go by the courthouse and check the book for your name. Please cooperate with us; we are trying to get all of our people registered to vote” (Rust College Archives, Civil Rights Movement Collection).

By the end of 1964, civil rights were also no longer a local issue, a state issue, or even a southern issue. It was now a national concern. The sudden national thrust left blacks with little control as the federal government became an active participant in change, leaving a void between the old conservative leadership and the new emerging post-Brown leadership (Marable 1998; Sitkoff, 1981). The new leadership was not cognizant of the pre-Brown days. Nor was it as cautious about stepping on the toes of the white establishment (Carson, 1981; Dittmer, 1995; Marable, 1984). The ensuing years after Freedom Summer of 1964 left the black leadership in constant turmoil, as the aging leaders of the 1950s gradual-change approach were questioned by the young leadership, who, spurred on by the lawyers and the federal government, demanded immediate change. Whites were also faced with the decision to continue Massive Resistance in the face of the new younger black leadership, outsiders familiar with federal legislation, and the involvement of the U.S. Courts in integration.

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**Desegregation and the Public Schools: 1966-1970**

Alongside the tumultuous campaign for legal recognition, school integration/desegregation was a powerful and difficult campaign fought in the courts of law and public opinion. Freedom of Choice governed schools between 1966 and 1970. Before 1966, Montgomery County and Belvedere schools remained strictly segregated. However, under pressure from the federal government, some form of integration became unavoidable. While some school districts chose Massive Resistance, as had Prince Edward County, Virginia (Wolters, 1984), by closing schools before racially integrating them; Montgomery County and Belvedere resorted to the Freedom of Choice plan. Freedom of Choice allowed all students to attend the school they wanted. In Montgomery County, grades one, two, seven, and twelve were opened to Freedom of Choice. Each school district across Mississippi had the right to choose how to integrate the schools. Freedom of Choice was safe in Montgomery because it abided by the court decisions. Integration of schools occurred in two phases. Freedom of Choice was the first phase lasting less than five years. It powerfully affected the local population. The refusal of local districts to integrate forced the U.S. Courts to take action, thereby, beginning the second phase integration: desegregation. This phase was fought in the U.S. District Courts. By 1968, the South was faced with multiple class action suits against the schools for violation of the civil rights of black children. One such case was *Clarence Anthony vs. Marshall County Board of Education, et al.* The plaintiffs won when the Fifth District U.S. Court ruled that Freedom of Choice had not desegregated the schools. The Court gave schools the option to use testing to assign children to each grade based on their score. U.S. Senators from Mississippi advocated that the court ruling violated the Civil Rights Act because they favored blacks over whites. The state used money to support their students who wanted to attend private schools. Finally, the local school districts attempted delay tactics to keep schools segregated. In the end, they failed as the federal courts and Justice Hugo Black ushered in the end of Freedom of Choice and token integration with a plan for total desegregation of the schools in 1970. After lengthy delays in integration, the U.S. Courts forced schools to desegregate by February 1, 1970.

**Freedom of Choice, 1967-1969**

Montgomery County determined to integrate in four grades. For various reasons few chose integration. While the legal and sociological history of this phase of integration has its own historiography, the personal and intimate history is also worth telling because it possessed its own sociological implications. *The South Reporter* discouraged blacks from sending their children to the white schools during the Freedom of Choice period. At Belvedere School, Ruth Green, Al Beck, Modina Ray, and three other black seniors entered the new world of Freedom of Choice. In an angry letter to the paper, the black leadership attacked Freedom of Choice and the paper that urged blacks to keep their children in their own schools.

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“Remember that the editor of this paper is a white Southerner. We doubt that he has ever set foot in Frazier or Sims,” appeared in the opening paragraph (Rust College Archives).

### **Freedom of Choice?**

The world of Freedom of Choice was very different for all the participants involved. During their year at Belvedere School in 1966, Black students such as Al and Ruth chose to attend the white school over their own W.T. Sims School. The experience that year at the school served Al and Ruth, as well as their three other black classmates, as a sample of what society had in store for them outside of the South. If they could succeed in schools that according to Ruth were the harshest of all environments, they could succeed anywhere. Also, from their experiences, they took with them a sense of repaying their community, choosing to return, and, in turn, helping rekindle a sense of community and collective for blacks in Belvedere thirty years later. Constance Curry (1995) writing about freedom of choice in the Mississippi Delta described a similar feeling regarding the experiences of the Carter family in the white school during Freedom of Choice. Ruth Green, who grew in North Mississippi, lived many of the events at her school. Today, Ruth, who is the head nurse at the County Hospital, recalls,

I was in the first integrated class, and it was kind of weird how I ended up going to Belvedere . . . the way I ended up going there was that my dad would not let me get on the buses during the Freedom Rides . . . we had a lot of what we call safe housing and those were housing where people from like Michigan, Michigan State, Indiana, Chicago, all of these college students would come down and they would live in these houses . . . people would just let them stay . . . and those would be the places where they would have the meetings and get people ready to go to Birmingham or where ever . . . but my dad was like I'm sorry you cannot go . . . so in sixty-six, the summer you could go to whatever school you wanted to . . . you know I haven't done anything . . . I'll give them a year, I'll give them a year of my life . . . if I had known it would have been that much hell I would never have gone. (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Al remembered other reasons for attending the school. He already participated in the Movement and wanted to attend Belvedere School for personal improvement. Similar to Ruth, he also wanted to leave Belvedere, a special quality of adventure for anyone who was able to participate in the hostile world of Freedom of Choice. Ruth explained that blacks lived next to a school they could not attend, which insulted and inspired some blacks. Curry (1995) described the choice in terms of purely individual strength. Ruth and Al approached both of their parents with the suggestion to attend the white school. It was an individual act, not supported by either blacks or whites, seen as usurping segregation and the support system established to combat it. If the system that was supposed to protect blacks segregated

them, why would any individual willingly accept the consequences of displacing both the white and black status quo? As Al recalled,

Why I chose to go to Belvedere School . . . Well, I guess for most of my life living in Belvedere, you look at the outside world, which is a lot larger of course . . . and you see the cities New York, Chicago, L.A. and the rest of the world . . . Paris . . . and I always wondered how I would compare to students who graduated from those places . . . never thinking I would remain in here after I grew up . . . I had to prepare myself to compete when I go somewhere else . . . so I was looking for an opportunity to make myself better able to compete . . . and my parents always thought the same way . . . they encouraged . . . and always tried to help me to see further than the city limits . . . so to speak. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

As he regarded his future, he recognized the differences of the white school:

They had better books, better equipment . . . laboratories, you know . . . everything that would promote better education . . . so this was an excellent opportunity . . . and there were several students who were asked to go . . . I'm told, I don't know for sure . . . but no one asked me to go or mentioned it to me . . . you should go to Belvedere . . . and it was just something . . . it was opened . . . it was publicly announced that it was open and my thought was I gotta do this . . . you know 'you gotta do this. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

However, beneath the personal and family attention, Al also couched his decision in terms of racial uplift and community.

I had worked in the Civil Rights Movement, he recalled, I had done some things around that would hopefully help to promote integration and hopefully just a better life for the black community . . . and so it weighed heavy on my mind when the opportunity came about . . . And the results? I did learn a lot that year . . . I had a good year, academically, he insisted, but added, it was a hell of a year socially. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Al's work in civil rights gave him the inner strength and conviction to "stick it out" for the school year. He needed all such resources and nerves. Indeed it was "a hell of a year socially." He recalled once incident in particular:

I came to my locker at midday and there was this big Master-lock pad-lock on my locker and so they had to come over and cut it off . . . well, actually what they ended up doing was they didn't cut the lock, they ended up cutting the locker . . . so as a consequence, I could never lock my locker again . . . the rest of the year . . . there were several die-hard students that I guess they took it on their own to make sure that I understood that I wasn't wanted there. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

He recalled other events in this hellish season. "Did you ever play football," he asked?

You know the drill where they'll have a line, two lines and you get the ball, and they bump you and trip . . . try to . . . I guess that's called a fumble exercise . . . contact

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exercise . . . that's kind of what it was like going through the hallway . . . to virtually every class . . . somebody was bumping you on a regular basis . . . sometimes you could see them coming sometimes you could not . . . some of them you knew that it was coming from cause they did it every day . . . and I played football before at Sims, so I had no problem using the forearm and you know . . . I held my own with that I never left there with any bruises that I could recall. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

If daily life at Belvedere was like a football scrimmage for Al, actual football—or its absence — entered his memories too.

It was interesting, very interesting . . . obviously that was quite a bit of solitude, didn't really have the regular exchange between the other students, I mean I was the only black there . . . so not a whole lot of conversation, a lot of time to think and listen and do whatever you were going to do . . . and just figure out what kind of games were going on next. Teachers, students . . . the whole nine yards . . . I remember when I first got to ask if I could play football . . . because I had transferred from one school in the same district to another school . . . they brought up some rule . . . and I cannot imagine that the rule was on the books . . . it was just verbally stated to me . . . and I cannot imagine that they would have looked ahead to even develop that type of rule unless it was just a state rule . . . because, you know, you only had one white school and two black schools and St. Mary's parochial school . . . and the city school, and we exchanged students all the time . . . if they played here last year they'd come to the next school, you know, without missing a beat . . . and no one had ever questioned that, and I can not imagine that they had that rule in the public schools because they never anticipated integration. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

It was a lonely year too. "Actually, there was one guy that befriended me and he would come over in class and talk to me which was almost amazing. . . and that lasted for about two or three weeks. . . and then he called me, he used to call me after class and we would talk on the phone" (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999). It did not last long. After a little while, Al remembered, "he came to me and told me that his sister was being heckled quite a bit, and he felt that it was because of his display towards me . . . so . . . he fell by the wayside . . . he wasn't afraid for himself but he was afraid for his sister, blah, blah, blah . . . so we didn't have very much contact after that . . . but he was the only one . . . the only student that ever even spoke to me . . . the only white student" (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999).

Like Al, Ruth also experienced loneliness in school. "I had some of my classes with Modina, but I didn't have any classes with Al. . . it kind of depended on which classes we had. . . and we did have lunch at the same time . . . so it was kind of, usually one or two of us would be in the same lunch at the same time." Ruth's experiences parallel those of Al in dealing with companionship. She said,

there was some people who would write mail and would use derogatory terms . . . and those were kind of trashy people, I mean they were the kind of people I don't think anybody would want their kids to be with . . . But there was one girl in my



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class named Puddin' and she had inherited all of this money from her grandparents or somebody . . . and she had her own car, a maid, a cook, a really, really rich girl, the owner, that she was like hey, if you want to talk to somebody, I'll talk to you, and I was like, OK, she wanted to exchange pictures and phone numbers, but that was the only person that I knew, other than Modina or Janice or them. (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Among the problems encountered by the black students attending Belvedere were their experiences within their community. When they returned to their homes, many of their peers wondered why they wanted to be with the whites. Ruth recalled:

Yeah, they called us deserters, you know . . . it was, my thought was that . . . and I didn't look at myself as a hero or anything, but I did look at myself as "Yeah, you're stepping out there," go ahead on . . . someday we'll . . . but it was like "they left us, they are not part of us any more" . . . I really didn't understand that, and it was really disheartening . . . I really didn't understand that, and I still don't to this day . . . I remember after graduating from college, coming back to a class reunion, and I wasn't invited . . . I just heard about it, as a matter of fact I just happened to be home and they were having it . . . and I walked to the door and they were like, well you didn't graduate with us you have to pay a visitor's fee . . . I didn't have no problem with the money but the attitude was like, "Whoa, hey what's going on here?", and since that time its changed with the class reunions, but the first couple . . . I was almost like . . . and even the conversations, I mean it wasn't just that person at the door . . . there were quasi-negative comments . . . a little bit of tact here and there . . . sometimes very direct though . . . not much tact at all. (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

The big surprise awaiting the Freedom of Choicer students was teachers' acceptance. Teachers helped ease the choice to attend the white school; especially in the academic arena, where to their surprise, the students received better grades than they expected. There was enforcement of new rules for transfer students enacted by the state legislature, locker searches, bag searches, and administrative impediments for the transfer of students. Even though they did retaliate against black students by firing their parents or attacking the students, whites slowly began raising money to establish a private school in the basement of the First Methodist Church as a white alternative to the public schools. Ruth recalls her experience with teachers and their ability to make her feel welcomed, which did not correspond to the rest of the school experience,

The teachers were really good, they tried to make me feel as welcome as they could . . . my teacher was Mrs. Smith . . . she said "if you have any problems do not hesitate to call me at home, this is my home number, this is my home room" . . . she really did, and I felt that I could have talked to her about anything. (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

As she recalled the teacher, a memory about the yearbook flashed in her mind.

. . . but when I did the year book, they put all of our pictures on the back page . . . so

that you could just take that page off . . . and you could have your year book without blacks. . . . Well, that's us . . . in the yearbook, we were the four people on the back page of the senior . . . you could rip that one page out and then you wouldn't have them in your book . . . (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Al echoed Ruth's praise of teachers' dedication,

I liked to think that I had pretty good intuition at that age in spite of being very young . . . and I can recall being in various classes and feeling, you know, that this person is doing just the minimal of what they can for me . . . and I don't want to high-light that because there were more teachers that were dedicated teachers. . . . I got the feeling, and my experience with learning with them and going to class with them . . . the whole class and learning experience was they wanted you to learn period they didn't care what the class what made up of . . . once you walked in and you close the door and you were at your seat they were about teaching students . . . there were several teachers that I felt that way about . . . Mrs. O'Dell was one . . . I never felt that she did anything to hinder me at all. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

He recalled another teacher,

Mrs. Smith, . . . I remember her, she was just a very dedicated teacher . . . I took geometry from her . . . made an A . . . quite frankly I knew I was doing A work . . . but I didn't think I would received the grade. . . pleased, not really surprised I guess at the end of the year, but I was very pleased that she did give me the grade . . . based on just scores through out the year and performance in class . . . and on, and on, and on . . . I felt that she was a good lady and she never showed me any prejudice that I could recognize at the time, you know, she was very helpful. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Although he felt that teachers were there to help him, Al held reservations about others. He recalls,

the guy that I really thought belonged to the Ku Klux Klan . . . and maybe that's . . . just by his actions because I felt that he was very deceptive, you know, could not be trusted, devil incarnate sort of person . . . was the principal, and maybe he just thought he was trying to do a good job with a new and rough situation, but at the same time I felt that he was not going to let . . . I just always felt that he was trying to keep a tight reign on us. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

One experience that really affected Al was his connection to the librarian through an unspoken exchange during study hall. Of the devoted and dedicated instructors, Al recalled one who symbolized what amounted to intellectual virtue for him.

The lady who really, I guess when I first arrived, she didn't . . . how can I put this . . . she was a librarian, I think her name was Colthart . . . C-o-l-t-h-a-r-p . . . I don't know how she pronounced it though . . . I was in study hall one day. . . and she, the first day I was there, brought me a book and she said "I think you may be interested in this" . . . and it was a book about the first black general in the modern military, Benjamin O. Davis . . . and it was his biography, or maybe it was his autobiography . . . and I read that

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of course he told about all of the hard times he faced going through the academy . . . and the military . . . and I guess that really, it helped . . . it definitely helped . . . and what I got from that was that she was saying “Just hang in there.” (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

In Belvedere, whites perceived that race and class were one in the same when it came to blacks. Ruth recalls her experiences; she deserted her fellow blacks and therefore, was treated to a cold reception from them. The actions were visible for her during the school day. She recalled she did not attend civil rights marches or demonstrate, but she integrated Belvedere because, “that’s what I did . . . for the movement . . . not . . . going to marches or other places . . . but that’s how I ended up going to Belvedere.” Ruth, Like Al, found no companionship at school. “In my class, the students did not talk to me . . . you know I was just like an object . . . I would see them and the teachers would let them look through my purse.” She described herself as “totally isolated,” not only at Belvedere but among her black friends too, “but then my friend at the other school, my black friends . . . they would tell me that they didn’t know what was wrong with me . . . so here I am, you know . . . anytime that we were out of school at Belvedere I’d go back over to my other school, and they were like ‘why are you down here’ . . . leave . . . so it was a real hard” (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999).

The experience in the schools allowed Ruth and Al a new understanding of their lives. They lived out a difficult experience, and today feel they owe it to their community to help heal old wounds from the 1960s. They have both returned to Belvedere, and plan on living their lives there. Along with the current mayor, also a civil rights leader, they are attempting to build a new leadership base for their community. Reflecting on her experience, Ruth recounts her thoughts on Belvedere, and why she returned,

the one thing that is so sad about this community is that I went away for twenty-two years and then I came back, because my husband really wanted to coach football here . . . so he had the opportunity to do that, so that’s why we ended up coming back . . . but what is so sad to me is that nothing has changed, and I have my theory, and my theory is that integration is something that you can’t force . . . you can not force it, you cant mandate it, you cant make a law about it . . . but when you in your soul, not in your mind, in your soul, you believe it . . . because your mother has told you, your grandmother everybody that you know, you have lived this way . . . the only black people you have known, not seen, but known are people that work for you . . . they call you mistress since you were twelve years old . . . you can’t look around and . . . that’s you, that is who you are . . . most people, when you know better, you do better . . . for example I work with people here who welcome me into their homes they come into my home . . . now these are adults, now, they had to become adults to realize that . . . whenever grandmother held this person down . . . now whether that will ever happen, I don’t know. (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Her connection to Belvedere is one of place. In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright

(1998) felt the same attraction to his home in Roxie, Mississippi. This was even after the atrocities he witnessed against blacks. The attraction to place is extremely strong for many southerners, as Michael Kreyling (1998) illustrates in *Inventing Southern Literature*, “the myth and the history feed one another; together they make consciousness a process, and we are in it, body and mind” (p. 18). Whether this connection was real or not, it is tied into their identity as southern blacks and their experiences as Freedom of Choice participants. Ruth explains the reason why there is a white academy in Belvedere,

why shouldn't you have your own school, if you can buy it, you can have your own school . . . you can dictate who will play sports, you can dictate who can be in clubs, you can dictate this because you are paying for it . . . why should you take a chance to get out of that one uterus . . . to go out into this cold world . . . you know babies would never be born if they didn't have to . . . in that uterus they are just enjoying, so nice and warm . . . and my theory is that if I can afford to not even deal with you so I'm not going to . . . and . . . a lot of their children go off to school and they even learn the hard way that people are the same . . . or they never learn they think and they go to a place, where everybody knows you . . . so they can keep you out of their uterus . . . and never have to change. (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Along with her views on the school, Ruth believes that change can occur. As the head nurse at the county hospital she tells the nurses sometimes,

it's the southern belle theory . . . I can be so passive aggressive but I can get what I want . . . you know I will never hurt your feelings but I can still get what I want . . . So . . . my momma worked for your momma, and her momma worked for your grand mamma, and so on . . . I can not hurt your feelings because I know your going to keep my children like your momma and on and on and on . . . so I'm just going to be as nice as I can be . . . that's what I'm going to do . . . you have to come over here anyway . . . you know why I can afford it, you know why . . . because I already made my money . . . your great grandparents money, I have my money . . . Belvedere has all these millionaires, I really think that this is what they believe . . . this is what is in their soul . . . if something should happen to their child . . . or whatever . . . because you just believe it . . . , I need your money, I need you to use my bank . . . I need you to go to my clothing store, and to be perfectly honest with you, when you go to my bank I'm going to help you, because its different, but now if you are going to touch my child . . . well now, I just don't know . . . I honestly just don't know what it is . . . but Belvedere . . . I lived in Memphis for twenty-two years and it was just so different . . . I don't know what it is . . . there sits there at his barber shop, and on his other side, and a liquor store . . . (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Thirty-five years later the old conflicts continue when Ruth meets people whom which she attended school. She is now the head nurse in the largest hospital in town. Her position allows her to connect with persons who have left the public schools for the private schools. She believes it has become a question of quality over race. She also realizes that times can change. She is optimistic over the future,

although the reality of Belvedere today is the visible segregation in all aspects of life and the mistrust of blacks and whites throughout the city. Along with her optimism for the future is her assessment of the current race relations. "It doesn't matter what I have to do, I'm not going to let my children go to school with yours . . . It doesn't matter, if I have to go to work, I'll go to work, if I have to get two jobs, I'll work two jobs . . . but its one thing that people fail to realize . . . it doesn't make you anything because they don't know you . . . how are you ever going to get to know me if you already know me as a piece of furniture, you already know me as a maid" (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999).

These beliefs Ruth speaks of came from her telling experience of Freedom of Choice, which centered on students' discovery or reinforcement of their skin color, and of their place in history that was expressed in their internalization of the moment. They understood what it meant to be black in the South. Ruth explains,

See I did not know what I was . . . black doctors, teachers, nurses, you know everything . . . I just thought that you would grow up and you would be what you wanted to be . . . I didn't know that I was this poor little underprivileged black kid, that I was supposed to get pregnant when I was thirteen, and have all these illegitimate babies . . . I didn't know this, you know, I just thought . . . my dad worked . . . and my mom she baby sat, you know she wasn't much, but I didn't know that she couldn't be what she wanted to be . . . I didn't know that I wasn't supposed to do this . . . so when I got there they have some really big problems . . . and I kind of figured it out after a half year or so . . . and she don't live with . . . I could look at her and see how segregated they were among themselves . . . and rich one were here, and the other ones were here . . . to see how they would be . . . I said let me get the hell out of here and get on with my life . . . but it was like they have some really big problems . . . I always believed that I could do whatever I wanted to do, because its what I had been taught all my life . . . a lot of people don't have that advantage to feel. (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Although his memories are different, Al reinforced his beliefs in himself that would lead him to "succeed." He felt that there was a bigger purpose to the Movement. At first, Al saw Freedom of Choice as a personal adventure, but as he recalls his experiences, he saw it as his continuing work with the Civil Rights Movement.

I was at the march in Washington. I was part of the advance team for the mule train . . . did voter registration throughout Montgomery County, Sunflower County, around Greenwood . . . they're all down in that area . . . I mean I was all over the place . . . got a policeman down in Lowndes County in Alabama to put a crease in my head . . . with a billy-club that remains to this day . . . it seems like when the Alabama state troopers had to be six-two or better . . . they were all these really big guys . . . yeah, I was at Selma . . . I was back and forth to Atlanta and different places . . . I didn't think it was my little part, but it was because of all that I had done I felt that I would be a hypocrite if I didn't . . . and that didn't move me so much as that with my personal . . . I felt it would help me to be there,

you know . . . I went along with the movement to go to Belvedere that year . . . it would help myself . . . it would help the community . . . it was just the thing to do. That's when you really discover who you are as a person . . . in the world . . . that's when you get in fights to discover whether you're going to make it . . . you know, that's when you find your resolve so to speak . . . and I guess I did, its just a little different path. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

While their decision to attend Belvedere estranged them from their friends at Sims, the Freedom of Choice students found little support among local civil rights workers in Belvedere. "The civil rights workers were cheerleaders," remembers Al, "but I was really disappointed by the local people that I had really grown to have a tremendous amount of respect for . . . it was almost like they were afraid to acknowledge me, especially in public . . . I got the feeling that . . . how could I say this . . . had I been standing in the middle of a square somewhere and I called one of their names out loud, that they might have ignored me . . . that kind of thing . . . that was an eye-opener as to human nature" (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999).

In her biography of the Carters, Constance Curry (1995) feared that the parents might suffer for her decision to integrate. The anxiety never entered Al's mind. His parents supported his decision, and, as he recalls, his mother did not lose her job.

Yeah she worked at the school . . . Well, like I say, you know in our conversation in Belvedere, we evolved out of the Civil Rights Movement . . . and I guess that would have just of out of character for Belvedere to be that forward . . . that was the reason why I felt terribly comfortable . . . because we over the years had various black prisoners that hung themselves . . . and I'm generalizing . . . and we never want anybody to get this is a generalization that many black people kill themselves . . . they might for the last ten or fifteen years . . . you just don't hear of . . . you know, we just don't become that distraught . . . "Life is just too rough, I gotta end it right here" you know . . . it just does not happen . . . so here is a streak that likes the liquor, likes to hang out, you know . . . throw a fist or two, and just like to be out and about . . . but yet he gets arrested and he says "Lord I just cant take it I'm going to hang myself" . . . you know he gets arrested for being drunk and disorderly and he comes up hung and he must have hung himself . . . but it just doesn't happen, give me a break, . . . and that happened two or three times . . . but we didn't have a lot of . . . you didn't find that many people in the river . . . hung in trees . . . not over the last fifty or sixty years . . . so in a way I wasn't really that concerned about that, because it hadn't really manifested itself that way previously. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

### **A Dream Deferred: Re-thinking the Movement, 2000**

Returning to Belvedere thirty-five years after they left, Al and Ruth reflect on what could be different, and show how their experiences led to similar views on what Belvedere and Blacks must do in order to improve their situation. In their decision to return to their hometown, they see a second phase in the leadership of the black community. For Ruth, desegregation led to the birth of Montgomery Academy and

the white flight from the public schools as well as the abandonment of the key social institution for the advancement of the entire community, an advancement that cannot occur when one race attends the public schools and the other the private schools (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999).

Al also recalled how other institutions were destroyed rather than integrated, “. . . burned the theater . . . so they wouldn’t have to integrate it . . . but you know, Mississippi has always been like that . . . they built a swimming pool, when we were trying to integrate the swimming pool and they built one . . . ‘Here you got your own swimming pool’ . . . and you know we had a gym . . . your comments exactly, this is a very polite town . . . so ‘give them a little something to appease them, give them a little something,’ that just went on forever . . . and it still goes on till this day” (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999).

Ruth’s recollections remind her that one reason why the town is still segregated is that there is a fear among blacks and whites to change. After “Montgomery Academy . . . and they made sure of it . . . anybody wants to come here. . . and its like you said its legal, but I think that we just accept it . . . and I’m just not going to deal with it . . . and I’ve been very disappointed in the black population you know your selves why are you crying on yourself . . . you know there are other jobs you can do . . . there are other things we can do . . . but I’m talking about why don’t we put our money together and do something . . . there’s a fear of change” (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999).

Change for Ruth can only occur after the public schools become public again. She states,

I really think the bigger problem though is the school system. Yes, number one, until we get a superintendent in there who can increase scores . . . I don’t care who he is . . . and that’s life . . . you want to know when you go to a school . . . am I going to be able to read when I get out . . . you don’t care about color . . . but you care about . . . my teacher but we said break away from family pride . . . we need this to survive. Well, I can tell you this, the people I went to school with . . . and I see them now . . . they are like willing to just start the whole system over . . . and they knew me, because I sat there in their class for a whole year . . . you know, its OK for you to talk to me anymore if we could just let that trickle down . . . why don’t we just let in a good superintendent, a good principal . . . I’m not trying to say that they are bad, but couldn’t we do better and then wouldn’t our children learn. . . I went to school last year . . . take the money that we have put into the public school system and invest it . . . we’d have one of the best in the country. If they had the number one public school system then they would have to ensure the safety of their children . . . there comes a time . . . number two, the protests . . . if they honestly do that and go on marching . . . then I think they can do it . . . but you gotta get up now, you gotta get up . . . because it’s almost like saying something that they all thought they need. (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999)

In Ruth’s mind, “when [she] was in the public school system, it was much worse than it is now . . . much worse . . . we had much worse teachers . . . we had . . . second hand, third hand books . . . when we got a new book . . . a cover on a cover . . . a new

book . . . I thought I'm the first person to use this book . . . gotta wash our hands after doing homework . . . because I'm telling you, we got hand me downs . . . so, we . . . it was the pits . . . but I went home and read" (Ruth Green, personal communication, Summer 1999).

Al eloquently compared his experience in Montgomery County to the Delta. He believed that there was the opportunity to turn Belvedere into something great, a Mecca for blacks, but they missed their chance, which in the end led to the current situation.

I remember, I used to go out when COFO, as they call it . . . counsel's over on West Avenue and we'd go out in the county and we'd bring people into town and register them to vote and on, and on, and on . . . and the roles were right there so you could kind of peek over and see . . . and it's amazing to me to see the number of people you would have expected to see on the rolls, weren't on the rolls . . . and you knew they could read, write . . . you know, they could handle it . . . but the majority of the people, and don't get me wrong there were a lot of people that did . . . and leaders, some that did, but there were a lot that didn't . . . but I guess that's in every group . . . some come on earlier and some come on later . . . and a lot of people had a lot of good reasons for it . . . a lot of peoples had their livelihood depended on it . . . in the school system, or whatever . . . or some type of local economic resource that their jobs or livelihood could have been affected by it. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

Well I think that the concept made sense in that the Delta was always seen as the big troubled area so you needed to put your biggest effort there, and then you look at a place like Belvedere and, well, it was obviously a good stop off, because at the time you had two black colleges, probably . . . and I don't know what you'd do about Belvedere because Belvedere as far as Mississippi was concerned, a place of reckoning, you know . . . it was known, you just drive around and you see the generals stayed here . . . Lee stayed here and Grant stayed here . . . the antebellum homes . . . they had a white college here years ago. (Al Beck, personal communication, Summer 1999)

## Conclusion

The perception was that few blacks would attempt to integrate the school. The white leadership believed that Freedom of Choice would soon be over (Curry, 1995; Wieder, 1997; Wolters, 1984). The local white leadership also understood the fear that blacks had about losing their jobs, or loans, or access to any other private and public institution under white control. In Belvedere, the fear was more myth than reality, as the white community did not act with the violence or the economic hegemony that occurred in other Delta towns (Bartley, 1995; Cobb, 1992). Many of the blacks were economically independent from whites; especially, the middle class who was employed at places like Rust and Mississippi College,<sup>3</sup> and also the black dollar was more important to the local economy than whites espoused.

Social class played a role in Freedom of Choice in Belvedere. Many of the children attending the white public school were middle class or above by Missis-



sippi standards. As Raymond Wolters (1984) has shown in cases of desegregation, or how Willie Morris (1971) describes his hometown of Yazoo City during desegregation in 1970, much of the change was surprisingly peaceful when the elite (Black and White) were involved. As Morris illustrates, the attitude of the upper social class was crucial in the reaction to desegregation, leading to peaceful desegregation because its leadership urged everyone to stay in the public schools. The hierarchal nature of Belvedere, and its service class-based power structure (i.e., bankers, land holders, store owners) minimized violence. Elsewhere, lower-class whites figured significant in anti-black violence, but that did not occur in Belvedere (Carson, 1981). Secondly, the proximity and mutual reliance of the black and white communities also kept the relations amicable if tense. Third, as was demonstrated by Elizabeth Jacoway and David Colburn (1982), southern businessmen were reluctant to use violence in their towns in the 1960s. They tended to be more moderate in terms of change (p. 295). Ruth Green, Al Beck, and the others' experiences were mostly forgotten by both blacks and whites, and as they left school after graduation, no one told their story. Their individual attempt benefited their own lives after graduation, but these individual efforts soon gave way to the federal government's use of the U.S. Courts to force full desegregation through decree. This was at the expense of the local leadership who were not financially or politically equipped like whites in other cities to implement handle the legal actions of the government.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission was established in 1956, shortly after *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas*. It was a state-funded institution that gathered information on all citizens of the state of Mississippi, thwarting integration in the state. The Commission was a hierarchal web of local and state authorities that used any means necessary, from the law to smearing and violence, in order to stop change in the state. In this paper, the State of Mississippi Sovereignty Commission records will be cited by their catalog number. The documents can be accessed at the State of Mississippi Historical Archives by using the catalog numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Rust College was founded in 1866 by the Methodist Church to educate Blacks in Mississippi.

<sup>3</sup> Mississippi College was established by the A.M.E. modeled on Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.

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